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# Communication in Election Campaigns: Staggering Changes or Same Old, Same Old?

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and Anne Schulz

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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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# Different Shades of Cooperation: Mapping Political Parties' Involvement With Influencers

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## Abstract

As social media influencers receive increased attention as intermediaries in the political domain, political parties are seeking to expand their involvement with them. However, knowledge of how parties get involved with influencers remains limited. This study presents a qualitative mapping of parties' influencer engagement, drawing on a secondary analysis of two datasets containing a combined 25 expert interviews with party communicators from Germany. It theorizes influencer involvement as the parties' management of social interactions. Employing an adapted version of Godes et al.'s (2005) framework for analyzing a firm's management of social interactions, it systemizes the 35 identified cases of influencer involvement as instances of different management strategies. While the moderator strategy—characterized by relationship-building and information exchange—emerged as the most prevalent, the participant strategy—marked by partisan collaboration—enjoyed the highest popularity. Overall, the findings indicate that the parties' influencer involvement is still in a formative phase, marked by experimental practices, resource constraints, and ambivalence toward influencer autonomy.

## Keywords

communication management; digital campaigning; political communication; political marketing; social media influencers

## 1. Introduction

In January 2025, in the run-up to the national elections in Germany, Robert Habeck, then-vice chancellor and frontrunner of the Green party, visited the livestream of Maximilian Knabe (aka HandOfBlood) to talk

about his election program. With 1.4 million followers on his Twitch channel and another 2.8 million followers on his main YouTube account, Knabe ranks among the most popular German gaming influencers. In the closing segment of the 2-hour, 41-minute video, there occurred a remarkable shift to the meta-level of the conversation:

Knabe: Normally, I would have said this is a cool segue to game a bit. But it is really late and we have talked more about these points—what I appreciate—than I had thought. That’s why I want to say thank you at this point that you have dared to come to my tile table [i.e., the dominant piece of furniture in the studio] in a completely new, unfamiliar sphere that is live...

Habeck: I am really happy that we are not going to game. I would have been really scared if...

Knabe: I wouldn’t have given you such a hard time. We would have gamed together, not against each other.

Habeck: Yes. But I don’t know how it works.

Knabe: I am really good at being there for people and walking them through. (HandOfTrash, 2025, 2:36:15)

As Knabe emphasized in this short snippet, appearing on a gaming livestream to wage his campaign was a new experience for his guest, Habeck. And Habeck’s appearance certainly generated interest and engagement. A later upload of the recorded livestream on one of Knabe’s secondary YouTube channels, HandOfTrash, collected 1.1 million views and roughly 18,000 comments at my time of writing.

The fact that Habeck took this risk—and chance—is just further proof that political parties have identified influencers as valuable intermediaries specifically to address younger voter segments. This is a development that is neither unique to the Green party nor to Germany, as political communication around the world is seeing an increase in parties’ influencer-related activities (e.g., for the US, Goodwin et al., 2023; for India, Udupa, 2024).

These activities are highly heterogeneous. Their heterogeneity stems, in part, from the relative novelty of political influencing. Party communicators are still exploring ways to benefit from influencers, and most of them do so with severely limited resources (Borchers et al., 2025). It also stems from the difficulty of recruiting influencers. Communication managers often raise complaints about influencers’ unwillingness to work with parties (Borchers, 2025). These complaints are arguably justified, at least to a certain extent, because some influencers report avoiding politicizing their public persona and, consequently, their self-brand (Goodwin et al., 2023; Suuronen et al., 2022). Ultimately, this perceived shortage requires political communicators to respond flexibly to the needs of those influencers who are willing to get involved with political parties so that they have any chance at all of appearing in influencer content. In fact, despite Knabe’s quasi-romantic and highly metaphorical talk about walking Habeck through, he clearly attached importance to not being perceived as partisan. While explaining that he appreciated Habeck’s appearance because it would make politicians appear more approachable, throughout the closing segment, he repeatedly stressed that he “did not like every answer” (HandOfTrash, 2025, 2:37:14) and that “this does not mean that

I like everything you are doing” (HandOfTrash, 2025, 2:37:54). This performative distancing would be rather unusual in a commercial context, in which influencers endorse products for client corporations.

This article explores this heterogeneity in political parties’ involvement with influencers. It thus adds to the body of knowledge on political campaigning in the digital domain, with a focus on executing strategy (e.g., Barclay et al., 2025; LaMarre & Suzuki-Lambrecht, 2013). In particular, it asks how political parties get involved with influencers to benefit from their impact on voters. However, so far, we know little about political parties’ involvement with influencers, so it is necessary to lay the groundwork for more detailed future studies. While research on political influencing clearly gained momentum in the last three years or so, it has tended to look at influencers and their followers mostly within the context of lifestyle politics (Arnesson & Reinikainen, 2024). By asking how political parties in Germany involve influencers in their campaigns, the current study shifts the focus to the parties and their activities. In doing so, I build on a still small research stream that combines political influencing with insights from communication management to investigate parties’ influencer-related activities (Borchers, 2025; Borchers et al., 2025; Goodwin et al., 2023). I also loosely connect to studies that investigate the effects of influencer messages on formal party politics (e.g., Klüver, 2024; Schmuck et al., 2022; Wasike, 2023) by illuminating the backstage of these effects.

## 2. Literature Review

Social media influencers are internet users who “have established a significant number of relevant relationships with a specific quality to and influence on organizational stakeholders through content production, content distribution, interaction, and personal appearance on the social web” (Enke & Borchers, 2019, p. 267). While influencers were initially associated with the corporate domain and consumer society, they are increasingly creating content on social and political issues. This “recent trend towards more ‘meaningful’ content” (Arnesson & Reinikainen, 2024, p. 2) has put influencers on the agenda of political communicators and researchers interested in political communication alike.

### 2.1. Influencers in Politics

Influencers engage with politics in different ways and with different levels of intensity. Recently, von Sikorski et al. (2025) suggested categorizing political influencers along three dimensions—namely, the density of their political content (i.e., how often they address political issues across their content), their style of presenting politics (i.e., whether they create fact-based or opinion-based political content), and their proximity to political actors, ideologies, and institutions (i.e., whether they are officially associated with a particular party, etc.). This scheme helps illustrate the heterogeneity of influencers’ engagement with politics. It also demonstrates that to become strategically substantial to political communicators, influencers do not necessarily need to produce political content full-time, but that addressing political issues only sporadically can also make them relevant for parties.

A growing body of research has shown that influencers also wield influence in the political realm. Studies have demonstrated that young voters in particular resort to influencers to obtain political information (Harff & Schmuck, 2025; Peters et al., 2022) and to make sense of political information they found elsewhere (Peter & Muth, 2023). Influencers also affect party-relevant outcomes. Crucially, they stimulate political interest among their followers (Schmuck et al., 2022; Wasike, 2023), improve political trust (Wasike, 2023),

and encourage political participation (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Naderer, 2023; Pöyry & Reinikainen, 2024; Reinikainen, Borchers, et al., 2025). Drawing on the widely noticed case of Rezo—a German YouTuber who heavily criticized the then-ruling conservative party, CDU/CSU, for its inadequate climate policies in the run-up to the 2019 elections to the European Parliament—Klüver (2024) was able to prove that influencer initiatives can generate a sizeable effect on election results. On the flip side, posts from political influencers can also produce disturbing effects. Specifically, empirical studies have demonstrated that influencers can increase negative emotional affect (Alsharawy et al., 2026) and deepen polarization (Gibson et al., 2023). Moreover, Palacios López et al. (2023) pointed to the high share of disinformation in political influencer content in Spain, while Udupa (2024) traced how Indian politics uses influencers to push the boundaries of what can be said. This discernible impact of influencers on voters implies that political parties are well advised to explore how they can collaborate with influencers and leverage influencer power for their own campaigns.

## ***2.2. Parties' Management of Strategic Influencer Communication***

Parties involve influencers in the context of managing their communication activities. Compared to the comprehensive body of research on the management of corporate influencer communication (e.g., Childers et al., 2019; Enke & Borchers, 2019), studies on how parties manage their involvement with influencers are still relatively rare. However, a few pioneering studies have provided initial insights.

In terms of staffing, Goodwin et al. (2023) found that demographic and audience metrics matter when party communicators select influencers for campaign collaboration. In particular, Goodwin et al. (2023) mention gender, age range, location, follower count, and topics covered as criteria that political communicators apply when selecting influencers for collaboration. Borchers (2024) added nuance to this catalogue of selection criteria by exploring the imaginary of the “ideal influencer” with whom party communicators wish to collaborate. This ideal influencer possesses features such as authenticity and passion for the party and its program, but also the ability to break down complex political issues, as well as leniency in collaborating with party communicators who may have only little experience in influencer collaborations.

In terms of strategic objectives, political parties mainly aim to inform and mobilize voters, whereas interacting with voters plays only a subordinate role (Borchers, 2025). The key advantages political communicators see in cooperating with influencers include gaining attention for the party and its program and making politicians and politics appear more approachable. On the downside, political communicators still struggle with how to integrate influencers into larger campaigns to best benefit from influencer services and create synergy effects across the different communication channels (Borchers, 2025; Goodwin et al., 2023).

In terms of implementing collaborations, communication managers in parties struggle with the information asymmetries that underlie party–influencer collaborations (Borchers et al., 2025). To date, the management of influencer campaigns is only little institutionalized and only little professionalized in parties. Notably, most parties allocate few resources to working with influencers and therefore do not have the means to purchase expertise from specialized influencer marketing agencies. Furthermore, studies in the field agree that losing control over influencer conduct is a serious fear of political communication managers (Borchers, 2025; Goodwin et al., 2023). Influencer marketing operates within a “paradigm of letting go of control” (Borchers, 2023) that postulates that influencer effects can be maximized by granting influencers substantial autonomy

so as not to curtail their authenticity. This logic breaks with the more traditional logic of working with communication agencies, which follows a rationale of “who pays, decides” and therefore requires political communicators to radically rethink their approach when approaching influencers. Yet while communication managers in corporations have become used to ceding control, political communicators still feel uncomfortable with doing so (Borchers, 2025).

Despite these illuminating insights into the management of influencer campaigns, a critical gap in the literature concerns the fundamental question of how political parties attempt to integrate influencers into their campaigns. To address this gap, the current study explores the approaches parties employ in their strategic influencer communication:

RQ: What approaches do party communicators adopt to involve influencers?

### 2.3. Analytical Framework for Answering the RQ

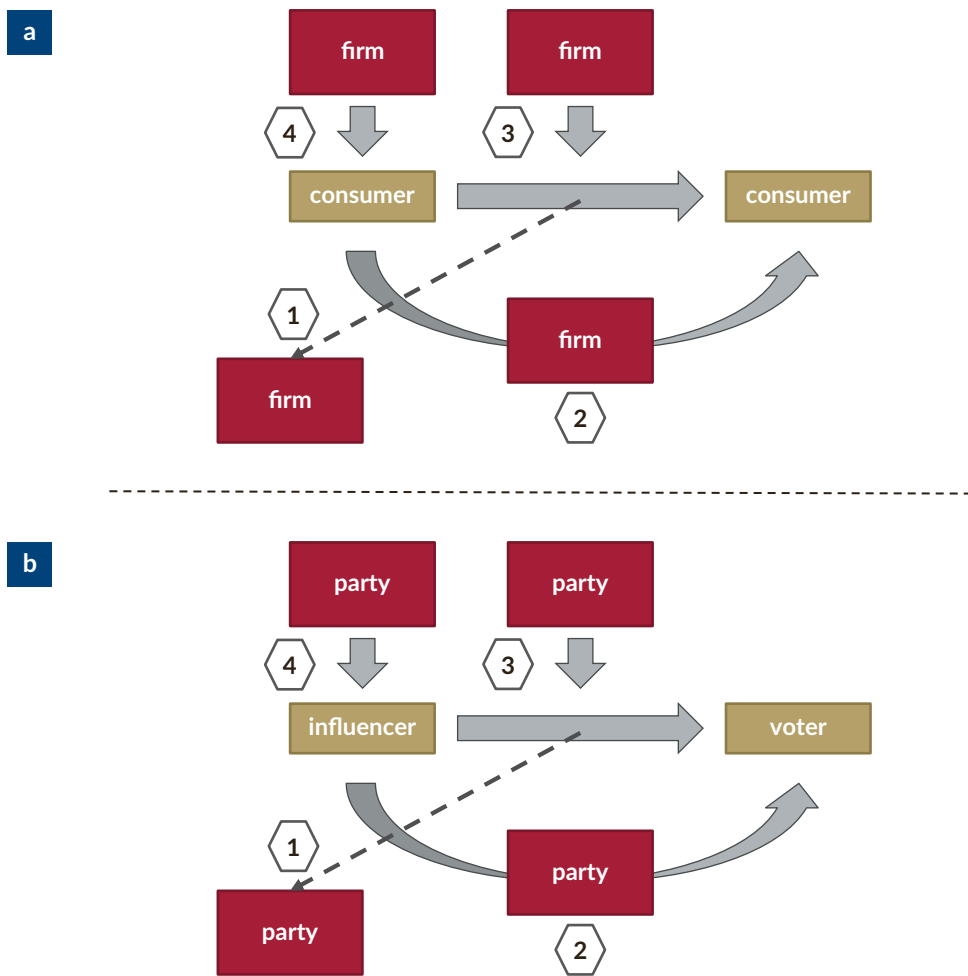
To substantiate my investigation, I suggest theorizing these approaches as the *management of social interactions*. Literature on communication management uses the term “social interactions” to describe the interactions between users specifically on social media platforms. Early on, Godes et al. (2005) presented a much-noticed framework that responded to the ambition of communication managers to control social interactions on the then emerging Web 2.0. This framework systemizes a firm’s options for managing consumer-to-consumer interactions by outlining four strategies. It organizes the strategies around the roles a firm can implement in relation to these interactions (see Figure 1a). Godes et al. (2005) then sorted the four strategies by the degree to which the firm intervenes with organic interactions, ranging from “passive” (i.e., no intervention) to “aggressive” (i.e., the purposeful shaping of interactions):

- Under the *observer* strategy, the firm collects information by listening to interactions without getting involved. A standard procedure is to monitor relevant online communities. Firms observe these communities in real time and often in an automated way. Surveys among online users represent another, albeit more arduous way of collecting information under the observer strategy. Firms use this information for organizational learning. For instance, the information can help them to adapt their marketing strategy to better respond to the needs of a target group. The information can also help to identify looming crises.
- Under the *moderator* strategy, the firm fosters convenient interactions. The idea is to encourage consumers to publicly express their opinions on the firm and its products. Obviously, the twist is specifically to motivate loyal consumers so that the firm maximizes its benefit from such interactions. However, even more neutral users can be strategically valuable, because they increase the firm’s visibility, too. Firms implement the moderator strategy, for example, by setting up brand communities and encouraging positive reviews on consumer review platforms.
- Under the *mediator* strategy, the firm manages the dissemination of interactions by controlling how and to whom certain interactions are distributed. This implies that the firm identifies beneficial interactions and takes action to share these interactions further, with the aim of getting more consumers to take notice of them. For instance, firms do so by placing testimonials of satisfied consumers on their own website.

- Under the *participant* strategy, the firm enters the interactions and creates content itself. The goal is to steer interactions in a favorable direction. According to Godes et al. (2005), content creation often occurs anonymously, without firms disclosing their authorship. For example, firms pay reputation management services to create favorable online reviews. However, such anonymity brings the participant's strategy close to manipulation. For this strategy to be considered more ethically appropriate, any interferences by firms in social interactions should be disclosed.

Even today, when influencers have become key species in the information ecologies of social media, this framework remains useful due to the generic nature of the strategies. This implies that the model is flexible enough to incorporate variations of the four strategies that may result from applying it to social interactions that include influencers as a specific type of online users. Another advantage of the model lies in the fact that, due to this generic nature, it can be applied to other types of organizations besides firms. By identifying the potential points of intervention in social interactions, it is of use in analyzing the activities of any organization that attempts to manage social interactions online. Given the ongoing tendency in political parties to resort to marketing logics (Newman, 2002), I argue that the model by Godes et al. (2005) provides a productive framework for investigating political parties' involvement with influencers.

However, to apply the model to my case of political parties and their involvement with influencers, I need to make three adaptations. First, at the center of my framework is the party, not the firm. Second, this party is interested in the interactions between voters, not between consumers. Third, the interactions do not take place between equals, but between influencers and ordinary social media users. The genre of influencing operates within the narrative of influencers and their followers as equals. According to social media folklore, influencers are formerly ordinary social media users who, although they happened to gain a micro-celebrity status, still remain the girl or boy "next door" (Hund, 2023). Yet despite this narrative, there does exist a power asymmetry between influencers and their followers due to the "attention capital" (Mears, 2023) influencers accumulate. It is precisely because of this asymmetry that parties are much more interested in influencers than they are interested in ordinary social media users. By targeting influencers, they hope to achieve effects of scale resulting from the large followings influencers captain. Structurally, however, this is not a significant difference from previous constellations. Within social networks, users are rarely exactly equal but differ in their reach across the network (i.e., their connections). Accordingly, firms and other organizations have always been particularly interested in users with high reach, for example in buzz marketing campaigns (Carl, 2006). From this perspective, influencers simply take this logic to the next level, as their reach makes them easily identifiable as potentially impactful users. Figure 1b displays a modified framework for analyzing political parties' management of influencer-follower interactions.



**Figure 1.** Analytical framework: (a) four generic social interaction management strategies framework as developed by Godes et al. (2005); (b) my modified framework for analyzing political parties' involvement with influencers. Strategies are: (1) observer, (2) moderator, (3) mediator, and (4) participant. Source: Adapted from Godes et al. (2005, p. 422).

### 3. Methods

This study presents a secondary analysis of qualitative data (Mason, 2007) from two expert interview studies with German party communicators. To answer the RQ, I combined data from two studies (Borchers et al., 2025; Bühler & Borchers, 2023), both of which examined the management of strategic influencer communication by political parties.

#### 3.1. Data Collection

This study draws on two datasets.

Dataset A contains 11 interviews that I conducted with communication managers working for political parties in Germany between April 2023 and February 2024. These interviews focused on the principal-agent risks the communication managers face in working with influencers. The interview guide explicitly asked about interviewees' experiences with influencers. During the interviews, I also encouraged interviewees to

share specific examples from their work with influencers. These questions encouraged them to describe and reflect on actual instances in which they were involved with influencers. Dataset A is the German part of a larger comparative study that included interviews with party communicators in Germany, Finland, and Romania (Borchers et al., 2025). To recruit participants, I used maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002) to consider interview partners (a) from various political parties, (b) working at various political levels (i.e., state/federal level), and (c) having varying experience in working with influencers. Interview lengths for Dataset A ranged from 34 to 84 minutes ( $M = 1:02:13$ ).

Dataset B consists of 14 interviews with party communicators from political parties in Germany. This group included communication managers, but, in contrast to Dataset A, also included party politicians who fulfilled communicative functions for the party. The study examined how influencer collaborations contribute to communicative value creation for parties. As in the first study, the interview guide again included questions about interviewees' experiences with influencers and prompted them to share specific examples. Dataset B was created from December 2020 to February 2021 by Lara Bühler under my supervision and was part of her master's thesis. Lara Bühler applied maximum variation sampling, using the same sampling criteria as I used for Dataset A. Interview lengths ranged from 38 to 54 minutes ( $M = 0:47:49$ ).

Table 1 provides an overview of the study participants. As the table shows, the two studies succeeded in recruiting interviewees from five of the six major political parties in Germany, defined as parties that hold seats in the federal parliament and at least 2 of the 16 state parliaments. However—and despite persistent attempts—both studies failed to recruit interviewees from the right-wing extremist party AfD. Another peculiarity is that not all participants had gained first-hand experience of involvement with influencers. The proportion of such inexperienced interview partners is higher in Dataset B, presumably because Dataset A was created later, at a time when influencer involvement had become more relevant. As a consequence, I excluded seven interviews with interviewees lacking influencer experience from my analysis.

**Table 1.** Overview of the datasets.

Criterion	Manifestation	Number of Cases		
		Dataset A <sup>1</sup>	Dataset B	Combined
Party	SPD (Social Democrats)	2	4	6
	CDU/CSU (Conservatives)	3	3	6
	Grüne (Greens)	2	3	5
	FDP (Liberals)	1	2	3
	AfD (right-wing)			
	Linke (Socialists)	2	1	3
	Other (minor parties)	1	1	2
Political level	National	5	4	9
	Federal state	6	10	16
Position	Member of Parliament		5	5
	Executive secretary	3		3
	Head of communications	5		5
	Press officer	3	7	10
	Social media/community manager		2	2

**Table 1.** (Cont.) Overview of the datasets.

Criterion	Manifestation	Number of Cases		
		Dataset A <sup>1</sup>	Dataset B	Combined
Experience in collaborating with influencers	Prior experience	9	9	18
	No prior experience	2	5	7
Future collaborations with influencers in election campaigns	Planning to collaborate	11	13	24
	Not planning to collaborate		1	1
Summary		11	14	25

Notes: For the sake of simplicity, the table lists only the higher-ranking interview partner; <sup>1</sup> in one interview, two political communicators from the same party participated.

### 3.2. Data Analysis

I analyzed the data in a content structuring qualitative content analysis, using content-related categories (Stamann et al., 2016). I developed the fairly simple formal coding frame in a mixed deductive-inductive approach. To start with, I established the four strategies from my analytical framework as dimensions of the coding frame. I then identified cases of influencer involvement in the datasets and assigned each to one of the four strategies. I thus identified 35 cases of influencer involvement throughout the interviews (see Table 2). In the following inductive process, I fine-coded the cases, using the strategy of subsumption, to develop subcategories that represent different variants of the four management strategies. I completed this process using the program MAXQDA.

**Table 2.** Cases of influencer involvement.

Case	Description	Strategy
1	Party invites influencers from care sector to learn about current issues	observer
2	Influencers ask politician to share information on rally	observer
3	Party reacts to influencers reposting party content	moderator
4	Party contacts influencers to inquire about collaborations	moderator
5	Party invites influencers to roundtables on gender equality	moderator
6	Party invites influencers to back a regulation initiative	moderator
7	Party invites influencers to party convention	moderator
8	Party supplies influencer with information on niche issue	moderator
9	Party supplies influencers with information on election campaign	moderator
10	Party supplies influencer with video material	moderator
11	Party invites influencers to backroom discussions	moderator
12	Party politician is interviewed on the influencer's podcast	moderator
13	Party sets up group in instant messaging app to supply influencers with campaign information	moderator
14	Party asks influencers to share information on candidate nominations	moderator
15	Party politician is interviewed during the influencer's livestream	moderator

**Table 2.** (Cont.) Cases of influencer involvement.

Case	Description	Strategy
16	Party politician visits Instagram live broadcast of influencer to discuss current political scandal	moderator
17	Party politician appears in regular influencer content	moderator
18	Party politician appears on the influencer's podcast	moderator
19	Party politician shares information on specific regulation initiative with influencers who support the initiative	moderator
20	Party invites influencers to clothing swap event	moderator
21	Party invites influencer to party event and grants backstage access	moderator
22	Party politician takes pictures with influencers	mediator
23	Party politician interviews influencer on party podcast	mediator
24	Party interviews influencers	mediator
25	Party interviews influencers	mediator
26	Party politician interviews several influencers on party podcast	mediator
27	Party motivates party-affiliated influencers to recommend voting for the party	participant
28	Party asks influencers to back party positions publicly	participant
29	Party collaborates with niche influencers to create content with party politician	participant
30	Party politician features as expert in influencer posts on confronting right-wing extremism	participant
31	Party arranges content creation on party positions with niche influencers	participant
32	Party involves in-house influencers in party events	participant
33	Party supports party member in obtaining influencer status	participant
34	Party invites influencer to media event to produce behind-the-scenes content	participant
35	Party arranges campaign support with influencers	participant

Note: In the following sections, I use case numbers to reference statements from the datasets.

## 4. Findings

The secondary analysis revealed that party communicators have adopted all four strategies identified by Godes et al. (2005), albeit to varying degrees of scope and sophistication.

### 4.1. *The Party as Observer*

The first management strategy that Godes et al. (2005) identify is the observer strategy, in which the party listens to social media interactions that may be strategically substantial. Only a few interviewees described approaches that would fall under the observer strategy. However, the few who did do so described different ways of implementing this strategy. The first type is represented by a party politician who shared information that influencers asked the party to share (which resembles a revised moderator strategy, see below). Another variant included a political communicator inviting influencers to off-the-record conversations that were arranged without any specific commitment to cooperate in a campaign. The interviewee recounted how she reached out to influencers who posted content about working in the care sector to learn more about the professional struggles they faced. She explained:

You have to talk to these people to see...what their needs are and how we can tailor our political content to it. So, we worked with several persons or contacted them—they wouldn't probably call it a collaboration—to simply discuss these issues. (Case 1)

With such conversations, party communicators sought to gather insights into the positions and sentiments that prevail among influencers and their followers. Notably, the variants of the observer strategy I identified in the data depart from the initial strategy as described by Godes et al. (2005). In the latter two variants, the parties become active by approaching influencers as central knots in social media information flows. In consequence, the actual listening is implemented through influencers. Rather than listening to what online crowds think about specific topics, parties resort to influencers who then report on their communities.

#### 4.2. *The Party as Moderator*

The moderator strategy differs from the observer strategy in that it reverses the direction of information flows. Rather than being informed by influencers, the moderator strategy aims to inform influencers. At its core, the interviewed party communicators employ the moderator strategy to create occasions that should prompt influencers to produce content featuring the party and/or its positions.

Parties implemented the moderator strategy in different ways. In its first variant, they involve influencers through events. For this purpose, they invite influencers to a wide range of events such as party conferences and election campaign events. In other cases, they use events that are not party-specific, but that are thematically positioned at the intersection between the influencers' field of interest and the party's priority issues. An interviewee reported how they invited influencers, along with other stakeholders, to local roundtables on how to improve opportunities for women. In another case, a party invited influencers with an interest in fashion to a clothing swap event that the party organized. When asked about the rationale behind this, she explained:

A clothing swap party is something that people don't attend because they think it's problematic when children are being exploited and the like. Rather, people usually attend because they want to find some nice clothes and get rid of other clothes. But then they are at least partially open to other messages. (20)

Importantly, the interviewee reflected on this initiative with satisfaction: "It actually worked quite well. Some [of the invited influencers] came and posted something about our event on their channels" (20). Of course, there is no guarantee that this approach always works well. Another participant came to a less rosy conclusion, after his party had invited influencers to a party convention: "[My party] didn't handle it very wisely. The background was actually good; they just wanted to get people talking. But unfortunately, they didn't handle the timing very wisely" (7). He then went on to elaborate that they had not considered that the program items at such events often take significantly longer than anticipated. As a result, the influencers lost interest in waiting for an opportunity to talk to politicians, who were still busy with party business, and left the party conference frustrated and with nothing to show for their effort. This example demonstrates that simply inviting influencers as an add-on to established events does not do the trick. Instead, the event structure should be designed to cater to the demands of influencers.

In its second variant, political communicators send out party materials to influencers. This variant involves measures such as more general mailings in the style of press releases. Yet it also involves the targeted dissemination of information to influencers identified as potentially in line with the party positions via more exclusive groups in instant messaging apps: “We set up appropriate groups to provide these influencers with information and messages in the hope that they would then pass them on. Simply to take advantage of their reach” (13). However, the initiative can also come from influencers, who may contact a party to request background information when preparing posts on party-relevant issues: “And when [influencer’s] request came in, we implemented it very quickly and very easily and worked together very well” (10). Hoping to earn media coverage, the party’s communication department here functioned as a service provider for the influencer.

Lastly, in its third variant, political communicators accept invitations to appear in influencer content. Importantly (and in contrast to the participant strategy discussed below), in these cases influencers adopt a more neutral role instead of acting as partisans. A common format is the influencer-led interview with a party politician. Influencers either establish new formats for these interviews, often reminiscent of journalistic interviews, or they integrate the interview into established show formats that the politician visits as a guest (e.g., in the regular gaming livestream, such as the appearance of Robert Habeck on the channel of Maximilian Knabe mentioned above). In some instances, such interviews are part of wider series in which influencers reach out to politicians of different parties with the aim of showcasing the parties’ positions as a service to their followers.

What these three approaches have in common are the objectives of establishing and deepening connections with influencers and of creating occasions for influencers to cover the party and/or party-related topics in an earned media mode. As an interviewee explained: “We are approaching this strategically. We try to reach many influencers and establish contact by...talking to each other and then simply staying in touch with them” (4). At the same time, the moderator strategy clearly demonstrates that both party communicators and influencers initiate interactions. It is therefore not only the party that approaches influencers in the hope of receiving positive mentions in influencer content. Influencers, at least those who are interested in adding a political dimension to their public persona, also turn to politicians for their content production.

### **4.3. The Party as Mediator**

Within the mediator strategy, parties provide their own channels to feature influencer content. This ambition distinguishes the mediator strategy from the moderator strategy (and the participant strategy discussed below). While the latter strategies seek to place the party in influencer content, the mediator strategy aims to place the influencer in the party’s content.

The mediator strategy only makes sense for political communicators with certain objectives such as obtaining content for the party’s own social media channels or increasing the reach and attractiveness of these channels in influencer-prone voter segments. In pursuing such objectives, political communicators invite influencers to their own digital formats like party- and politician-hosted formats such as podcasts. Compared to the appearance of party representatives in influencer content under the moderator strategy (see Section 4.2), these formats reverse the roles of politicians and influencers, featuring the former as interviewer and the latter as the interviewee. This role switch implies a change in focus. While formats under

the moderator strategy let the politician (as the guest) take center stage, formats under the mediator strategy place the influencer in the spotlight. Influencers are then usually invited to discuss influencer-related issues, which can be rooted in their biography, their expertise, or both. An interviewee explained how their party relied on the podcast of a well-known party politician to open doors to influencer collaboration by inviting selected influencers to a podcast episode: “Through the podcast with [party politician], we repeatedly come into contact with certain influencers. And, of course, these are also contacts you build up along the way” (23). The interviewed communicators nevertheless highlighted that the mediator strategy can function as a door opener, for example when interviewed influencers invite party politicians back to their format.

#### **4.4. The Party as Participant**

In the participant strategy, influencers and party come to an agreement, either formally or informally, that the influencers will support the party as partisans. The interviewed political communicators used the participant strategy in two ways. First, they placed party politicians in influencer content, for example in interview formats. An interviewee described how he became part of such a cooperation, which interestingly was initiated by the influencer:

This influencer, who usually creates content about home décor and eco-friendly lifestyles, was asked by her followers how they can address right-wing extremism within their families. And she thought: “I know someone who has already looked into this more, I can bring him over.” And then we shot a video together. (30)

This is an approach that I have already described as part of the moderator strategy. However, the difference lies in the positioning of the influencer as either a neutral host (moderator strategy) or a partisan host (participant strategy). The positioning implies that, under the participant strategy, the influencer and the politician share the goal of presenting the party in the most positive light, whereas this is not necessarily the case under the moderator strategy.

Second, influencers can produce partisan content without featuring party members. Instead, they resort to their original content genres and integrate the party and/or its positions into the narrative of the post. In contrast to the first variant, in which party officials do much of the talking, in this variant the influencers speak in the name of the party. From the perspective of my interviewees, this was an important difference, because it concerns the question of how tightly they could control influencer conduct. An interviewee provided an example of this variant, in which he collaborated with an influencer who specialized in creating comedy content. The working method was that the party suggested topics to the influencer that the influencer was then supposed to implement. Pointing to the potential conflict between serious politics and comedic trivialization, this party communicator advocated close coordination with the influencer: “He’s someone who tends to turn everything into comedy. And then you have to ask yourself, what are you actually trying to convey? Because it shouldn’t be ridiculous either. That requires tact and sensitivity” (31). The interviewee then went on to contrast this case with another cooperation in which his party collaborated with an influencer who created lifestyle content. When suggesting topics to this second influencer, he could approve her posts “almost unseen”. In contrast, collaborating with the comedy influencer required more care:

With the [comedy influencer], it happens that you say, “Can you just try to adjust it a little bit? So that people who you don’t usually reach, but who are actually inclined to do so, will take a look at it?” (31)

The participant strategy thus grants political communicators greater voice in deciding on the content and strategic direction of influencer posts than, for instance, the moderator strategy would allow. This made this strategy the most popular with the interviewed communicators.

The participant strategy gains an additional dimension when considering that there are two types of influencers with whom parties collaborate: party-external influencers (i.e., social media influencers as defined in Enke & Borchers, 2019) and party-internal influencers (i.e., party members with no significant visibility within the party but with a significant follower count on social media), who are referred to as corporate or in-house influencers in the corporate domain. The interviewed political communicators valued the option of involving in-house influencers in their campaigns, and they emphasized that in-house influencers are easier to win over for a campaign and that working with them reduces the risk of unclear influencer loyalty. Furthermore, they asserted that they retain greater control over the output with in-house influencers. On the downside, in-house influencers lack autonomy, which threatens to mitigate the impact of their posts. Additionally, a crucial challenge in working with in-house influencers lies in identifying them in the first place, because not all communications departments have an overview of internet-famous party members.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to examine the approaches that political communicators adopt to involve influencers in their campaigns. It used an adjusted version of the framework by Godes et al. (2005) that describes four generic social interaction-management strategies to identify and classify these approaches. The findings illustrated that these four strategies also occur in the context of political communication, albeit with widely varying levels of scope and sophistication.

### 5.1. Contextualizing Strategies

The observer strategy was implemented only rarely, when party communicators gathered information through influencers to deepen their knowledge about the ecosystems they seek to navigate. This strategy follows an organizational listening approach (Macnamara, 2016), even if the interviews revealed that the party communicators adopted this approach somewhat differently from what was initially imagined. Instead of listening to social media crowds directly, the interviewed communicators used influencers as intermediaries. This approach thus follows the general tendency of communication managers to outsource functions to influencers (Borchers & Enke, 2021).

The moderator strategy was the strategy for which I identified the most cases. This strategy expects more from influencers than the observer strategy in that it targets influencers’ content creation in an attempt to trigger party-friendly posts. At its core, the strategy aims to integrate influencers into party-controlled information flows, in the hope that influencers will draw on this information when creating content. In pursuing this goal, the moderator strategy follows the rationale of influencer relations (Borchers & Enke, 2021; Smith et al., 2023). Influencer relations bears close similarities to the PR function of media relations in which organizations cater to the demands of journalists. Just as with journalists, party communicators treat

influencers foremost as multipliers rather than party evangelists. Likewise, the moderator strategy focuses on relationship management and thus emphasizes a long-term perspective in working with influencers. This is also what happened in the aftermath of the mentioned clothing swap event: “This then developed into a longer-term collaboration with [party politician holding a high office] who was invited by the influencers from time to time to talk to them” (20). Obviously, party communicators hope that these activities will win over influencers for the party in the long run, which is why they usually make deliberate choices about which influencers to target.

The mediator strategy was adopted only rarely. Given its high requirements and its limited fields of application in election campaigning, its rare occurrence in this study is only slightly surprising. In fact, when pursuing objectives that do not focus on the party’s own channels, this strategy deprives influencers of one of their core strengths (and services) for collaboration partners—namely, disseminating content to an engaged audience. Moreover, if the party also produces the content itself, for example when inviting influencers to a party-hosted podcast, it also does not make use of influencers’ content production competences. The strategy’s main advantages therefore lie in posting attractive content on the party’s own channels and possibly pulling followers of influencers over to these channels, in the hope of increasing their reach (Borchers & Enke, 2021).

Lastly, the participant strategy constituted the most popular strategy among the interviewed party communicators, although it was adopted less often than the moderator strategy in absolute numbers. This strategy follows the rationale of influencer marketing in which a principal (i.e., the party) commissions an agent (i.e., the influencer) to perform communicative functions on the principal’s behalf (Borchers et al., 2025). While the agent enjoys a certain freedom in performing these functions, the principal nevertheless maintains control over the process. However, the degree of control may vary, and it has been argued that it should be kept relatively low in influencer marketing to avoid compromising influencer effectiveness (e.g., Borchers, 2023; Childers et al., 2019). As previous research has demonstrated (Borchers, 2025; Borchers et al., 2025; Goodwin et al., 2023), party communicators meet the expectation of granting influencers considerable autonomy in their conduct with ambivalence, and this standpoint poses a true threat to successful influencer marketing initiatives. Nevertheless, the popularity of the strategy makes it conceivable that it will be used more frequently in the future.

## **5.2. Professionalizing Influencer Involvement**

Abstracting from the individual approaches, this study revealed that the parties’ involvement with influencers is still in its formative phase, with limited professionalization and institutionalization compared to the situation in corporations. In practice, this means that only some of the examined cases resulted from a clearly defined strategy. With media diets shifting away from legacy media (Harff & Schmuck, 2025; Peters et al., 2022), it appears urgently necessary to develop new, effective approaches to digital campaigns that involve influencers to a greater extent. The situation therefore requires the re-allocation of resources—for example, for upstaffing communication departments and purchasing external expertise—to rapidly advance professionalization in strategic influencer communication and to build the respective infrastructure. However, such initiatives, which the interviewed party communicators were actually calling for, were often opposed by party structures where party elders prioritize time-honored media strategies that focus on legacy media, posters, street campaigning, and the like.

That influencer collaborations come in many different shades further complicates the process of developing in-house expertise. In fact, the strategies of moderating, mediating, and participating in social interactions fall into traditionally separate communication domains with their specific domain expertise—namely, earned media (moderator), owned media (mediator), and paid media (participant; Neill & Schauster, 2018). For example, the moderator strategy does not affect the autonomy of influencers in that it treats them as genuinely independent stakeholders and therefore relies on mechanisms of context control (Nothhaft & Wehmeier, 2007). In contrast, the participant strategy aims at openly winning influencers over as true partisans of the party. This status allows for much closer coordination between parties and influencers who work together towards the joint goal of achieving the party's campaign objectives. Accordingly, party communicators must learn to approach and handle influencers differently, depending on the interaction strategy they follow.

### ***5.3. Submitting Politics to the Logics of Influencer Culture?***

Looking beyond the perspective of political parties, it seems productive to ask what implications the findings have for democratic processes. Parties' interest in working with influencers results from a profound change in media diets. By embracing strategic influencer communication, the interviewed communication practitioners seek to get a hold of these voter segments that otherwise would disappear from the media arenas parties traditionally focus on. Here, three aspects come into view.

First, following voters' media usage patterns obviously lies in the strategic interest of parties that aim to maximize their vote count. But this movement can also benefit democratic processes because it makes it easier for social media-prone voters to obtain information within their own media ecology. This suggests that the involvement of parties with influencers can contribute to more informed voting decisions. Moreover, parties collaborate with influencers not only to inform voters, but also to mobilize them (Borchers, 2025). Because voter turnout plays an important role in legitimizing election results (e.g., Fowler & Smirnov, 2007), influencer involvement can contribute to stabilizing democratic systems.

Second, and in developing this idea further, the heterogeneity of influencer involvement cautions us against thinking of parties' activities merely as influencer marketing. The influencer marketing approach is represented by the participant strategy, and this strategy is undoubtedly popular among the interviewed communicators because it allows relatively high control over the output (Borchers, 2025). However, this study showed that the participant strategy is only one strategy among others and not even the one most often employed. In fact, influencer communication draws on various communicative genres (Borchers & Enke, 2022), and the moderator strategy, in particular, bears witness to the field's alternative rootedness in non-marketing contexts. When influencers work with parties without adopting a partisan position—for example when interviewing party representatives, as Maximilian Knabe does with Robert Habeck in the introductory episode of this article—their methods draw on journalistic occupational ideologies (Maeres & Hanusch, 2020). Influencer involvement in election campaigns should therefore not be equated with the purchase of opinions and, ultimately, the manipulation of public opinion. Rather, it serves a necessary function in media systems that can no longer rely solely on journalism to organize public debate. However, it should be clear that this solution is not without risks, because influencers do not operate under the ethical guidelines of journalism that reflect journalism's democratic function.

Third, this study demonstrated that parties' influencer involvement comes at the price of submitting to the logics of influencer culture. Political communicators in this study tended to position themselves as supplicants who seek the favor of influencers. This positioning implies that, in many analyzed cases, the influencers took a decisive role in deciding how a party and its politics are represented. As a result of this constellation, these representations incorporate the structural requirements of influencer communication. For instance, influencers need to consider how they can best exploit their involvement with parties to curate their self-brand (Reinikainen, Pöyry, et al., 2025; Suuronen et al., 2022). They also need to "please the algorithm" (Haapoja et al., 2024) to secure their microcelebrity status and may therefore be inclined to choose modes of representation that favor algorithmic attractiveness over democratic requirements. All of this suggests that parties' influencer involvement could further deepen the mediatization of politics (Strömbäck, 2008).

#### **5.4. Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This study has its limitations. First and foremost, the findings are restricted to Germany and limited by the willingness of party communicators to participate in the study (self-selection) and share their insights openly (social desirability). It is therefore possible, if not probable, that this study does not provide a complete picture of the approaches that party communicators adopt to involve influencers. Second, this study is based on interviews with professional communicators who are trained in how to communicate strategically. There is a risk that they may have used the interviews as an opportunity to present themselves in a favorable light. Finally, the fact that this study draws on a secondary analysis of data implies that the data were not gathered purposefully to answer the posed research question. The data were sufficiently rich with information to do the basic work of identifying the various approaches to involving influencers. Nevertheless, the interviews did not explore every case in great detail, and in some instances, I would have welcomed more context information on a case to deepen my analysis.

To advance research on political parties' involvement with influencers, I would like to conclude by pointing out three directions for follow-up studies. First, my study identified collaborative formats via interviews with party communicators. Analyzing posts that influencers created in the context of election campaigns would make a valuable addition to this study. Second, this study adopted the perspective of party communicators on influencer involvement. Exploring how influencers perceive party initiatives, and how they respond to them, would provide a much-needed counterbalance to this perspective. Third, this study drew on data from Germany. As early comparative research on political influencing demonstrated (Borchers et al., 2025), how parties manage strategic influencer communication varies across countries. Studies that extend beyond the German context therefore promise to enrich my findings with the necessary nuance.

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#### **Conflict of Interests**

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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# Negative Campaigning and Mobilization Through Disinformation: Astroturf Political Influencers' Visual Disinformation Strategies on Facebook

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## Abstract

This study investigates the strategic use of visual and verbal disinformation by astroturf political influencers for negative campaigning and political mobilization. Focusing on the case of the 2022 national election campaign in Hungary, the research examines how seemingly grassroots influencers, who conceal affiliations with political actors, engage in astroturfing, a deceptive communication tactic involving the dissemination of fabricated or misleading information. Specifically, the analysis centers on the content produced by Megafon, a prominent astroturf influencer network on Facebook, the dominant platform for political communication in Hungary. To address the research questions, a total of 2,655 Facebook posts were analyzed using manual quantitative content analysis. The dataset comprises both visual and verbal content, with a particular focus on negative campaigning and political mobilization. The findings indicate that disinformation is deeply embedded in both the textual and visual dimensions of astroturf content, with visual disinformation being more prevalent than purely textual. A recurring tactic identified is decontextualization, where genuine visuals are paired with misleading commentary, thereby distorting meaning and intent. Visuals are frequently used to misrepresent opponents' actions and mobilize supporters under false pretenses. These strategies are deployed without transparent disclosure of influencers' political connections, blurring the boundaries between organic activity and coordinated political communication. By analyzing these manipulative practices, the study emphasizes the urgent need to recognize astroturf visual disinformation as a potent instrument for undermining democratic discourse and highlights the critical role of social media as a battleground for political manipulation in contemporary electoral contexts.

## Keywords

astroturfing; democratic discourse; disinformation; mobilization; negative campaigning; visual communication

## 1. Introduction

Political influencers have emerged as new actors in political communication, using their visibility and popularity to promote political actors or issues on social media (Riedl et al., 2023). They can thereby “mobilize voters that [official] campaigns cannot reach” (Goodwin et al., 2023, p. 1627). Operating in a gray area with no strict campaigning regulations, their activities can be seen as grassroots political activism or astroturfing (Goodwin et al., 2023). Online astroturfing refers to centrally coordinated political campaigns that imitate genuine grassroots activity, creating the illusion of spontaneous participation while being directed top-down by political actors (Arce-García et al., 2022; Keller et al., 2020). Although such campaigns may involve the intentional spread of fabricated or misleading information, their defining characteristic lies in the deceptive presentation of coordinated communication as authentic engagement (Keller et al., 2020). Digital astroturfing can aim to gain support for or oppose a policy or political actor (Kovic et al., 2018). This article argues that such aims can translate into mobilization and negative campaigning strategies.

While mobilization (i.e., calls to action encouraging citizens to participate in the democratic process) and negative campaigning (i.e., attacks on political opponents) are well-established themes in political communication research (Haselmayer, 2019; Haßler et al., 2024), their intersection with astroturfing has received comparatively less systematic attention. Recent studies have explored political astroturfing and its effects on online engagement (e.g., Arce-García et al., 2022; Keller et al., 2020), yet little is known about how such practices integrate disinformation narratives for mobilization and negative campaigning in influencer-driven environments. Accordingly, this article aims to understand the extent of disinformation narratives used for (RQ1) negative campaigning and (RQ2) mobilization in astroturf political influencers’ campaigns.

Additionally, disinformation and digital astroturfing research has predominantly focused on textual content, leaving the role of visuals underexplored. Given that visual information is processed faster and perceived as more credible (Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Messaris & Abraham, 2001), visual disinformation may have stronger persuasive effects (Dan et al., 2021; Weikmann & Lecheler, 2023). Accordingly, the study investigates (RQ3) the use of visual disinformation and (RQ4) the content of disinformation narratives employed by pro-government astroturf influencers on Facebook during the 2022 Hungarian national elections. The Hungarian case, where the Megafon network strategically trained influencers to promote government-aligned messages (Bene & Juhász, 2025), offers a revealing example of how coordinated visual disinformation supports electoral mobilization. While Hungary is the focal case study, the findings are situated within broader scholarly debates on influencer-mediated disinformation in democratic contexts.

To address the research questions, both visual and verbal Facebook posts ( $N = 2,655$ ) were analyzed using manual quantitative content analysis, focusing on negative campaigning, mobilization, and visual disinformation. Findings suggest that both verbal and visual disinformation are prominent in the posts of Megafon astroturf influencers and are largely employed for negative campaigning and mobilization. These strategies frequently rely on decontextualization—pairing genuine visuals with misleading texts (Hameleers et al., 2020). Consequently, astroturf visual disinformation can be a powerful tool in negative campaigning and mobilization, often used to undermine opposition without clear disclosure of the real political motives. By outlining astroturf verbal and visual disinformation tendencies, this research contributes to the field of information disorder studies.

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## 2. Disinformation, Astroturf Political Influencers, Negative Campaigning, and Mobilization

Disinformation, astroturfing, negative campaigning, and mobilization can be understood as interconnected strategies within the digital campaign environment: Astroturfing provides the organizational infrastructure, disinformation narratives supply manipulative content, negative campaigning defines strategic attacks, and mobilization represents their behavioral outcome.

Recent scholarship on the “age of disinformation” (Carmi et al., 2020) emphasizes the strategic manipulation of information in digital environments. The concept of information disorder (Wardle, 2018) captures this spectrum, encompassing misinformation (the unintentional spread of false information), disinformation (the deliberate dissemination of false or misleading content), and malinformation (genuine information shared to cause harm). Among these, disinformation poses a particular threat to democratic integrity by undermining informed citizenship, weakening institutional trust, and delegitimizing political opponents (Bennett & Livingston, 2020; Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

With the onset of the fourth age of political communication (Blumler, 2016), social media platforms have transformed political discourse by introducing new actors and organizational logics (Thorson & Wells, 2016). One of these new actors is social media influencers, who mediate political content through affective, personalized, and interactive communication styles (Riedl et al., 2023; von Sikorski et al., 2025). They can promote political actors and issues with genuine posts, but may also simulate grassroots coordination or conceal their real motives and political connections (Goodwin et al., 2023). In the latter case, the literature labels them astroturf political influencers: They are seemingly independent social media personalities who, while appearing as grassroots voices, are in fact strategically aligned with political actors to disseminate partisan narratives, mobilize support, and discredit opponents through coordinated, often deceptive communication (von Sikorski et al., 2025).

Following Keller et al. (2020), astroturfing refers to campaigns that mimic spontaneous, bottom-up political expression while being orchestrated top-down by partisan organizations. In these campaigns, paid or incentivized participants simulate genuine civic engagement, promoting partisan agendas, distracting from unfavorable issues, or attacking opponents. While astroturfing often overlaps with disinformation, it is conceptually broader: Not all astroturfed content is factually false, but all such activity is deceptive in its presentation of coordination and authenticity. As Keller et al. (2020, p. 259) argue, astroturfing “deceives the audience about the identity of its participants,” thereby constituting a form of information manipulation that may or may not rely on falsehoods.

Digital astroturfing can aim to influence and manipulate public opinion and shape political narratives by sharing content that undermines or supports political issues and candidates (Kovic et al., 2018). Based on this idea, this article argues that disinformation shared on social media by astroturf influencers can be used for negative campaigning and political mobilization.

Negative campaigning can be defined in several ways (see Haselmayer, 2019). From the simplest and most straightforward approach, it means attacking the opponents with any kind of criticism (Geer, 2006). With digital media, negative campaigning has become more personalized and emotionally charged (Nai & Walter,

2015). On social media, negative campaigning thrives on affective polarization and algorithmic visibility, where emotionally provocative content spreads faster than neutral information (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

Within this environment, disinformation serves as a catalyst for attack politics. False or misleading content allows actors to delegitimize opponents and shape perceptions without accountability. It serves both as content (by spreading fabricated accusations) and a mechanism (by exploiting emotional dynamics) to reinforce hostility (Tucker et al., 2018). Disinformation-based attacks often rely on moral outrage and fear, sustaining polarization and reinforcing group identity.

Astroturf political influencers might play a crucial role in this process. They lend authenticity to centrally coordinated campaigns by translating elite attack messages into relatable narratives. Thereby, astroturfing provides an organizational structure through which disinformation-driven negative campaigning can spread covertly and effectively.

Mobilization—the activation and encouragement of the public to participate in the democratic and political process (see Norris, 2001; Verba et al., 2002)—can be considered a core aim of political communication. However, as Haßler et al. (2024, p. 386) describe, mobilization “has changed significantly in recent decades,” shaped by new political actors, content, channels, audiences, and regulations. These developments have reshaped campaign and communication strategies, especially with disinformation.

Disinformation might operate as a mobilizing instrument, often used for mobilizing supporters against opponents and the press (Bennett & Livingston, 2020). By solving coordination problems with focusing on collective attention and creating shared perceptions of threat or injustice (Petersen, 2020), it can stimulate emotional arousal and in-group solidarity, and leverage anger, fear, and resentment to strengthen partisan cohesion and prompt participation (Thorson & Wells, 2020). Critically, this process is not simply manipulation but a complex coordination mechanism (Petersen, 2020).

Astroturf influencers might be particularly effective here, using relatable personas and visual formats to transform partisan emotions into calls for action, whether voting, sharing content, or attacking opponents online. Through this blend of authenticity and coordination, they link disinformation to tangible political behavior. While both strategies are shaped by the new channels, trends, and actors, little research exists on the possible connections between disinformation, negative campaigning, and mobilization. Hence, this study investigates (RQ1) the extent to which disinformation narratives are employed for negative campaigning and (RQ2) for mobilization in the Facebook communication of astroturf influencers.

### 3. Visual Disinformation on Social Media

The increasingly visual nature of social media has transformed how political actors communicate. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok prioritize attention-grabbing images and videos, prompting political actors to make visual content central to their strategies (Lilleker, 2019). In this environment, visuals are not merely illustrative but strategic tools used to signal authenticity, evoke emotion, and frame political realities in ways that resonate with audiences and circumvent traditional journalistic gatekeeping (Russmann et al., 2019). Because they are processed and remembered more easily than text, images exert stronger emotional and cognitive influence in political communication (Lilleker, 2019; Miles, 2023).

Because visuals are highly persuasive and easily shared on social media, visual disinformation has become a particularly potent phenomenon with the deliberate use of images and videos to mislead, deceive, or manipulate public opinion for political purposes (Dan et al., 2021). Hence, the strategic role of visuals becomes particularly salient in disinformation and astroturfing campaigns. Visuals can be employed to construct persuasive and emotionally charged narratives that appear credible and organic but are in fact centrally coordinated. Political actors, including state-aligned influencers, might exploit the high shareability and immediacy of images and videos to amplify disinformation, blur accountability, and legitimize partisan frames. For example, decontextualized war footage or pandemic-related imagery has been used strategically to reinforce specific narratives, justify political actions, and undermine trust in opponents and media institutions (Brennen et al., 2021; Uluşan & Özejder, 2024).

Visuals play multiple communicative functions within these strategies: They can serve as “evidence” for false claims, simplify complex realities into emotionally charged symbols, and mobilize collective sentiments around polarizing issues. Their power lies not only in emotional appeal but in their ability to anchor deceptive narratives within apparently authentic imagery, thereby lending credibility to misleading messages (Krafft & Donovan, 2020). For political actors seeking to dominate online discourse, visuals might thus function as tools of framing and amplification.

Additionally, with widely available AI tools, and deepfakes with multimodal synthetic media, all kinds of communication actors are capable of fabricating convincing audio-visual content that can manipulate public perception and erode trust (Battista, 2024). While such technologies enhance campaign sophistication, their use in spreading disinformation poses profound risks to transparency, accountability, and the integrity of democratic processes.

Despite their growing prominence, the strategic deployment of visuals in political disinformation remains underexamined. While prior research has extensively analyzed textual misinformation, only a small proportion of studies systematically investigate how visual content is produced, combined, and circulated as part of disinformation campaigns (Dan et al., 2021; Weikmann & Lecheler, 2023; Yang et al., 2023). This gap is especially significant given the increasing role of influencer-based and astroturf communication, where visuals might serve as key instruments of persuasion.

To address this gap, the present study focuses on the use of visuals in the Facebook communication of astroturf political influencers during the 2022 Hungarian national elections. Specifically, it investigates (RQ3) which visual disinformation strategies can be identified and (RQ4) which narratives appear in the Facebook communication of astroturf influencers.

#### **4. Astroturfing Political Influencers in the 2022 Hungarian Election Campaign**

The 2022 Hungarian national elections provide a unique opportunity to study astroturf political influencers, who spread government-friendly information on Facebook during the campaign (Bene & Juhász, 2025). To understand the role of these actors, it is necessary to explain the country-specific characteristics. The context of the study is crucial from the perspective of disinformation types, which might vary depending on the environment of a country (see Rojas & Valenzuela, 2019).

Hungary can be described as an “illiberal democracy” (Bíró-Nagy, 2017; Polyák, 2019). As Bennett and Livingston (2020) describe, in illiberal democracies, “disinformation supports a transition to more authoritarian regimes with overt press censorship and the suspension of basic rights and legal processes” (p. 4). To better understand how this system works, it is necessary to review some major political events leading up to this condition.

Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz–KDNP coalition has held a parliamentary supermajority for 15 years, as of 2025. The 2022 parliamentary elections were held on 3 April, preceded by a seven-week-long official campaign period between 12 February and 3 April. It must be highlighted that on 24 February, six weeks before the elections, Russia invaded Ukraine—an event which highly impacted the ongoing Hungarian campaign context and its topics (see Farkas et al., 2024). Additionally, this election was unique from another perspective, too: Because of the “free but not fair” nature of the elections and the “unbalanced” playing field (see Batory, 2014), a six-party opposition coalition (United for Hungary) was formed to defeat Fidesz, led by a non-partisan, independent candidate, Péter Márki-Zay. Despite this alliance, Fidesz secured a fourth consecutive two-thirds majority.

Taking a step back, since the beginning of their first two-thirds majority in 2010, the ruling parties have increasingly reshaped the Hungarian media landscape (Bajomi-Lázár & Stępińska, 2019). They passed a new Media Act in 2010 and steadily expanded government influence, which “does not use violence or overt censorship to control media. The main instrument of control is the re-distribution of media resources” (Bajomi-Lázár & Stępińska, 2019, p. 261). As Bátorfy and Urbán (2020) summarized, the governing Fidesz–KDNP party alliance channels state resources to traditional media outlets aligned with the government. Although the internet is still a relatively freer place, government-friendly businessmen have already purchased the most popular online news sites, e.g., Origo.hu and Index.hu. In Hungary, 85% consume their news online, and 61% specifically on social media—specifically on Facebook—which is higher than news consumption on TV (51%) or in print (7%; Newman et al., 2023). Not surprisingly, the government turned to social media influencers to expand the channels and the opportunities to influence voters.

However, the Hungarian government did not need regular influencers who created their own content but actors who seemingly genuinely shared attacking messages about the opponents (Bene & Juhász, 2025), and used more confrontational and vulgar language than the official politicians (Mikola, 2023). Consequently, they needed astroturf political influencers, who artificially manipulated public opinion while presenting themselves as spontaneous and uncoordinated. This task was outsourced to Megafon (Mikola, 2023).

Officially, Megafon is a nonprofit communication agency that claims to receive no public funds. Accordingly, their political advertising activities on social media do not fall within the scope of the Hungarian campaign regulations and are not regulated and controlled by the State Audit Office. Although the funding background of Megafon is not transparent, in a lawsuit, the court has decided that it is legitimate to claim that the agency is indirectly financed by public money through a foundation and a company (Bozzay, 2022; Polyák et al., 2024; Tóth-Bíró & Bálint, 2021). Although their self-claimed mission is to support and amplify the voice of the right-wing, conservative community through training and sponsoring influencers, all the supported influencers are connected to the government, and their social media posts are basically repeating the government’s rhetoric (Mikola, 2023). Furthermore, Megafon actors constantly refer to themselves as independent influencers and non-electoral actors, but in fact, they are astroturfing political influencers.

As Bene and Juhász's (2025) comparative analysis of Megafon Facebook activity, engagement, and advertising data shows, these astroturf influencers engage in character assassination of opposition politicians. The authors also describe how Megafon's activities are closely coordinated with Fidesz, evidenced by shared personnel, party appearances at events, and leaked emails linking Megafon to Fidesz's digital team. Following Keller et al.'s (2020) definition, astroturfing refers to centrally organized campaigns that mimic grassroots activism to appear spontaneous. Megafon fits this description precisely—its influencers simulate independent voices while executing coordinated, pro-government communication designed to manipulate perceptions of authentic public support.

## 5. Methods

Prior research indicates that visual disinformation thrives on social media (Yang et al., 2023). Within the Hungarian context, Facebook represents the most widely used platform by both political actors and citizens (Newman et al., 2023), and it therefore serves as the empirical focus of this study. In 2022, the Megafon website listed 10 affiliated influencers (A kopasz oszt, Zsolt Bayer, Dániel Bohár, Dániel Deák, Stefi Déri, KonVerzio, Tamás Kötter, Tamás Korondy, Philip Rákay, and Kristóf Trombitás). Table A1 (see Supplementary File) summarizes key descriptive data on context for their online activity and reach during the election period. Using CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook, we collected all posts published by these actors during the official 2022 Hungarian national election campaign period (12 February–3 April), resulting in an initial dataset of  $N = 3,657$  posts. At the time of coding, however, the posts of one influencer (Dániel Deák) and several additional items were no longer available, most likely due to deletion. Consequently, the final dataset consisted of 2,655 posts produced by nine Megafon influencers.

The units of analysis were the individual posts on the influencers' Facebook accounts. Posts included status updates, links, photos, videos, and live videos, which could include text. In the case of multiple photos, only the first one was coded, while in the case of videos, only the first minute was coded. Text overlaid on visuals was coded as part of the visual content.

As a first step of the analysis, a Hungarian fact-checking site (Lakmusz, 2022) and a Political Capital (2022) report were used to collect and overview the main disinformation narratives of the 2022 Hungarian election campaign (see Table 3). As a next step, a manual quantitative content analysis (Parry, 2020), with an inductive, qualitative codebook generation process based on Hameleers et al. (2020) was applied to 100 random posts to refine the codebook. The inductive analysis aimed to formulate categories that describe both the visual and verbal characteristics of disinformation and their relations to mobilization and negative campaigning. After formulating a detailed codebook that focuses on the disinformation activities of astroturf political influencers, the manual quantitative content analysis was applied.

The presence of disinformation narratives was coded with a dichotomous variable (1 if present, 0 if not), and if present, the coder had to decide which disinformation narrative was present in the posts from the previously collected list of narratives. If more narratives were present in the same post, the most pronounced one had to be coded. In each post, the coder assessed whether the disinformation appeared verbally, visually, or both. If visual disinformation was present, the type of visual disinformation was coded according to Hameleers et al.'s (2020) work, which differentiates between four categories: (a) pairing authentic visuals with misleading texts (decontextualization); (b) cropping or decontextualizing visuals to

make certain aspects of issues more salient in a goal-directed way (reframing); (c) manipulating visuals to present a different reality (visual doctoring); and (d) fabricating content by pairing manipulated images with manipulated text (multimodal doctoring). To understand the “big picture”—the visual disinformation narratives—Hameleers’ (2025) logic is applied to consider both the visual and verbal elements of Facebook posts, which are in interaction when creating deceptive storylines and statements.

Negative campaigning was identified as critiques, accusations, and attacks on opponents (Geer, 2006), coded as a dichotomous variable (1 if present, 0 if not). Mobilization was defined as calls to action, such as encouraging or discouraging voting for a party or actor; sharing, reading, or watching election-related information; invitations to online or offline campaign events; or other election-related encouragement directed at political actors or citizens—inspired by the ideas of the Digital Election Campaigning Worldwide (2026) codebook, which allows international comparisons of election campaign strategies in digital communication channels. Coding of this variable differentiated between mobilization, interaction, information, and no calls to action.

Additionally, general visual features, such as the type of visuals and valence of the visual disinformation posts, were also coded. The former variable distinguished between video, screenshot, photo, meme, flyer, statistics, and cartoons, while valence (positive, negative, mixed, neutral, or humorous) was judged based on overall visual and verbal tone.

The final codebook (see Table 1) was applied to the whole sample ( $N = 2,655$ ). Coding was carried out by the author of the article. To ensure reliability and validity, an intercoder reliability test was also applied on a random sample ( $N = 100$ ) by a political science student, who participated in two coder training sessions. The intercoder reliability test resulted in Krippendorff’s alpha values of at least 0.93 for all variables.

Finally, computational statistical analyses were carried out to explore the relationships between disinformation narratives, negative campaigning, and mobilization to systematically examine how these elements interact in astroturf influencers’ communication.

## 6. Results

Table 1 summarizes the main descriptive findings of the content analysis. As can be seen, disinformation narratives were present in 22% of the whole sample, and from these posts, 22% contained only verbal disinformation, while 78% appeared with visual elements. Accordingly, it can be said that disinformation was present in a fifth of the posts of the astroturf political influencers’ Facebook campaign, and visual disinformation was more common than purely verbal disinformation.

Almost half of all posts (47%) called for some kind of action. The main aim was mobilization (82%), which was either a positive call to participate in the elections, or a negative call not to let the opposition win, and in some cases, a “go for it” cheer for the ruling party’s candidates. To a lesser degree, Megafon influencers shared information on other political matters and encouraged their followers to read or watch election-related content (17%). Calls for interactions were uncommon (1%). This means that the astroturf political influencers of Megafon are almost exclusively using their visibility to mobilize voters, and by doing so, they contribute to the government’s campaign.

**Table 1.** Summary of descriptive findings of the content analysis.

Categories	Krippendorff's alpha	Variables	Freq. (% within the whole sample)	Freq. (% within the category)
Presence of disinformation	0.97		22%	–
		Visual	17%	78%
		Verbal	5%	22%
Presence of calls to action	0.96		47%	–
		Mobilization	38%	82%
		Interaction	1%	1%
		Information	8%	17%
Presence of negative campaigning	0.96		49%	–
Main topic of disinformation*	0.95			
Type of visual disinformation	0.98			Freq. (% within all visual disinfo. posts)
		Decontextualization	13%	75%
		Reframing	3%	17%
		Visual doctoring	1%	8%
		Multimodal doctoring	0%	0%
Type of visuals	0.96			
		Video	6%	34%
		Screenshot	4%	25%
		Photo	4%	21%
		Meme	2%	10%
		Flyer	1%	6%
		Statistics	1%	3%
		Cartoon	0%	1%
Valence of the visual disinformation posts	0.93			
		Positive	1%	4%
		Negative	11%	62%
		Mixed	4%	25%
		Neutral	0%	1%
		Humorous	1%	8%

Note: \* Identified main topics of disinformation are described in Table 3.

As for negative campaigning, almost half of the posts (49%) showed negative statements or visual representations of opposition actors. These posts contained accusations, character attacks, criticism, or negative exaggerations. Accordingly, it can be said that by organizing an astroturf political influencer campaign, the government can capitalize not only on strengthened mobilization but also reap the rewards of negative campaigning strategies.

Further, to answer RQ1 and RQ2, Table 2 summarizes that 89% of all disinformation posts were used for negative campaigning. As for mobilization, 66% of all disinformation posts were intended as calls for action. Altogether, more than half of the disinformation (57%) spread by astroturf political influencers was aimed at both mobilizing their followers and running a negative campaign. In sum, then, results suggest that both negative campaigning and mobilization were important strategies of the astroturf political influencers when spreading disinformation.

Turning to RQ3 and the types of visual disinformation, 75% of the disinformation posts used visual decontextualization, with authentic visuals being paired with misleading texts, either in the post text or in text superimposed on the visuals. Reframing, when visuals are cropped to make certain aspects of issues more salient in a goal-directed way, was present in 17% of all disinformation posts. Visual doctoring—the manipulation of visuals to present a different reality—occurred in 8% of disinformation posts. Multimodal doctoring, with the manipulation of both visual and verbal elements, was not present.

As for the visual characteristics of disinformation, the types and the valence of the images and videos were coded. For visual disinformation purposes, videos (34%), screenshots (25%), photos (21%), and memes (10%) were the most commonly used, while flyers (6%), statistics (3%), and cartoons (1%) were rarely used. The high ratio of videos, screenshots, and photos suggests that these are the most suitable tools for decontextualization, as authentic visuals can best support the verbal elements of disinformation spread by astroturf influencers.

Considering the valence of the posts, the majority of visual disinformation was negative (62%), and humorous posts (8%) outnumbered positive ones (4%). The high amount of negativity can be easily understood considering the frequent application of negative campaigning. Further, these results suggest that visual disinformation is predominantly negative in nature. Twenty-five percent of visual disinformation posts were mixed, and these typically depicted the opposition from a negative perspective and Viktor Orbán from a positive one.

**Table 2.** Negative campaigning and calls to action within disinformation.

Variables	Freq. (% within disinformation)*
Negative campaigning	89%
Calls to action	66%
Both Negative campaigning & Calls to action	57%

Note: \* The variables are not mutually exclusive within disinformation.

Turning to RQ4, Table 3 describes the frequency and content of the identified disinformation narratives, and the frequency with which they were used for calls to action and negative campaigning. The most frequent statements were formed about the supposed intention of the opposition parties and candidates to drag Hungary into the Russian-Ukrainian war (50%). This was often summarized in a form that the stake of the election was war or peace, where the government represented peace, while the opposition stood for war. The narrative was formulated with other words, too: Sometimes the whole opposition, sometimes specifically Péter Márki-Zay, was accused of wanting to drag Hungary into the war by sending weapons and Hungarian soldiers to Ukraine. These posts were quite often used for both mobilization (75%) and negative campaigning (85%).

The second most common disinformation narrative was about the former prime minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány, and his supposed leading role in the opposition (28%). This narrative also appeared as him being in control of the actual opposition coalition's leader, Péter Márki-Zay, or stated that Márki-Zay is only a puppet of Gyurcsány. These narratives mobilized followers in 67% of cases, and 91% of posts related to the former prime minister were used for negative campaigning.

Another common disinformation narrative states that the opposition works with foreign/CIA agents, and they are all controlled and financed by a globalist international network whose aim is to replace Viktor Orbán (8%). A little more than half of these posts (53%) were aimed at mobilizing followers, and not surprisingly, all of them (100%) contained criticisms or accusations.

In 6% of the disinformation posts, a narrative about the opposition's supposed intention to abolish the utility cost-reduction program of the government appeared, while 4% of disinformation was about the idea that the opposition candidates' campaigns are financed by the cocaine trade. While both narratives were used for negative campaigning (100% each), the former one was more often used for mobilization (48%) than the latter one (20%).

Finally, there are less frequent but still recurring narratives (1% each), such as the opposition's supposed intention to support children's gender affirmation surgery without parental consent, their intention to

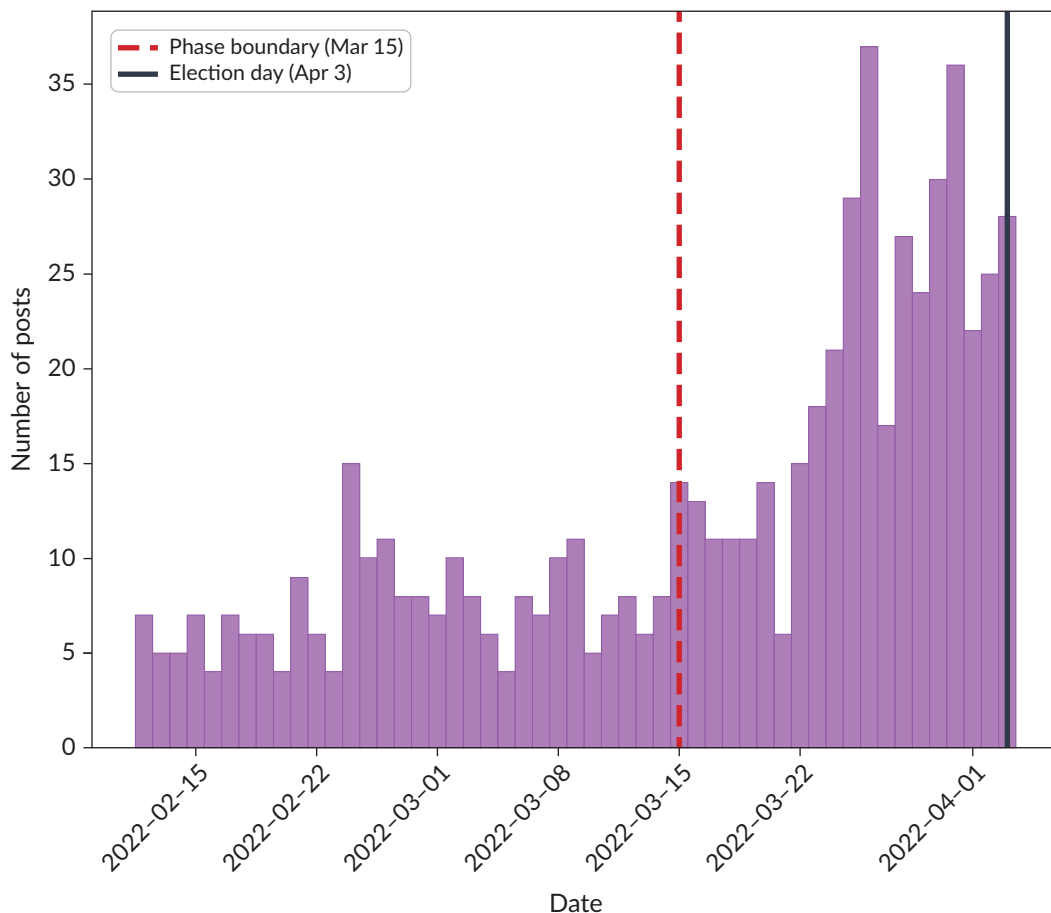
**Table 3.** Frequency and content of the most common disinformation narratives.

	Frequency	Calls to action*	Negative campaigning*
The opposition wants Hungary to join the war	50%	75%	85%
Ferenc Gyurcsány is the real leader of the opposition coalition	28%	67%	91%
The opposition works with foreign and CIA agents for globalist powers	8%	53%	100%
The opposition seeks to abolish the utility cost-reduction program	6%	48%	100%
Opposition candidates' campaigns are financed by the cocaine trade	4%	20%	100%
In the West, children have gender affirmation surgeries without parental consent, and the opposition would support this in Hungary	1%	71%	29%
The opposition seeks to privatize healthcare	1%	0%	100%
The opposition would open Hungary's borders to illegal migrants	1%	60%	100%
Ukraine, as a state, does not exist or is an artificial entity	1%	100%	100%
The US and/or the "deep state" is responsible for the war; it serves their interests	1%	67%	1%
Other	1%	50%	100%

Note: \* Percentages are calculated for the frequency within the given disinformation narrative.

privatize the health care system, and to open Hungary’s borders to illegal migrants. Still, in 1% each, there were narratives about the ideas that Ukraine as a state does not exist or is an artificial entity, and that the US and/or the “deep state” is responsible for the war, which serves their interests. Lastly, the final 1% of disinformation; these posts were rare and therefore merged into a single “other” category. These were related to the opposition’s intention to raise taxes, and to the Ukrainian neo-nazi deputy police chief of Kyiv. These narratives quite frequently contained criticism or accusations, and to a lesser degree, mobilization was also aimed at by these posts.

Regarding temporal dynamics, Figure 1 illustrates a clear temporal pattern in posting activity, with a sharp escalation as the campaign unfolds: rising from an average of 7.3 posts per day in the early phase to 20.4 in the final weeks. The mid-March surge aligns with the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February and its ensuing political fallout, suggesting that external crises served as key triggers for intensified communication and agenda-setting. Posting activity reaches its peak in the final days before the 3 April election, reflecting a deliberate strategy to maximize visibility and engagement during the most competitive stage of the campaign.



**Figure 1.** Temporal patterns in posting activity.

As Table 4 shows, mobilization posts nearly doubled from the early campaign (40%) to the final phase (71%). This highly significant increase indicates a strategic shift toward activating supporters as election day approached. Negative campaigning, by contrast, remained consistently dominant throughout the period (87–94%), underscoring its central role in the influencers’ communication. Overall, the campaign evolved

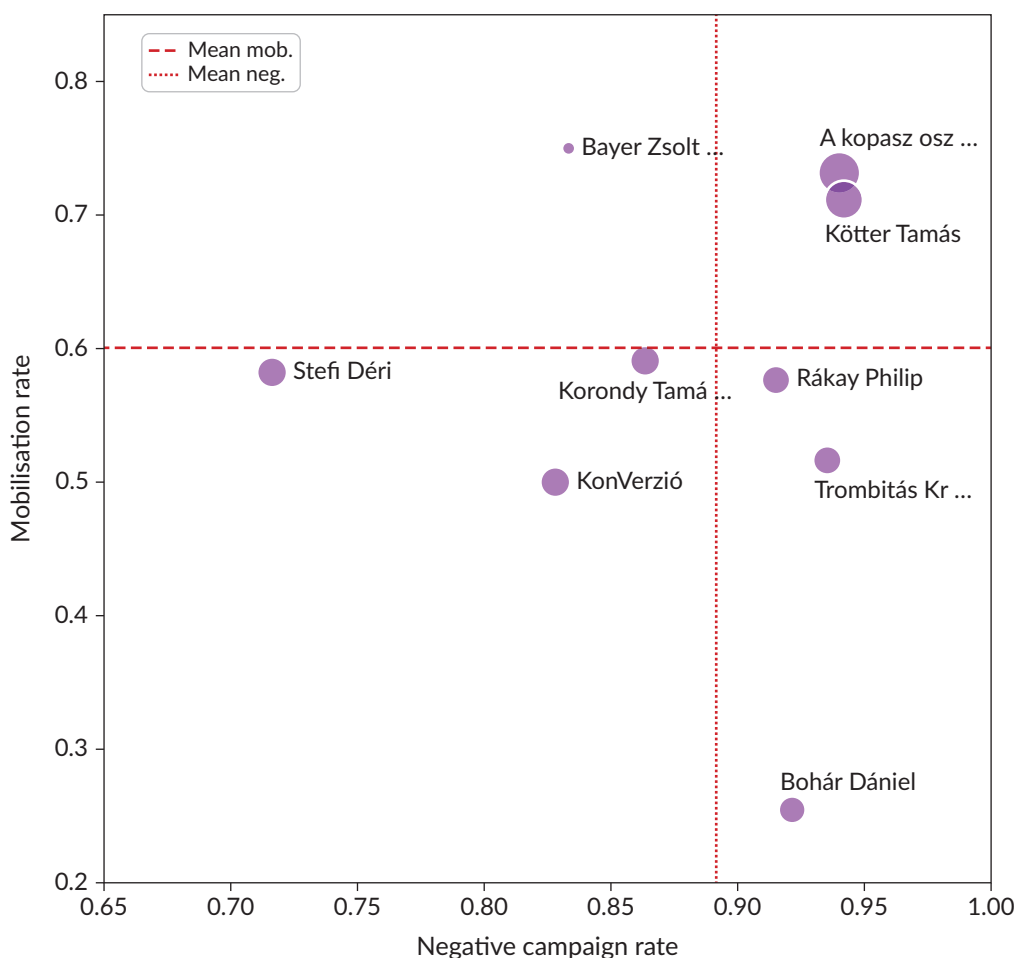
from a primarily attack-oriented phase to one increasingly focused on mobilization, suggesting a calculated transition from persuasion to turnout efforts in the final stretch.

**Table 4.** Temporal patterns of mobilization and negative campaigning.

	Mobilization (%)	Negative campaigning (%)
Early (12 Feb–14 Mar)	36.9	93.8
Late (15 Mar–3 Apr)	71.4	86.6

Note: Chi-square test (mobilisation × phase):  $\chi^2 = 60.0$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ .

Next, Figure 2 shows that across pages, activity clusters are consistently in high-negative territory (above 82%), yet levels of mobilization vary substantially (26% to 75%). Dániel Bohár stands out for combining the lowest mobilization rate (26%) with persistently high negativity, reflecting an attack-oriented communication style focused more on delegitimizing opponents than rallying supporters. In contrast, Stefi Déri presents a somewhat different profile, with lower negativity (72%) and moderate mobilization, suggesting a more mixed strategy that blends critique with selective calls to action.



**Figure 2.** Influencers' mobilization and negative campaigning activity. Varying sizes of the purple circles indicate the total number of posts published during the campaign.

## 7. Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated the relationships between disinformation narratives, negative campaigning, and mobilization strategies in astroturf political influencers' Facebook posts during the 2022 Hungarian national election campaign. To enhance our understanding of contemporary online disinformation, the analysis was further extended to examine visual content and its role in shaping information disorder.

The findings reveal that disinformation appeared in approximately one-fifth of the sample, underscoring the threat posed by astroturf influencers disseminating dubious political content. These actors relied predominantly on visual disinformation, employing images and videos for decontextualization, i.e., to support false claims with authentic images. This observation aligns with prior research (Hameleers et al., 2020) and suggests that decontextualization remains the most accessible and effective form of visual disinformation, as it requires neither advanced technical expertise nor specialized tools. However, as AI-driven image manipulation technologies evolve, this balance may shift. By 2026, AI-modified visuals had already begun to appear in Hungarian Facebook-based political communication, particularly in attack-oriented content targeting opponents.

Regarding the strategies of astroturf political influencers, both mobilization and negative campaigning emerged as common objectives of their posts, frequently intertwined with disinformation. The findings on negative campaigning are consistent with previous research, as Bene and Juhász (2025) likewise identified a high proportion of posts targeting the personal integrity of political opponents. Notably, calls to action appeared in more than half of the disinformation posts, while negative campaigning with accusations and criticism towards the opposition was present in nearly all such content. Moreover, over half of the disinformation posts simultaneously served both mobilization and negative campaigning purposes. These results lend support to Goodwin et al.'s (2023) argument concerning the mobilizing potential of these emerging actors and offer a previously underexplored illustration of substantial shifts in mobilization strategies (Haßler et al., 2024).

Based on the results, it seems like, besides spreading disinformation, astroturf political influencers aim to mobilize voters, frequently relying on negative campaigning techniques. This mobilizing function suggests that astroturf influencers are not just transmitters of partisan messages but also actively shape political participation, demonstrating a shift in campaigning where traditional party communication is augmented by influencers. These practices illustrate how political communication is being transformed by new digital intermediaries, who leverage personalized styles and platform-specific affordances to amplify partisan narratives and attack opponents. Accordingly, our findings lend support to Riedl et al.'s (2023, p. 2) argument that political influencers constitute an "ideal case for studying the changing political media ecology," as they exemplify both the innovative and disruptive forces reshaping democratic campaigning in the digital age.

The most frequent disinformation narratives were connected to the opposition's supposed intention to lead Hungary into war, and to the alleged leading role of the former prime minister. There were other common narratives, which were mainly false accusations of the opposition parties and candidates. Although to a lesser degree, the astroturf actors spread disinformation about the role of the US in the Russian-Ukrainian war. Consequently, Megafon astroturf political influencers used various disinformation narratives to support the government.

Overall, the findings reveal a campaign communication pattern dominated by negativity and strategic mobilization. While negative campaigning remained consistently high across phases, mobilization intensified sharply toward the election, reflecting a tactical shift from attack-driven to participation-focused messaging. Pages clustered around high negativity but diverged in mobilization intensity, with some emphasizing attacks and others engagement.

The present article underlines Facebook's central role in the Hungarian political communication, which aligns with broader media consumption patterns in Hungary, where political news consumption on social media is high (Newman et al., 2023). Further, results align with general social media consumption patterns as well: Facebook's visual affordances with images, videos, memes, and screenshots facilitate rapid dissemination of emotionally charged, misleading content that promotes ruling party interests while discrediting opponents. Additionally, this study reveals how astroturfing blurs the line between authentic political expression and state-coordinated disinformation, creating a false sense of grassroots engagement.

The article's case-specific insights open important theoretical discussions regarding whether findings can be generalized and extended to other democracies. On one hand, the use of Facebook's algorithmic amplification of visual and emotional content is not country-specific; these posts trigger more engagement— and thus, more visibility all around the globe (see Gerbaudo et al., 2023; Metz et al., 2020). Also, visual disinformation techniques, such as decontextualization and reframing, are common methods of persuasion in international disinformation campaigns (see Hameleers, 2023). Furthermore, astroturfing as a strategy is present worldwide (Schoch et al., 2022), and the concept of political influencers masquerading as grassroots actors is seen in other countries, such as the US, with coordinated influencer campaigns (Goodwin et al., 2023), and Russia, with state-sponsored troll farms (Zannettou et al., 2020), as well. Additionally, the illiberal democracy model of Hungary has been copied in many countries such as Turkey, Poland, and Serbia (Krekó, 2022; Shattuck, 2018), where similar media-state convergence occurs (Štětka & Mihelj, 2024). Finally, considering the content and context, tactics like character attacks and emotional visual framing are portable tools used across multiple electoral systems and media ecologies (see Grabe & Bucy, 2014; Nai et al., 2022; Petkevic & Nai, 2022).

On the other hand, Hungary's illiberal democracy and the extensive government control over traditional media create an unusually supportive ecosystem for astroturfing to thrive, unlike in pluralistic systems. Still, Hungary can function as a model for other regimes, showing how astroturfing can be institutionalized in a semi-democratic framework. This exportability makes Hungary an influential case in global debates on disinformation and democracy. Nevertheless, the scarcity of counter-messaging outlets or fact-checking infrastructure in Hungary may have amplified Megafon's effects, which is an important asymmetry that does not hold universally.

Associated with this, the study has limitations. First, the identification of disinformation narratives relied on a list of previously verified cases, which may have constrained our ability to detect newly emerging narratives circulating during the campaign. The limited availability of Hungarian-language fact-checking databases further restricts the scope of identified narratives, potentially leading to an underestimation of disinformation prevalence. Second, while manual content analysis enables the nuanced interpretation of visual and contextual elements that automated tools cannot capture, it limits the number of posts that can be feasibly analyzed. Finally, future work might focus on different social media platforms to compare and widen our knowledge of astroturf political influencers.

Still, the findings of the present article highlight that astroturf political influencers should be considered as a new kind of political communication actors with serious potential to mislead and mobilize voters by false accusations about political opponents. Since “an astroturfing campaign tries to appear like such an organic expression of public opinion but is actually centrally coordinated and organized” (Keller et al., 2020), citizens might be deceived about the credibility and intentions of these political influencers, the real political actors behind the shared information, and the validity of their content. Additionally, since these astroturf political influencers aim to mobilize their voters, the threats to democratic processes and informed citizenry are increased. Considering the high ratio of visual disinformation used by these actors, the potential threats might be even more significant. Visuals can be highly effective tools both in negative campaigning and political mobilization, and when it comes to disinformation, images and videos can provide fake evidence, with a high potential to emotionally influence public opinion, often by discrediting opponents or evoking fear, uncertainty, and anger.

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### Supplementary Material

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

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# Echoes of Emotion: Influencers' Communication Strategies and Comment Polarization in the US 2024 Presidential Election

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## Abstract

This study examines strategic differences between Democratic and Republican YouTube influencers during the 2024 US presidential election and their association with comment-level political polarization. Drawing on digital opinion leadership theory, platform architecture perspectives, and visual framing research, we employ a mixed-methods design integrating framing analysis with latent Dirichlet allocation topic modeling. The study analyzes 373 videos and 371,124 user comments published between July 27 and November 30, 2024. These data were sourced from 40 YouTube channels with at least 100,000 subscribers. Findings reveal that Democratic creators adopted a moral-crisis framing strategy while Republicans emphasized an opportunity–explanation framing model, and that 56.4% of comment discourse centers on candidate personality rather than policy substance, exhibiting patterns consistent with affective polarization. The study develops and empirically calibrates the YouTube polarization risk assessment scale through ordinary least squares regression analysis ( $R^2 = 0.224$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), identifying political stance strength and humor/sarcasm as the strongest predictors of comment polarization, thereby providing an exploratory, empirically informed framework for assessing polarization risk in platform-based political communication.

## Keywords

affective polarization; electoral communication; polarization; political communication; political influencers; YouTube

## 1. Introduction

On November 5th, 2024, Donald Trump won the presidential election, signaling both political reconfiguration and transformation in communication studies. What commentators and scholars have characterized as the first truly platform-driven presidential election (Schwemmer & Riedl, 2025; Stocking et al., 2024; Zakrzewski, 2024) witnessed YouTube political influencers transitioning from peripheral commentators to central actors. Marshall McLuhan's "the medium is the message" finds renewed expression in the digital platform era: When political discourse becomes fully integrated into platform logic, influencers emerge as integral elements of politics itself (Gillespie, 2018; McLuhan, 1994).

Pew Research Center data show that approximately half of news influencers on YouTube express clear political leanings (28% lean right, 21% lean left; Stocking et al., 2024). Across social media platforms, 37% of American adults aged 18 to 29 report regularly getting news from influencers, underscoring these creators' significance as political information sources for younger demographics (Stocking et al., 2024). These digitally native political actors contribute to a new paradigm through parasocial relationships, visual narratives, and entertainment-oriented packaging, forming a "horizontal political communication network" where influence derives from authenticity and emotional resonance rather than institutionalized authority (Riedl et al., 2023). YouTube's platform architecture, including its recommendation systems and engagement metrics, shapes political information visibility in ways that prior research has linked to "interest graphs" logic (Haroon et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2024). Unlike X's (formerly Twitter) rapid-scrolling or TikTok's fragmented flows, YouTube's "deep engagement" model fosters immersion in long-form content and comment debates, creating conditions that may both facilitate cross-partisan exposure and concentrate ideologically congruent content (Hosseinmardi et al., 2021).

The 2024 cycle marked the full emergence of a novel political communication ecology, with substantial investments in influencer partnerships leveraging an organic content veneer to shape political discourse (Zakrzewski, 2024). YouTube influencers have perfected "political entertainment," converting complex policy issues into engaging narratives (Beck & Spencer, 2025; Berrocal et al., 2014). This communication model coincides with intensifying American affective polarization where influencers serve as architects of group identity through visual symbols, narrative frameworks, and interactive rituals (Cole et al., 2025; Druckman et al., 2022).

This study dissects divergent communication strategies employed by partisan YouTube influencers during the 2024 presidential election and examines how these strategies are associated with comment-level political polarization within YouTube's platform environment. The findings prompt reconsideration of the public sphere, political participation, and democracy's future, given the ascent of influencers as new opinion leaders within platform-mediated communication environments.

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1. The Rise of Digital Opinion Leaders: From Traditional Elites to Platform-Era Power Reconstruction*

The emergence of "proximal mass opinion leaders," new political actors who maintain intimate proximity to their audiences while wielding mass-scale influence, cuts across the traditional binaries of elite versus mass, professional versus amateur, and formal versus informal (Harff et al., 2025).

YouTube political influencers exemplify this new form of power. Their influence is built on three core mechanisms: commercialized content production, strategic platform utilization, and parasocial interactions (Fischer et al., 2022). Unlike traditional elites, their authority derives from “political parasocial relationships” (Cohen & Holbert, 2021) rooted in perceived intimacy rather than institutional position. Followers often credit content based on influencer credibility rather than the merits of the content itself (Rose & Rohlinger, 2024; Turcotte et al., 2015).

These opinion leaders operate within a platform environment in which engagement metrics shape content visibility (Haroon et al., 2023). As Van Dijck et al. (2018) argued, this creates a “platform politics paradox” where the potential for deep engagement coexists with the risk of filter bubbles. Understanding this platform context is essential for analyzing influencer strategies, even though the present study focuses on user-driven content rather than algorithmically boosted recommendations.

## ***2.2. Visual Politics and Entertainment Fusion: YouTube’s Political Aesthetics***

YouTube’s platform affordances, including long-form video hosting, content recommendation systems, comment sections, and subscription features, fundamentally shape the possibilities and constraints of political communication (Evans et al., 2017). These affordances do not determine content but rather create a “grammar” within which influencers strategically construct political meaning (Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

“Politainment,” the blending of politics and entertainment that originated in the television era (Nieland, 2008), takes a more complex form on YouTube (Berrocal et al., 2014). Humor has emerged as a core rhetorical strategy that not only lowers barriers to political engagement but also blurs the boundaries between critique and entertainment (Beck & Spencer, 2025). Through meme-like visual simplification, influencers distill complex policy issues into shareable visual symbols, converting ideological conflicts into cultural signifiers (Shifman, 2014).

The integration of verbal and visual framing is particularly salient in the YouTube context where meaning is constructed through the interplay of spoken discourse, on-screen text, and visual imagery. An integrative framing analysis approach recognizes that verbal and visual frames within the same message may differ and interact, necessitating systematic attention to both modalities (Dan, 2017). As visual framing research demonstrates, visual elements carry independent framing power that often elicits stronger affective responses than text alone (Geise & Baden, 2015; Müller & Geise, 2015). This dual-modality character of YouTube’s political content necessitates an analytical approach that attends to both verbal and visual dimensions of framing (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011).

## ***2.3. New Mechanisms of Polarization: The Spiral Ascent from Cognitive Divergence to Affective Opposition***

This study focuses specifically on affective polarization, defined as the tendency of partisans to view opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015), rather than ideological polarization over policy positions. This distinction is critical: While ideological divergence may remain relatively stable, affective polarization has intensified dramatically in recent decades (Iyengar et al., 2019). Within digital platforms, affective polarization manifests as emotional hostility in discursive interactions, making YouTube comment sections a particularly apt site for observing these dynamics.

YouTube comment sections offer a useful window into polarization mechanisms. They exhibit measurable patterns of toxicity polarization where comments cluster into distributions reflecting strong partisan divergence rather than a moderate middle ground (Mall et al., 2024). Sentiment analysis of comments related to recent elections confirms that these sections display higher emotional polarity than the video content itself (Shevtsov et al., 2023).

In social-psychological terms, political polarization operates as a process of group identity, operating through the mechanisms of in-group favoritism and out-group derogation as predicted by social identity theory (Cole et al., 2025; Tajfel & Turner, 2001). Within YouTube's environment, platform features may interact with these psychological mechanisms: recommendation systems, upvoting functions, and subscription features create conditions that can concentrate ideologically congruent content (Hosseinmardi et al., 2021). This dynamic interacts with systematic public misperception of partisan extremity (Druckman et al., 2022), creating a mutually reinforcing cycle between perceived and actual polarization (Yarchi et al., 2024).

#### **2.4. Theoretical Synthesis and Research Gaps**

Based on the previous discussion, we can distill several core theoretical frameworks for understanding the communication of political influencers on YouTube and its democratic implications:

First, the digital opinion leadership framework illustrates how political influencers shape political attitudes through parasocial relationships and platform functionalities, employing mechanisms distinct from traditional communication (Harff et al., 2025; Schwemmer & Riedl, 2025). Second, a platform architecture perspective recognizes that structural features of digital platforms, such as engagement metrics and recommendation systems, may systematically shape the visibility and reach of political content (Haroon et al., 2023; Van Dijck et al., 2018), although the present study does not directly measure these processes. Third, visual framing and politainment research demonstrates that political content on YouTube is constructed through the interplay of verbal and visual modalities, where entertainment-oriented packaging and emotional resonance serve as key strategic resources (Beck & Spencer, 2025; Geise & Baden, 2015).

Despite substantial literature on social media political communication, significant gaps remain. First, platform-specific analyses of YouTube's unique ecosystem—particularly the interplay between long-form content, comment sections, and recommendation systems—are scarce. Second, empirical studies directly linking content characteristics to comment-level polarization responses are limited. Third, while mixed methods are established in digital research (Rogers, 2019), studies integrating framing analysis with large-scale topic modeling within YouTube's electoral context remain rare. Existing literature (Freelon et al., 2020) further suggests that right-wing creators may leverage platform affordances more effectively, yet whether partisan strategies converge or diverge within YouTube's environment remains unclear.

To address these gaps, this study proposes the following research questions:

RQ1: During the 2024 US presidential election, what systematic differences exist in content framing strategies between Democratic and Republican-oriented YouTube political influencers?

RQ2: What is the main topic structure of political discussions related to the 2024 US election on YouTube, and what polarization characteristics does it present?

RQ3: Is there a model that can effectively predict the degree of polarization in YouTube political video comment sections?

### 3. Research Design and Method

#### 3.1. Research Method Overview

This study employed a mixed-methods approach integrating framing analysis with quantitative latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) topic modeling. The framing analysis combined qualitative and quantitative elements: The coding scheme was developed inductively through qualitative open coding of a video subsample (Stage 1), and subsequently applied as a systematic quantitative coding instrument to the full corpus (Stage 2). This two-stage approach captures both the nuanced construction of frames within individual videos and their distributional patterns across the partisan spectrum, aligning with established mixed-methods practices in political communication research (Walter & Ophir, 2019; Ylä-Anttila et al., 2022). The LDA component provides a complementary computational perspective on large-scale comment discourse, and its integration with the framing results is examined through cross-tabulation analysis.

#### 3.2. Sample Selection and Data Collection

We conducted systematic searches on the YouTube platform on August 8th 2025, using keywords including “2024 election,” “Trump 2024,” “Harris,” “Democratic,” “Republican,” “political commentary,” “election,” “MAGA,” and their combined variants, initially identifying content creators with clear political orientations ( $n = 53$ ). These creators clearly stated their political positions in their names, channel descriptions, video content, or social media accounts. The search strategy followed social media mixed-methods design principles, using multiple keyword combinations to ensure sample comprehensiveness and representativeness (Schneiker et al., 2019).

Screening criteria were developed with reference to Fischer et al.’s (2022) framework on YouTube political influencers. First, channels were required to have a minimum of 100,000 subscribers. This criterion was adopted to focus on channels with established audiences large enough to sustain community interaction and potentially amplify partisan messaging, while excluding smaller or more peripheral voices unlikely to shape broader public discourse. Second, relevant political content had to be published during the most intense period of the US presidential election from July 27th to November 30th, 2024, as well as after the election, ensuring temporal relevance. Third, high update frequency had to be maintained during the research period, with at least one video published weekly, ensuring content continuity and timeliness. Additionally, the study excluded current political figures and mainstream media organization accounts, focusing on digitally native political influencers. A total of 35 influencers met these three sampling criteria. An additional five influencers (e.g., Candace Owens) were purposively included given their exceptional content impact, high engagement levels, cross-platform visibility, and prominent role in shaping election-related public discourse. Excluding them did not statistically alter the overall pattern of the findings. These criteria follow Kim et al.’s

(2018) recommendations for social media content analysis sampling methods, ensuring capture of politically significant communication events.

The final sample consisted of 20 Democratic-leaning and 20 Republican-leaning influencers ( $N = 40$ ), with a cumulative subscriber count of 77.7 million (as of August 8th, 2025). From all videos published by these 40 influencers within the target timeframe, irrelevant content (e.g., non-election topics) was removed. A stratified random sampling method was then employed, selecting 8–10 videos per influencer, resulting in a final corpus of 373 valid video samples for analysis (192 Democratic and 181 Republican samples).

Although prior research documented that conservative voices often achieve greater reach and engagement on social media platforms (Freelon et al., 2020; Schradie, 2019), we employed a balanced sample to enable controlled comparative analysis. This design choice prioritizes internal validity for detecting strategic divergence over proportional representation of the total discursive space.

### 3.3. Framing Analysis

The coding system followed Van Gorp's (2010) two-stage inductive-deductive method. In the first stage, we conducted open coding of 50 randomly selected videos (25 Democratic, 25 Republican). Two coders independently viewed each video in full, recording recurring thematic patterns, rhetorical strategies, and emotional appeals. Through iterative comparison and consensus discussion, the team identified emergent frame elements until thematic saturation was reached. During this preparatory phase, the two coders resolved all discrepancies through iterative discussion until full consensus was achieved, ensuring conceptual alignment before formal independent coding began. In the second stage, these inductively derived categories were cross-referenced with established frame typologies (Entman, 1993; Nisbet, 2009) to produce the final coding scheme, which was then systematically applied to the full sample of 373 videos.

Our coding dimensions encompassed three levels. Form characteristics included video duration, thumbnail type, and title strategy (Berrocal et al., 2014; Fischer et al., 2022). Content characteristics included: political keywords (Fischer et al., 2022; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000); political stance on a five-point scale from purely Democratic to purely Republican (Yarchi et al., 2024); partisan mockery; issue frame types integrating Iyengar's (1994) and Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) typologies; stance expression methods; main issues; political symbols as visual framing (Grabe & Bucy, 2009); and personal image. Emotional characteristics drew on discrete emotion theory (Marcus et al., 2000), including dominant emotion, emotional intensity, target orientation (Papacharissi, 2015), content serialization, engagement level (see Appendix A in the Supplementary File), comment polarization, and opinion distribution.

Comment polarization was assessed using a four-level ordinal scale adapted from prior research on online incivility (Coe et al., 2014; Küchler et al., 2023; see Appendix B for detailed coding criteria and representative comment examples). For each video, two trained coders independently evaluated a systematic random sample of 50 comments, assessing three dimensions: (a) emotional tone, ranging from neutral/factual to overtly hostile; (b) language intensity, from policy-focused discourse to personal attacks; and (c) cross-partisan engagement, from substantive dialogue to complete dismissal. Based on holistic assessment of these dimensions, coders assigned one of four levels: none (exclusively rational, policy-focused discussion without partisan markers), mild (occasional partisan expressions while maintaining

substantive cross-ideological engagement), moderate (prevalent partisan language with limited but present cross-partisan dialogue), and high (pervasive partisan hostility, personal attacks, and/or categorical dismissal of opposing views).

Two trained coders independently coded all 373 videos. After a calibration phase involving consensus-based trial coding of 30 videos, formal coding achieved high inter-coder reliability, with an average Cohen's Kappa of 0.975 (range: 0.952 to 1.000 across individual variables; see Appendix C for reliability scores by variable).

### 3.4. LDA Topic Modeling Analysis

All user comments from the 373 sample videos were collected ( $n = 795,356$ ). Following standard preprocessing for LDA (Maier et al., 2018), non-English comments, bots, duplicates, and emoji-only comments were removed. Text cleaning included lowercasing, removal of URLs and special characters, tokenization, and application of both standard and custom stop word lists (Schofield et al., 2017). Lemmatization and n-gram techniques were used to preserve the semantic integrity of political terms. The final preprocessed corpus contained 371,124 comments for analysis. Our analysis was limited to publicly available comments and thus excluded deleted or moderated content. The direction of potential bias from this missing content is indeterminate, as including such material could have either strengthened or weakened the observed patterns. This limitation should be considered when interpreting the results. YouTube commenters represent a self-selected subset of the broader audience. Prior research shows that only a declining share of online users participate in comments and that commenters differ systematically from non-commenters (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2023). Accordingly, the polarization patterns identified should be interpreted as reflecting active commenters' discourse rather than overall audience attitudes.

The LDA model was implemented with Python's Gensim library. The optimal number of topics ( $K = 8$ ) was determined by evaluating topic coherence and perplexity scores (Blei et al., 2003; Mimno et al., 2011). Hyperparameters were set to  $\alpha = 0.15$  and  $\beta = 0.05$  to produce concentrated, interpretable topics (Griffiths & Steyvers, 2004).

Topic validity was assessed through a threefold approach evaluating internal semantic coherence, external distinctiveness between topics, and theoretical relevance to established concepts in political communication (Nicholls & Culpepper, 2021). Topic stability was confirmed through bootstrap sampling (500 iterations). Two authors independently reviewed the top 100 high-probability comments per topic and, after three rounds of discussion, assigned the following labels: Topic 1 "Trump truth controversy," Topic 2 "election mobilization and outcomes," Topic 3 "religious moral conflicts," Topic 4 "economic security and extremism accusations," Topic 5 "racial identity politics," Topic 6 "media narratives and personal attacks," Topic 7 "education and generational divides," and Topic 8 "controversial policies and conspiracy theories."

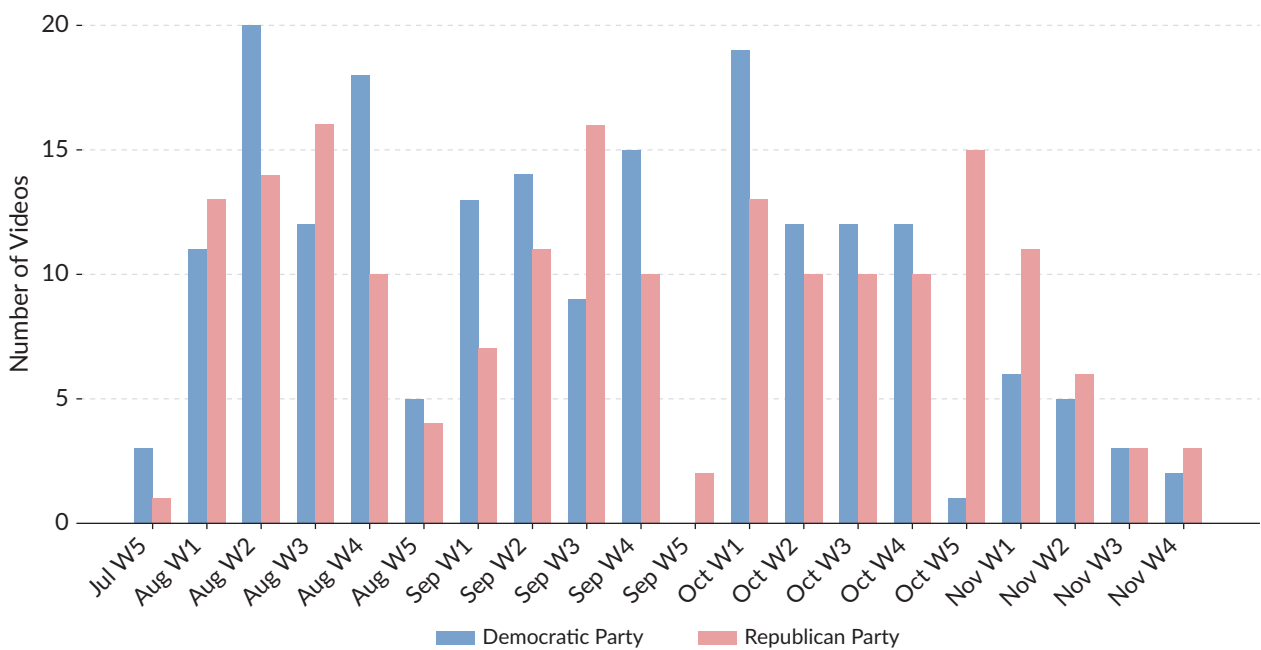
## 4. Research Findings

### 4.1. Descriptive Analysis: Strategic Divergence in Partisan Communication and Comment Polarization

The results of the framing analysis address RQ1.

The temporal distribution data (Figure 1) reveal distinctly different content deployment strategies employed by influencers from the two parties. Democrats present a relatively dispersed but clearly nodal publication pattern, reaching peak value in the second week of August (20 videos), with secondary peaks forming in the fourth week of August (18 videos) and the first week of October (19 videos). This multi-peak distribution highly correlates with key event timing, such as the Democratic National Convention and vice-presidential candidate announcement. Republicans demonstrate a more uniform but equally strategic distribution pattern, forming relatively gentle peaks in the third week of August, third week of September, and fourth week of October (approximately 15–16 videos), corresponding respectively to the post-Republican Convention, presidential debate period, and the election sprint phase, embodying a “steady advancement” communication strategy.

Democrats’ multi-peak distribution aligns with key political events, reflecting a concentrated effort at critical moments, while Republicans’ steadier output pattern suggests a continuous engagement strategy. Both parties’ publication frequency drops sharply after election day, confirming that influencer activity is fundamentally election-driven (Tran et al., 2022).



**Figure 1.** Weekly distribution of content published by Democratic and Republican YouTube political influencers.

The results of the framing analysis (Table 1) reveal divergent framing strategies between the two parties. Compared with Republican influencers, Democratic influencers construct a distinct cognitive architecture by simultaneously emphasizing crisis frames (Democrats: 26% vs. Republicans: 9.4%) and moral frames (Democrats: 28.1% vs. Republicans: 11.6%). This strategy effectively elevates political choices to the level of value-based choices, thereby framing policy disputes as moral conflicts. Compared with Democratic influencers, Republican influencers adopt a markedly different logic, combining a dominant use of opportunity frames (Republicans: 56.4% vs. Democrats: 40.1%) with a pronounced application of explanatory frames (Republicans: 22.7% vs. Democrats: 5.2%). This combination culminates in an “education–persuasion” model. Republican influencers’ more frequent use of extra-long videos (Republicans:

21% vs. Democrats: 10.9%) provides greater content capacity to support their primary goal of opinion persuasion (Republicans: 56.4% vs. Democrats: 33.9%).

These framing differences are mirrored in the emotional tenor of the content. Democratic influencers more commonly employ frames of fear and worry (Democrats: 19.3% vs. Republicans: 6.1%), while Republican influencers more frequently leverage frames of hope and pride (Republicans: 23.2% vs. Democrats: 17.7%). Both parties also exhibit high levels of partisan mockery (Republicans: 83.4% vs. Democrats: 76%) and use satirical criticism as a primary mode of stance expression (Republicans: 42% vs. Democrats: 39.1%). This consistent use of confrontational and dismissive communication appears to lay the groundwork for the exacerbation of political polarization.

**Table 1.** Framing analysis coding categories and results (see Appendix D for detailed category descriptions).

Coding Category	Subcategory	Democratic Influencers (n)	Democratic Influencers (%)	Republican Influencers (n)	Republican Influencers (%)
Video Duration	Short (<5min)	3	1.6	9	5
	Medium (5–14min)	102	53.1	80	44.2
	Long (15–44min)	66	34.4	54	29.8
	Extra-long (≥45 min)	21	10.9	38	21
Thumbnail Type	Political figure close-up	107	55.7	124	68.5
	Text and figure combination	53	27.6	55	30.4
	Non-political figure close-up	28	14.6	0	0
	Others	4	2.1	2	1.1
Title Strategy	Neutral description	17	8.9	16	8.8
	Emotional inducement	16	8.3	9	5
	Click-bait	143	74.5	147	81.2
	Question-oriented	16	8.3	9	5
Political Keywords	Figures	87	45.3	95	52.5
	Events	70	36.5	55	30.4
	Policies	8	4.2	12	6.6
	Comprehensive topics	24	12.5	16	8.8
	Others	3	1.6	3	1.7
Political Stance	Pure Democratic	133	69.3	0	0
	Democratic-leaning	41	21.4	0	0
	Neutral	13	6.8	0	0
	Republican-leaning	5	2.6	41	22.7
	Pure Republican	0	0	140	77.3
Partisan Mockery	Absent	46	24	30	16.6
	Present	146	76	151	83.4

**Table 1.** (Cont.) Framing analysis coding categories and results (see Appendix D for detailed category descriptions).

Coding Category	Subcategory	Democratic Influencers (n)	Democratic Influencers (%)	Republican Influencers (n)	Republican Influencers (%)
Issue Frame Type	Crisis frame	50	26	17	9.4
	Opportunity frame	77	40.1	102	56.4
	Moral frame	54	28.1	21	11.6
	Explanatory frame	10	5.2	41	22.7
	Economic frame	1	0.5	0	0
Stance Expression Method	Direct expression	91	47.4	65	35.9
	Implicit suggestion	4	2.1	17	9.4
	Satirical criticism	75	39.1	76	42
	Education and explanation	22	11.5	23	12.7
Main Issues	Economy	6	3.1	5	2.8
	Campaign events	128	66.7	115	63.5
	Culture	14	7.3	9	5
	Foreign affairs	2	1	2	1.1
	Institutional	21	10.9	22	12.2
	Others	21	10.9	28	15.5
Political Symbols	American flag	64	33.3	50	27.6
	Party symbols	20	10.4	20	11
	None	108	56.3	111	61.3
Personal Image	Formal professional	83	43.2	81	44.8
	Casual	81	42.2	39	21.5
	Personalized	10	5.2	61	33.7
	Authoritative	18	9.4	0	0
Dominant Emotion	Anger	30	15.6	26	14.4
	Fear and worry	37	19.3	11	6.1
	Hope and pride	34	17.7	42	23.2
	Humor and mockery	56	29.2	56	30.9
	Rationality	35	18.2	46	25.4
Emotional Intensity	Low intensity	28	14.6	22	12.2
	Medium intensity	73	38	82	45.3
	High intensity	91	47.4	77	42.5
Target Orientation	Group identity	58	30.2	40	22.1
	Call to action	26	13.5	9	5
	Opinion persuasion	65	33.9	102	56.4
	Emotional catharsis	43	22.4	30	16.6
Content Serialization	Regular series	150	78.1	150	82.9
	Standalone videos	42	21.9	31	17.1

**Table 1.** (Cont.) Framing analysis coding categories and results (see Appendix D for detailed category descriptions).

Coding Category	Subcategory	Democratic Influencers (n)	Democratic Influencers (%)	Republican Influencers (n)	Republican Influencers (%)
Engagement Level (Views/Comments)	Low engagement	19	9.9	13	7.2
	Medium engagement	72	37.5	39	21.5
	High engagement	101	52.6	129	71.3
Comment Polarization	None	0	0	3	1.7
	Mild polarization	17	8.9	25	13.8
	Moderate polarization	80	41.7	59	32.6
	High polarization	95	49.5	94	51.9
Opinion Distribution	One-sided	77	40.1	94	51.9
	Supportive	80	41.7	79	43.6
	Divided	33	17.2	7	3.9
	Opposed	2	1	1	0.6

LDA topic modeling of 371,124 comments yielded the following results to address RQ2.

Through LDA topic modeling analysis (Table 2), eight distinct topics were ultimately identified, which can be grouped into three core dimensions by semantic relevance: (a) candidate and partisan identity polarization, covering Topic 1 (“Trump truth controversy,” 20.3%), Topic 2 (“election mobilization and outcomes,” 17.2%), and Topic 6 (“media narratives and personal attacks,” 18.9%); (b) values and cultural identity polarization, involving Topic 3 (“religious moral conflicts,” 6.3%), Topic 5 (“racial identity politics,” 10.9%), and Topic 7 (“education and generational divides,” 9.4%); (c) policy issues and extremist labeling, containing Topic 4 (“economic security and extremism accusations,” 11.6%) and Topic 8 (“controversial policies and conspiracy theories,” 5.4%).

**Table 2.** LDA analysis results and category identification.

Topic No.	Sample Count	Proportion	Label	Representative Words	Category Identification
1	75,445	0.20329	Trump truth controversy	trump, lie, harris, campaign, truth, republican, democrat, love, sad, racist, party, crazy, hope, walz, vance	Candidate & partisan identity polarization
2	63,710	0.17167	Election mobilization and outcomes	vote, trump, democrat, country, win, america, president, republican, harris, party, lose, hope, fear, democracy, moral	Candidate & partisan identity polarization
3	23,415	0.06309	Religious moral conflicts	church, abortion, child, love, kill, hope, evil, bless, happy, truth, family, heart, america, jewish, anti	Values & cultural identity polarization

**Table 2.** (Cont.) LDA analysis results and category identification.

Topic No.	Sample Count	Proportion	Label	Representative Words	Category Identification
4	43,016	0.1159	Economic security and extremism accusations	money, fascist, country, government, america, free, trump, border, business, military, war, criminal, law, tax, economy	Policy issues & extremist labeling
5	40,335	0.10868	Racial identity politics	family, black, white, woman, house, price, asian, trump, harris, child, economy, obama, racist, race, culture	Values & cultural identity polarization
6	70,222	0.18921	Media narratives and personal attacks	trump, debate, stupid, media, harris, president, hope, criminal, lose, truth, jail, law, biden, laugh, musk	Candidate & partisan identity polarization
7	34,709	0.09363	Education and generational divides	child, school, truth, trump, experience, woman, grade, relationship, class, argue, family, smart, learn, change, kill	Values & cultural identity polarization
8	20,225	0.05449	Controversial policies and conspiracy theories	gun, fight, border, pet, immigration, vaccine, construction, hasan, hand, check, direction, garbage, kill, mark, car, police, violence	Policy issues & extremist labeling

According to the topic distribution analysis, candidate-related topics dominate. The top three high-frequency topics, “Trump truth controversy,” “media narratives and personal attacks,” and “election mobilization and outcomes,” collectively account for 56.4% of the total, indicating that online discussions during the 2024 election were highly concentrated around candidates’ personal characteristics and partisan opposition rather than specific policy issues (Pereira et al., 2023). This personalized political discussion model reflects key characteristics of current American political discourse. While this distribution is consistent with the personalization of political discourse, we note that a predominant focus on political competition does not inherently indicate polarization. Political candidates and partisan dynamics can be discussed without fostering intergroup hostility. The personalization pattern becomes polarizing, specifically when accompanied by affective hostility and out-group derogation, as the high levels of personal attacks (Topic 6: 18.9%) and comment polarization documented in Section 4.2 confirm.

In the vocabulary distribution, several features stand out: First, in Topic 3, religion-related vocabulary shows concentrated occurrence (“church,” “abortion,” “bless”), indicating religion’s core role in political polarization phenomena. Second, in Topic 5, racial marker words appear with high frequency and co-occurrence (“black,” “white,” “racist,” “race”), showing racial identity’s significant importance in political discussion. Third, in Topic 4, extremist language (“fascist,” “criminal,” “border”) coexists with economic issue vocabulary (“economy,” “business,” “tax”), indicating policy discussions have been infiltrated by extremist language (Calice et al., 2023).

To examine the analytical link between influencer framing strategies and comment discourse, we cross-tabulated the manually coded video frames with the LDA topic distribution (see Appendix E) in their associated comment sections. Several patterns merit attention. First, videos coded with moral frames were associated with elevated proportions of Topic 6 (“media narratives and personal attacks”) across both parties (Democratic: 23.7%, Republican: 23.8%), compared with other frame types, suggesting that moral framing may channel comment discourse toward personalized attacks. Second, among Republican influencer videos, those employing explanatory frames showed a higher proportion of Topic 7 (“education and generational divides”: 11.5%) than videos with other frame types, consistent with the education-persuasion framing model identified in the content analysis. Third, videos with humor as the dominant emotion were associated with elevated proportions of Topic 6 across both parties (Democratic: 26.4%, Republican: 22.2%), confirming the link between satirical content and personalized political discourse in the comment sections. These cross-modal patterns indicate that the thematic structure of comment discourse is not independent of influencer framing strategies but is systematically associated with them, thereby demonstrating the integrative analytical value of combining framing analysis with topic modeling.

In summary, the framing analysis and LDA results document systematic strategic divergence alongside pervasive affective polarization patterns, as discussed further in Section 5.

#### ***4.2. The Triple Dimensions of Polarization: Content Strategy, Emotional Mobilization, and Platform Dynamics***

Building on the descriptive patterns identified above, this section further examines the temporal dynamics underlying the strategic divergence in RQ1 and the polarization patterns in RQ2.

First, in the dimension of content strategy (Figure 2), the temporal evolution of frame types reveals a dynamic process of content polarization. Democratic influencers’ use of crisis frames was most prominent during the early campaign period (late July to mid-August), exceeding 70%, before gradually decreasing as the election approached. This pattern, consistent with the “critical point narrative” suggested by prior research, may evoke a sense of urgency among audiences. In contrast, Republican influencers’ opportunity frames consistently remained at high levels, surpassing 50% throughout. This consistency may be interpreted as conveying a sense of certainty, which could facilitate audience identification (Cole et al., 2025; Iyengar et al., 2019).

Second, temporal analysis of emotional mobilization reveals distinct mechanisms of emotional polarization. Democratic influencers’ emotional strategy shows distinct phase-specific characteristics: humor and hope were both prominent in the early period (July–August), rationality in the middle phase (September), and fear and worry in the late stage (October). By comparison, Republican influencers’ emotional tone maintained greater consistency with rationality being the most stable emotional characteristic throughout the campaign period, while hope and pride surged in the post-election weeks (November).

Third, comment polarization data suggest that platform architecture may be implicated in polarization dynamics (Brown et al., 2022). Although the two parties employ distinct content and emotional strategies, both produce similarly high levels of polarization (approximately 50%), suggesting a structural alignment in the platform architecture itself. Republican videos exhibit clear characteristics of “homogeneous polarization” (one-sided support was 51.9% while opinion division was only 3.9%), which aligns with their



**Figure 2.** Temporal charts of dominant emotions, polarization degree, and frame quantity in content published by Democratic and Republican YouTube political influencers.

33.7% prevalence of personalized image usage. This pattern is consistent with prior theoretical accounts suggesting that personal charisma-based influence may foster defensive group identity dynamics (Schramm et al., 2024). Although Democratic videos show a higher degree of opinion division (17.2%), this diversity may mask deeper splits, where different subgroups draw entirely different conclusions from the same content, forming a pattern of “polarization within polarization.”

Engagement data yield another insight: Compared with Democratic influencers, Republican videos show higher engagement rates (Republicans: 71.3% > Democrats: 52.6%), yet this does not translate into proportionally higher polarization, suggesting the existence of a “ceiling effect” in polarization dynamics. That is, when user groups are already highly polarized, further engagement primarily manifests as repeated interaction within homogeneous groups rather than producing new forms of polarization. This pattern is consistent with prior research suggesting that platform dynamics may interact with pre-existing polarization tendencies (Chen et al., 2023).

### 4.3. YouTube Polarization Risk Assessment Scale: From Empirical Findings to Theoretical Construction

We proposed the YouTube polarization risk assessment (YPRA) scale to address RQ3. Building on the framing analysis and LDA findings reported above, the YPRA scale integrates five content-level indicators into a weighted model designed to assess the polarization risk of individual videos. Its development proceeds from a core premise grounded in the preceding analyses: Comment polarization arises from the interaction of multiple content and emotional factors, and thus no single dimension can fully account for its complexity (Table 3).

**Table 3.** YPRA scale indicators and scoring.

Core Indicator	Category and Scores
Political Stance Strength (35%)	Pure stance: 9 points; Leaning stance: 4 points; Neutral: 1 point
Dominant Emotion (30%)	Humor/Sarcasm: 10 points; Anger: 9 points; Hope & Pride: 5 points; Fear & Worry: 4 points; Rationality: 3 points
Engagement Level (20%)	High engagement: 8 points; Medium engagement: 5 points; Low engagement: 2 points
Emotional Intensity (10%)	High intensity: 10 points; Medium intensity: 6 points; Low intensity: 2 points
Partisan Mockery (5%)	Present: 8 points; Absent: 2 points
Risk Thresholds	Low Risk: Weighted Score <4; Medium Risk: 4–6; High Risk: >6

To empirically ground the scale weights rather than relying solely on theoretical assumptions, we conducted an ordinary least squares regression analysis (see Appendix F, Tables F1–F3) with comment polarization as the dependent variable and five content-level indicators as independent predictors ( $N = 373$ ). The model achieved an  $R^2$  of 0.224 ( $F = 13.13$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that the five indicators collectively explain approximately 22.4% of the variance in comment polarization. While modest, this level of explanatory power is consistent with the inherent complexity of modeling online political behavior, where numerous contextual and individual-level factors beyond content characteristics influence polarization dynamics.

The regression analysis revealed three statistically significant predictors. Political Stance Strength emerged as the strongest predictor ( $\beta = 0.355, p < 0.001$ ), confirming that clearly partisan content is the most robust correlate of comment polarization. Dominant Emotion showed a notable pattern: Humor/Sarcasm ( $\beta = 0.350, p = 0.001$ ) exhibited a slightly stronger association with comment polarization than Anger ( $\beta = 0.314, p = 0.012$ ). Engagement Level was also significant ( $\beta = 0.198, p = 0.001$ ), suggesting that high-engagement environments are associated with more polarized comment discourse. Emotional Intensity was marginally significant ( $\beta = 0.107, p = 0.058$ ), while Partisan Mockery did not reach statistical significance ( $\beta = 0.116, p = 0.182$ ). Fear ( $\beta = 0.044, p = 0.727$ ) and Hope ( $\beta = 0.089, p = 0.418$ ) were not significant predictors of comment polarization.

Based on the normalized regression coefficients, the YPRA scale weights were empirically calibrated as follows: political stance strength (35%), dominant emotion (30%, with humor/sarcasm and anger assigned the highest risk scores), engagement level (20%), emotional intensity (10%), and partisan mockery (5%). This data-driven calibration replaced the initial literature-based weighting scheme, grounding the scale in the empirical patterns observed in this sample.

## 5. Discussion

This study examines whether YouTube political influencers function as architects of affective polarization or merely as mirrors reflecting pre-existing partisan divisions.

Addressing RQ1, the framing analysis reveals divergent strategies between Democratic and Republican influencers: the former relied on a moral-crisis dual construction, whereas the latter predominantly employed an opportunity-explanation model. This divergence challenges the assumption that platform environments necessarily homogenize partisan content strategies (Haroon et al., 2023), yet the observation that both camps produce similarly high polarization levels (approximately 50%) illustrates a paradox consistent with Van Dijck et al.'s (2018) analysis of platform societies: strategic diversity coexisting with convergent polarization outcomes.

Addressing RQ2, LDA topic modeling identified eight distinct thematic clusters, more than half of which (56.4%) centered on candidate personality rather than substantive policy debates. This pattern is consistent with the theoretical prediction that affective partisanship can drive political divergence even in the absence of prior ideological disagreement (Diermeier & Li, 2023): When comment discourse gravitates toward personal attacks rather than policy engagement, it suggests that emotional hostility may function as a contributing factor in—rather than merely a consequence of—political division.

Addressing RQ3, the empirically calibrated YPRA scale demonstrates that Political Stance Strength, Humor/Sarcasm, and Anger emerged as the three strongest predictors of comment polarization, with Political Stance and Dominant Emotion together accounting for 65% of the total scale weight. The finding that Humor/Sarcasm showed a slightly stronger statistical association with comment polarization than Anger complicates conventional accounts of online hostility that foreground overt anger. This result extends affective intelligence theory (Marcus et al., 2000) while suggesting a more compressed pathway to polarization than previous accounts of gradual radicalization: A single high-intensity video is associated with polarization levels that might otherwise require sustained exposure.

## 6. Conclusion

The pervasive presence of partisan mockery across both orientations (Democrats: 76%; Republicans: 83.4%) aligns with the predictions of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2001). Mockery appears to function not merely as a rhetorical device but as what we might term “affective infrastructure,” potentially reinforcing the emotional basis of partisan identity. This sheds light on the mutually reinforcing cycle between “perceived polarization” and “actual polarization” (Yarchi et al., 2024): By foregrounding personality over policy, influencers provide audiences with abundant signals for affective evaluation but limited material for ideological assessment. The consistent deployment of politicized visual imagery across both orientations further confirms that visual framing operates as a parallel persuasive channel, reinforcing verbal frames (Geise & Baden, 2015).

The regression finding that humor/sarcasm surpasses anger as a predictor of comment polarization is consistent with recent work on the political functions of humor (Beck & Spencer, 2025). Sarcasm may operate through implied superiority and collective derision, establishing exclusionary community boundaries that are difficult to challenge precisely because they are framed as entertainment rather than hostility. This mechanism may explain why humor-dominant videos showed the highest proportions of personalized attacks in comment discourse.

Theoretically, these findings point to a systematic distortion of Habermasian ideals of rational-critical debate. When approximately half of all videos exhibit high comment polarization (50.7% overall; Democrats: 49.5%, Republicans: 51.9%), what emerges is not a marketplace of ideas but an “echo-chamber resonance.” The “ceiling effect” we observe, where Republican videos show higher engagement yet not proportionally higher polarization, suggests a modification to the law of group polarization (Sunstein, 2002): Within platform architectures already saturated with high-intensity content, additional emotional intensity yields diminishing returns. Prior research has described how platform features such as recommendation systems can shape content visibility (Brown et al., 2022; Haroon et al., 2023). While the present study did not directly examine these processes, the observed association between engagement levels and comment polarization raises questions about the role of platform architecture that warrant investigation in future research.

In summary, the 2024 US election on YouTube was characterized by a confluence of entertainment-driven expression, emotional intensification, and entrenched partisan divisions. Within this platform ecology, characterized by attention-driven dynamics and intensive partisan communication, high levels of comment polarization appear as a persistent feature across both influencer orientations. The shift from the “post-truth” dynamics of 2016 through to the “discursive struggle over truth” in 2020, and finally to the “polarization ceiling” of 2024, suggests a steady erosion of deliberative norms. Emotion and antagonism increasingly displace rational argument in digital electoral communication. This transformation of electoral communication prompts a critical question: Is this trajectory compatible with democratic health?

These findings offer two implications for platform governance. First, risk assessment tools such as the YPRA scale can guide algorithm adjustments to reduce the visibility of highly polarized content. Second, enforcing stricter transparency for political influencer sponsorships could strengthen accountability in digital political communication.

This study has several limitations. First, while the sample of 40 major English-language influencers is representative, it may not fully capture niche creators, and videos deleted before or during sampling were not included. Additionally, the balanced sampling design (20 Democratic and 20 Republican influencers) may underrepresent the overall conservative dominance in YouTube's political ecosystem; future research employing proportional sampling could complement these findings. Second, as a platform-specific study of YouTube, the generalizability of the findings to other social media environments requires further validation. Third, although the research establishes robust associations between communication strategies and polarization, inferring causality necessitates future experimental or longitudinal research designs. Furthermore, the weighting scheme of the YPRA scale is primarily derived from empirical regression analysis within this specific election cycle. Alternative weighting configurations were not systematically tested, representing a limitation that future studies should address through robustness checks across different electoral contexts and platforms.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical and privacy restrictions.

### LLMs Disclosure

No large language models were used in the research or writing of this article.

### Supplementary Material

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

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# TikTok Edits, Vibes, Audio Memes: Participatory Propaganda in the 2025 German Federal Election Campaign

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## Abstract

This article examines how participatory propaganda operated on TikTok during the 2025 German federal election, focusing on how platform-specific vernaculars—TikTok edits, vibes, and audio memes—reshaped campaign communication. The study analyzes over 1,200 videos from official party and candidate accounts, alongside party-aligned fan videos, edits, and reused pro-party sounds to capture participatory diffusion. Participatory propaganda is conceptualized as co-performed, affect-driven political communication in which audiences create and amplify content. Participatory propaganda contrasts with classical persuasive campaigning in how persuasion is produced, privileging distributed participation, affective resonance, and blurred boundaries between elite and non-elite messaging. Combining platform ethnography and qualitative content analysis, it demonstrates five key markers: remixability, calls to action, coordination between official and unofficial actors, aesthetic and affective prioritization, and snowball virality. These dynamics unfold through TikTok edits (rapid visual sequencing), vibes (affective mood cues), and audio memes (reused sound snippets that carry shared meaning). The findings reveal how co-option and co-production intersect: Official campaigns employ remixable cues that grassroots actors transform into memeable narratives, while elite actors increasingly incorporate fan-produced edits and vibes into their messaging. Right-wing actors benefit most from dense supporter networks and decentralized production. Overall, campaign visibility and participatory uptake on TikTok hinge on affective infrastructures, complicating rational models of electoral communication. The article contributes to theorizing the platformization of politics by integrating campaign research and platform studies, emphasizing collective creativity as a defining feature of digital communication.

## Keywords

campaigning; elections; fandom; political communication; political participation; propaganda; TikTok

## 1. Introduction

In the transition from mass media to the platform age (Klinger et al., 2023), political persuasion has further shifted toward participatory, networked, and affect-driven modes. During the 2025 German federal election, all Bundestag parties campaigned on TikTok (Bösch & Geusen, 2025). Yet it was often unofficial accounts who remixed political messages into playful, emotionally charged content via platform affordances such as TikTok edits, vibes, and audio memes. Political communication on TikTok thus operates less through top-down broadcast than through practices co-enacted with audiences, producing hybrid forms of persuasion that blur the boundaries between official messaging and collective creativity (Asmolov, 2019; Wanless & Berk, 2021). While research on platform vernaculars and participatory practices is expanding, empirical work has largely focused on conflict, war, or authoritarian contexts (Chernobrov, 2025; Geboers & Pilipets, 2024). Participatory propaganda in democratic electoral contexts remains understudied, with few exceptions such as studies on the Russian-backed TikTok campaign during the 2024 Romanian parliamentary elections (Gross & Schultz, 2025; Stanescu, 2024). This is despite evidence that TikTok's platform-specific logics profoundly alter how political messaging is produced, circulated, and received. This creates a need to link participatory cultures to campaign logics and to specify how platform-native aesthetics and vernaculars now shape political participation (Munger & Li, 2025). This article investigates how participatory propaganda functioned on TikTok during the 2025 German federal election, focusing on three core features: TikTok edits, vibes, and audio memes. This study examines both official party and candidate accounts, and a diverse ecosystem of unofficial and fan accounts that not only algorithmically amplified political content but also created it. The research questions are:

RQ1: How did political actors employ participatory propaganda techniques on TikTok during the campaign, particularly using TikTok edits, vibes, and audio memes?

RQ2: What was the nature of interaction between elite (party/candidate) and non-elite (authentic/inauthentic) actors?

Participatory propaganda is conceptualized as a co-performed, affect-driven mode of persuasion in which audiences act as agents of dissemination, amplification, and meaning-making (Asmolov, 2019; Wanless & Berk, 2020, 2021). The analysis is situated within frameworks of convergence culture, dark participation, and intensified platform vernaculars, where sound templates, visual editing, and affective cues function as primary idioms of political engagement (Abidin & Kaye, 2021; Jenkins, 2009; Quandt & Klapproth, 2023). The empirical analysis draws on over 1,200 TikTok videos from party, candidate, and fan accounts, supplemented by additional accounts, sounds, and hashtags collected in February 2025. The article argues that TikTok's vernacular—anchored in sound, editing, and algorithmically amplified vibes—enables hybrid participatory propaganda that fuses co-option and co-production. This dynamic complicates normative models of rational deliberation and demonstrates how participatory propaganda becomes a routine feature of post-digital campaigning in European democracies. The case of the 2025 German federal election advances theory by integrating vernacular platform studies with campaign communication research and by demonstrating how TikTok's affordances relocate persuasive work from parties and candidates to supporters and fan accounts who produce, remix, and circulate political messages under algorithmic logics. While grounded in the German case, the mechanisms observed are platform-driven rather than nationally specific. In the following sections, the article defines edits, audio memes, and vibes as analytical entry points into

TikTok's participatory affordances and presents findings on (a) edits as aestheticized political fandom, (b) audio memes as sonic templates of participation, and (c) vibes as affective infrastructures of persuasion, followed by a synthesis of elite–non-elite interaction patterns.

## 2. Theory

### 2.1. *From Propaganda to Participatory Propaganda*

A Babylonian confusion of tongues is triggered by the mere mention of the word propaganda (Bussemer & Rollka, 2000), dating back to the 17th century and the Congregation de Propaganda Fide established by Pope Gregory XV (Guilday, 1921). Attempts to pin down and define propaganda scientifically have been manifold ever since. These efforts have consistently been shaped by historical media environments and social contexts. The early 21st century has seen a proliferation of concepts and terms surrounding propaganda (Olejnik, 2024). These concepts attempt to capture an expansive yet elusive phenomenon within a rapidly changing, platformized information environment. Within this expanding field (Radić, 2023), concepts such as computational propaganda (Howard & Woolley, 2018), network propaganda (Benkler et al., 2018), and participatory propaganda (Wanless & Berk, 2020) have been proposed to capture propaganda's contemporary forms in contemporary information environments. Participatory propaganda provides a useful lens for examining platform practices that aim to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior through affect-driven, co-performed dynamics involving both elite and non-elite actors.

### 2.2. *Participatory Propaganda vs. Persuasive Campaigning*

For much of the 20th century, campaigning, understood here as persuasive activity comprising strategic and orchestrated attempts to shape public opinion and direct action on behalf of political organizations and candidates (Lilleker et al., 2025), remained bounded and situated within a relatively confined and controllable communication environment (Jensen, 2017). Political communication was mediated by a limited number of actors—parties, newspapers, and broadcasters—and followed a predominantly top-down, monologic logic directed at passive audiences (Lilleker et al., 2025). In the platformized media ecology, these structural conditions have been fundamentally reconfigured. The communicative capacities of users are, as a technical matter, equivalent to those of institutional actors (Jensen, 2017). The dissolution of boundaries between producers, disseminators, and audiences (Jenkins, 2009) has produced a hybrid communicative field characterized by the simultaneity of top-down, bottom-up, and horizontal dynamics, resulting in participatory propaganda.

The distinction between traditional persuasive campaigning and participatory propaganda lies in a shift from static, top-down sender–receiver relations to fluid, multi-directional dynamics in which audiences act as active agents with equal technical means. Participatory propaganda differs from classical sender-driven persuasive campaigning in how persuasion is produced, not in whether influence is sought. While tactics in persuasive political campaigning could be deceptive, the source of a political advertisement or broadcast was usually apparent to the receiver. In contrast, a core feature of participatory propaganda is the possibility of obfuscation through blurred boundaries between elite and non-elite senders, alongside distributed re-authorship and peer circulation. Because trust is more likely to emerge through recommendations within personal social bonds and networks, participatory propaganda is theorized to gain credibility through

social recommendation and networked dissemination (Garrett & Weeks, 2013, as cited in Wanless & Berk, 2020).

### **2.3. Participatory Propaganda: Co-Option and Co-Production**

Participatory propaganda is understood as a co-performed, affect-driven mode of persuasion in which elite and non-elite actors act as agents of dissemination, amplification, and meaning-making. It has “only recently been identified as a distinct form of propaganda that deserves to be studied in its own right” (Lewandowsky, 2022, p. 13). The concept has been developed by scholars including Asmolov (2019), Starbird et al. (2023), and Wanless and Berk (2020), who emphasize different mechanisms, effects, and dynamics. All authors highlight that participatory propaganda fundamentally shifts the audience’s role from passive consumers to active agents in the communication process. Two central emphases can be distinguished: co-option and co-production.

Co-option emphasizes how propagandists enlist their audiences to disseminate propaganda. Wanless and Berk (2021) provide a formal definition:

Participatory propaganda is the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior of a target audience while seeking to co-opt its members to actively engage in the spread of persuasive communications, to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist. (p. 113)

The nuanced difference from traditional propaganda lies in the fact that modern technologies allow propagandists not only to push a message but also to gain audience “buy-in” through content that triggers engagement. This engagement transforms users from passive consumers into active campaigners, constituting what Wanless and Berk describe as a qualitatively more enhanced form of propaganda that is much more “invasive.”

Co-production, by contrast, describes processes where propaganda content or narratives are collaboratively assembled through mutual or shared creation “co-produced by regimes and citizens” (Asmolov, 2019, p. 9). Asmolov argues that participatory propaganda exploits the participatory design of digital networks, shifting from one-to-many communication to a “one-to-many-to-many” model in which targets become new originators, producing snowball effects. Starbird et al. (2023) apply similar reasoning in their analysis of participatory disinformation during the 2020 US election, highlighting collaboration between elites and audiences. They conceptualize participatory disinformation as a hybrid of top-down and bottom-up dynamics. The distinction between co-option and co-production centers on audience agency and intent. Co-option describes the mechanism by which the audience is persuaded to become a delivery vehicle for the propagandist’s predetermined message, whereas co-production describes the collective, collaborative effort between elites and the audience in generating the components of the message or narrative itself. Both dynamics can coexist within the same campaign, making participatory propaganda a hybrid phenomenon that combines elite direction with grassroots creativity.

Participatory propaganda can be identified in practice through several markers: content explicitly designed for remixing and sharing (such as templates or audio tracks); implicit or explicit calls to action encouraging

audience participation in message dissemination; evidence of coordination or interaction between official institutional accounts and unofficial supporter accounts; prioritization of affective and aesthetic appeal over deliberative argumentation; and the presence of “snowball effects” where individual users become new originators of distribution. These markers constitute the analytical framework guiding the empirical analysis.

#### **2.4. Empirical Contexts and Research Gaps**

Empirical studies of participatory propaganda have so far mostly centered on conflict zones, authoritarian systems, and the US. Gharavi and Gilpin (2025) observed participatory authoritarianism, while Geboers and Pilipets (2024) investigated participatory propaganda in Ukrainian wartime posters and through music on TikTok. Chernobrov (2025) examined online narrative battles between Armenian and Azerbaijani diasporas during the 2020 Karabakh war. Repnikova and Fang (2018) documented how Chinese authorities increasingly enlist ordinary internet users as active collaborators in propaganda and public opinion campaigns. In the US context, Watson (2025) showed how YouTube political influencers and their followers jointly propagate conservative narratives in a participatory manner. Outside the US, however, empirical studies of participatory propaganda in democratic elections remain scarce (Seppälä, 2022). Notable exceptions include recent analyses of TikTok campaigns during the 2024 Romanian parliamentary elections, which focus primarily on foreign information and manipulation interference (Gross & Schultz, 2025; Stanescu, 2024). This study broadens the empirical scope by examining participatory propaganda in the context of democratic election campaigning in Europe. It examines strategies and practices applied by German elite and non-elite actors on TikTok during the 2025 German federal election. This research enhances important work on participatory cultures in earlier political campaigns, as demonstrated by Jungherr (2012) on the German federal election of 2009, and contributes to understanding how participatory propaganda operates across diverse political systems and communication environments.

#### **2.5. TikTok’s Platform Affordances**

Before turning to TikTok’s political vernaculars, it is necessary to outline the platform’s affordances—the technical and cultural conditions shaping user practices (Meisner & Ledbetter, 2022). TikTok’s design centers on an algorithmic “For You Page,” short-form vertical video with integrated audio and editing tools, and an interface optimized for rapid, continuous engagement. These features privilege aesthetic appeal, affective intensity, and algorithmic amplification, shaping how users encounter and rework political content. Building on prior analyses of TikTok campaigning and right-wing communication strategies (Bösch, 2023), this study identifies three key vernaculars—vibes, edits, and audio memes—central to participatory propaganda on the platform. While edits, audio memes, and vibes are not exclusive to TikTok, its affordances and algorithmic logics uniquely operationalize, align, and amplify these practices. The following analysis therefore treats them as platform-specific articulations of participatory propaganda within TikTok’s electoral ecology.

##### **2.5.1. TikTok Edits: Aestheticized Political Fandom**

TikTok edits constitute a genre in which creators stylize footage, often of political figures, through rapid cuts, music synchronization, effects, and filters (Terpak, 2024). As Munger and Li (2025) argue, edits function as political fandom, prioritizing aesthetic appeal—making a politician “look good”—over policy-based persuasion. The significance of edits lies in their departure from facticity as a criterion for political

communication. Previous modalities of social media, particularly text-based platforms, placed significant emphasis on whether statements were true or false. For edits, facticity is beside the point (Munger & Li, 2025). Instead, these videos prioritize aesthetic appeal, emotional resonance, and the construction of parasocial affinity with political figures. The genre's informal designation as “thirst traps”—a term typically associated with sexualized self-presentation—signals its orientation toward visual appeal and affective attraction rather than substantive political argumentation. Experimental work suggests that exposure to such edits can influence viewers' evaluations of target politicians under specific conditions, highlighting that aesthetic presentation may shape political impressions (Munger & Li, 2025). This represents a shift toward what might be called “vibe-based” political evaluation, where feelings about a politician's presentation matter as much as or more than substantive political considerations. Moreover, the scope of the “political” expressible through video suggests an expanding role for this form of communication in 21st-century political discourse (Munger & Li, 2025).

### 2.5.2. Audio Memes: Sonic Templates of Participation

Audio memes constitute a distinctive and structurally central feature of TikTok's ecology. Building on research defining memes as units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by users (Shifman, 2013), audio memes extend memetic logic into the sonic domain. Unlike visual memes, audio memes function as sonic templates—snippets of music, dialogue, or sound effects—that users appropriate and remix across videos (Pilipets & Chao, 2025). These sounds become shared cultural resources that carry affective associations and contextual meanings that accumulate through repeated use. On TikTok, the same audio track can circulate across thousands of videos, forming what Pilipets and Chao (2025) term “memetic soundscapes.” These sonic environments allow accumulated associations to travel across contexts within TikTok's sound-driven interface (Abidin & Kaye, 2021). When applied to political content, audio memes frame interpretation even before visual content is fully processed, creating an immediate affective orientation toward the message. This represents a form of remix culture (Denisova, 2019; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015) where political expression emerges through the creative reappropriation of existing sonic materials. Audio memes are not politically neutral. Research shows that TikTok's auditory practices are exploited to intensify information disorders in conflict contexts (Bösch & Divon, 2024) and by far-right actors to circulate political messaging (Geboers & Bösch, 2025). Audio memes thus serve dual functions: They lower barriers to political participation through templated creativity while simultaneously enabling forms of political manipulation. By inviting users to co-produce political meaning through shared sound templates, audio memes can serve as a participatory propaganda practice.

### 2.5.3. Vibes: Affective Infrastructures of Persuasion

Vibes describe the atmosphere and feeling of spaces, events, experiences, and content both online and offline (Brown et al., 2024) that have been incorporated into digital vernaculars and have been transformed into commodities (Lupinacci, 2025). Vibes represent a shift away from shared intelligibility and factual authority toward a world where performative resonance and emotional alignment determine what is perceived as real or important, as Fendt (2025) argues. In the context of TikTok, vibes refer to a combination of symbolic, aesthetic, contextual, and taste-related elements that create particular moods or affective experiences (Royuela, 2025). Unlike traditional concepts of affect or emotion in media studies, vibes capture the colloquial understanding users themselves employ to describe their experiences on the platform.

As Kender (2022) demonstrates, users attribute distinct affective qualities to different social media spaces—characterizing platforms by their overall *vibe*—which shapes expectations for how interaction and expression should unfold. By examining *vibes* on TikTok, it is possible to explore the affective dynamics that capture the attention of TikTok users and the ways in which their affective states lead them to scroll in search of particular *vibes* (Royuela, 2025). In political communication, *vibes* function as a mode of evaluation that operates alongside or even supersedes traditional criteria like policy positions or factual accuracy. Research on far-right movements demonstrates how “vulgar *vibes*” can constitute a form of affective politics that mobilizes support through emotional resonance rather than ideological coherence (Leander & Lobato, 2025). Political content succeeds when it generates a desired *vibe*—signaling casualness, coolness, desire, or other diffuse affective and bodily responses (Miles, 2023). In what Fendt (2025) terms a “*vibocracy*,” a societal condition in which public life and decision-making are shaped by affective resonance, performative legitimacy, and unstable epistemic frames, the production of such *vibes* becomes a functional requirement of political communication rather than a supplementary stylistic device.

To translate these conceptual insights into empirical observation, the following analysis situates participatory propaganda within the communicative ecology of the 2025 German federal election, where TikTok emerged as a central site of political meaning-making.

## ***2.6. The 2025 German Federal Election: TikTok as Political Battleground***

The 2025 German federal election represents a pivotal moment in TikTok’s evolution as a space for political communication. For the first time, all parties represented in the 20th Bundestag actively used the platform to reach approximately 23 million German users, marking a decisive shift from the 2024 European Parliament elections, when several parties remained absent (Bösch, 2024). Between January 1 and February 23, 2025, official candidate and party accounts generated a combined 363.9 million views, illustrating TikTok’s unprecedented reach and engagement potential. The election thus offers a unique opportunity to observe participatory propaganda under conditions of full-party adoption, where platform affordances and vernaculars directly shape campaign strategies.

In response to AfD dominance on TikTok, democratic parties adopted platform-appropriate strategies, shifting from rational-informative, sender–receiver communication toward emotionally charged, participatory messaging (Bösch & Geusen, 2025). Successful campaigns, particularly those of the AfD and Die Linke, benefited from active ecosystems of unofficial accounts that fulfilled the participatory aspirations of politically engaged users (Neuberger et al., 2019). In TikTok’s fleeting and dense information flow, campaigns are difficult to plan and control as publics organize emergently and bottom-up, with memetic narratives and trends appearing, disappearing, and transforming rapidly. This context makes *vibes*, edits, and audio memes not merely stylistic choices but strategic necessities for political actors seeking to penetrate the platform’s “noise” (Salvaggio, 2024) and reach fragmented audiences.

Building on the theoretical framework of participatory propaganda and the specific context of the 2025 German federal election, this study investigates the two questions:

RQ1: How did political actors employ participatory propaganda techniques on TikTok during the campaign? This question examines whether and how elite and non-elite users deliberately leveraged

participatory mechanisms based on the three features—TikTok edits, vibes, and audio memes—to amplify their messaging, and what specific practices characterized these strategies.

RQ2: What was the nature of interaction between elite (party/candidate) and non-elite (authentic/inauthentic) actors? This question explores whether the relationship between official party accounts and unofficial fan accounts is better characterized as co-option (elites enlisting audiences to spread predetermined messages), co-production (collaborative creation of political narratives), or alternative configurations.

### 3. Methodology

To analyze participatory propaganda during the 2025 German federal election campaign on TikTok, the study examined content produced by (a) elite actors, official accounts operated by political parties and leading candidates, and (b) non-elite actors, including both authentic and inauthentic user accounts. Accounts were identified, labeled, scraped, and systematically analyzed to trace interaction patterns and content characteristics across actor types. Authentic accounts were identified based on observable cues such as identifiable user handles, profile images, and consistent posting behavior. Inauthentic accounts lacked such indicators and operated under anonymity. The authentic/inauthentic distinction is used pragmatically to trace coordination and amplification rather than to claim objective verification.

The data comprise three corpora. Corpus A includes posts from the official TikTok accounts (lead candidate and one central party account) of all parties represented in the 20th German Bundestag (AfD, BSW, CDU, Greens, Die Linke, FDP, SPD) from January 1 to February 23, 2025 ( $n = 1,207$ ). Corpus B captures non-elite actors. These accounts were identified via an exploratory user-centric approach (walkthrough method) supported by systematic election- and party-related hashtag searches. This approach identified party-aligned non-elite accounts through cues such as user handles, profile images, and consistent hashtag usage. The process allowed the identification of an ecosystem of unofficial “fan accounts” that produced content supporting specific parties or candidates. Sampling stopped once two fan accounts per party were identified. The author qualitatively analyzed 56 fan videos from 28 accounts (two per party; see Section 4.3). In addition, candidate-name + “edit” hashtag searches yielded 3,230 edit videos (see Section 4.1). Corpus C examines audio diffusion through 10 pro-party sounds used by both elite and non-elite actors; the most widely used sound appeared in approximately 9,000 videos (see Section 4.2). Counts of edits and sound usage are reported to illustrate circulation dynamics and scale, not to claim comprehensive coverage. All videos were downloaded on February 24, 2025, using Zeeschuimer, a browser-based data collection tool, and subsequently processed in 4CAT. The analysis focused on selected information-rich cases (Sandelowski, 1995) and combined immersive platform observation with qualitative content analysis. An iterative coding process assessed each video for the presence and function of edits, audio memes, and vibes as they materialized on TikTok, alongside markers of participatory propaganda. Edits, audio memes, and vibes were coded with attention to aesthetic emphasis, sound reuse and diffusion, and affective atmospheres shaping political evaluation. The markers used for participatory propaganda are:

- Marker 1: content explicitly designed for remixing and sharing;
- Marker 2: implicit or explicit calls to action encouraging audience participation;
- Marker 3: evidence of coordination between official and unofficial accounts;

- Marker 4: prioritization of affective and aesthetic appeal over deliberative argumentation;
- Marker 5: presence of “snowball effects” where users became new originators of distribution.

Several methodological limitations apply. First, TikTok’s algorithmic distribution produces feed-specific exposure, introducing selection bias. Although systematic hashtag and account monitoring mitigated this, comprehensive sampling remained impossible. Second, content ephemerality and platform restrictions (e.g., scraping limits) constrained data collection. Third, the study examines production and circulation rather than audience interpretation or behavioral effects; engagement metrics indicate participatory uptake rather than persuasion.

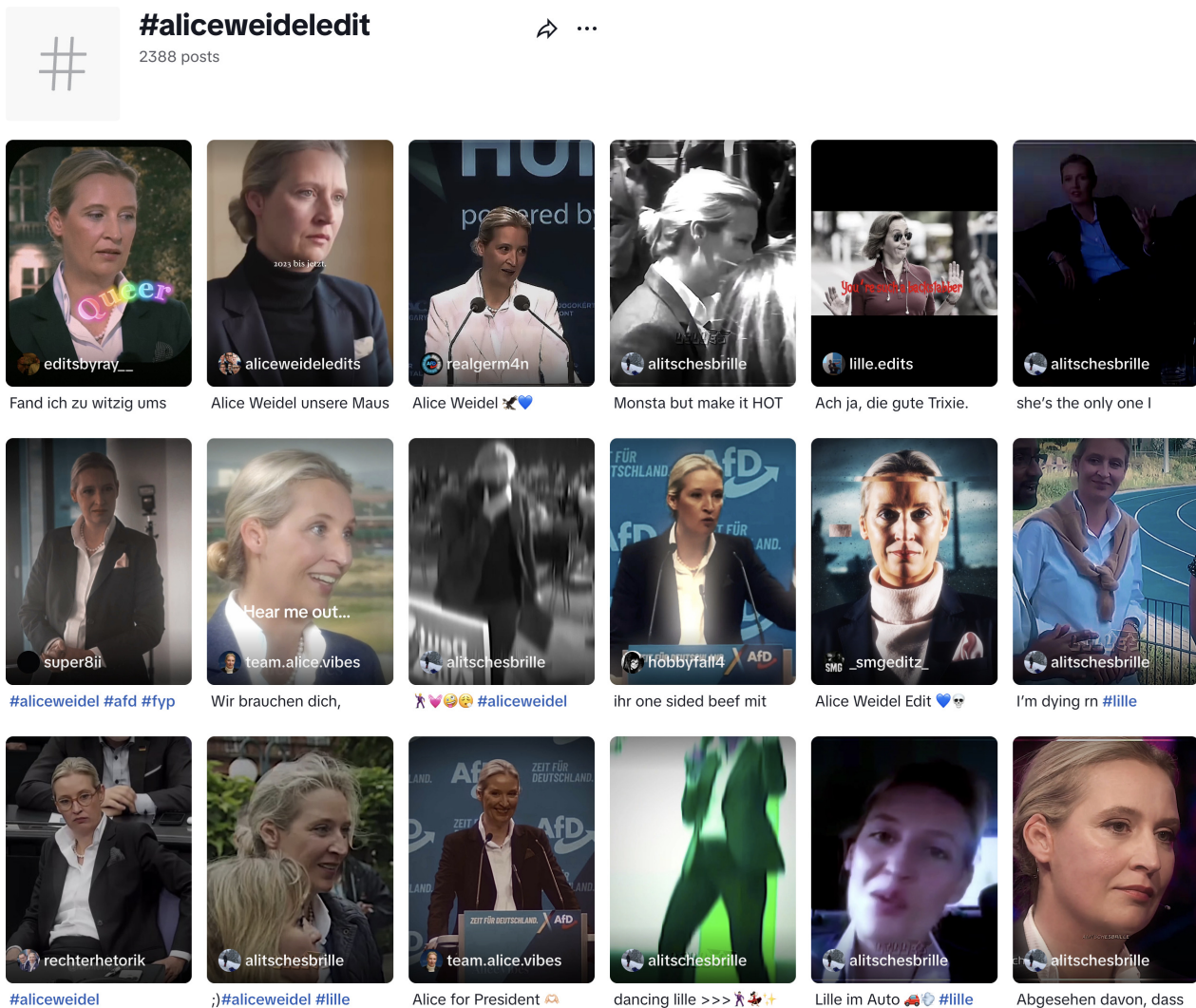
## 4. Findings

The following analysis examines how participatory propaganda materialized on TikTok during the 2025 German federal election through the platform-specific vernaculars of TikTok edits, audio memes, and vibes. The findings trace how parties and candidates attempted to mobilize users and how audiences co-produced and amplified campaign messages. The empirical subsections below contain information-rich cases exemplifying recurring patterns. These cases are used to illustrate how the five markers and vernacular forms materialize, rather than to claim frequency-based representativeness for the entire election discourse. This section addresses RQ1 and RQ2 by identifying patterns of co-option, co-production, and hybrid interaction between elite and non-elite actors. All parties engaged with platform conventions such as popular sounds, routines, and memes, including the *Busfahrergruß* (“bus-driver wave”) performed by Scholz (SPD) and Robert Habeck (Greens). These adaptations already indicate marker 1: content intentionally designed for remixing and sharing within platform vernaculars. Some campaigns explicitly invited participation: On 8 January, AfD leader Alice Weidel urged supporters to redistribute campaign materials on their own channels, offering incentives such as signed merchandise—an example of marker 2. These practices illustrate how the AfD’s “TikTok Army” sustains algorithmic visibility through coordinated official and unofficial activity (marker 3), with comparative studies identifying up to 12,790 AfD-affiliated fan accounts versus fewer than 900 for the SPD (Wetzel & Kiess, 2025). According to Dittrich et al. (2025), decentralized production ecologies rather than centralized orchestration underpin the AfD’s dominance. By contrast, Die Linke displayed emergent co-production between authentic user accounts and official content, with affective and aesthetic engagement outweighing deliberative argumentation (marker 4). The following subsections unpack these participatory strategies along the three analytical dimensions of vibes, audio memes, and TikTok edits.

### 4.1. TikTok Edits: Aestheticized Political Fandom (Co-production)

TikTok edits expose the platform’s visual affordances—the ways cutting, syncing, and stylizing footage convert political messaging into vernacular spectacle. These edits operationalize marker 1 (remixability) and marker 4 (aesthetic prioritization), converting political figures into fan-style visual templates. A prominent example of TikTok edits in German political communication appears under the hashtag #weidelknecht. For several years, edits under this hashtag have framed an imagined same-sex relationship between AfD leader Alice Weidel and Die Linke politician Sahra Wagenknecht. By the end of 2022, these videos had accumulated 61.4 million views (Bösch, 2023). Although TikTok later restricted hashtag view counts, searches still yield over 1,000 remix variations built from stylized television footage with sexualized connotations. Experimental research by

Munger and Li (2025) suggests that edits as a form of political fandom can influence viewers' evaluations of target politicians. This effect may be particularly pronounced when edits take on "thirst trap" aesthetics. A "thirst trap" refers to online content designed to attract attention and engagement through flirtation or visual allure (Boffone & Rosvally, 2023). Throughout the election campaign, TikTok edits of Alice Weidel, Robert Habeck, Heidi Reichinnek, and Christian Lindner repeatedly appeared in the platform walkthrough and hashtag-based observation. Labels such as "daddy" or "Kanzlerbabe" applied to edits of Robert Habeck illustrate the sexualized, affective framing typical of thirst-trap aesthetics. Fan edits exemplify a bottom-up dynamic in which non-elite users remix and enhance political footage. Because they originate outside official channels, their positionality imbues them with additional meaning and affect. Non-elite users are not co-opted into active engagement but choose to engage in an "acting together" (Asmolov, 2019). Tracking the entirety of TikTok edits on any topic is nearly impossible due to opaque content streams and diminishing access to reliable platform metrics (Kupferschmidt, 2025). Hashtags are one way to try quantifying results, yet hashtags are losing their relevance with fewer users applying them. Not every TikTok edit has a respective hashtag in the captions, yet an overview of those that have at least gives an impression about the prevalence and popularity of candidate-focused TikTok edits. For comparison, the author analyzed hashtags combining candidates' names with the term "edit." Although this method doesn't capture every existing edit (since not all use the hashtag), it still provides a meaningful indication of distribution. TikTok search results show: #aliceweideledit = 2,388 videos (as seen in Figure 1); #roberthabeckedit = 276; #heidreichinnekedit = 237; #christianlindneredit = 219; #sahrawagenknechtedit = 88; #olafscholzedit = 22; #friedrichmerzedit = no results. Once again, the AfD and its support network leverage platform affordances to circulate emotionally amplified content, generating higher visible participatory uptake than other parties. The iterative circulation of these edits, continually remixed by new users, illustrates marker 5: a snowball effect in which individual creators become new nodes of distribution. TikTok edits exemplify co-production in a bottom-up dynamic: Unofficial users transform existing political imagery into emotionally charged fan artefacts that circulate independently of party control. These findings position TikTok edits as a core mechanism of participatory propaganda rooted in co-production rather than co-option. Non-elite users do not merely amplify elite messaging but actively transform political imagery through remixing, aestheticization, and iterative circulation. The uneven distribution of edits—most pronounced around AfD figures—indicates that co-production is shaped by dense, platform-savvy supporter networks. Rather than functioning as classical persuasion, TikTok edits operate as infrastructures of affective alignment shaped by peer visibility, repetition, and snowball-like dissemination. These dynamics extend theories of participatory propaganda by foregrounding vernacular aesthetics as a central mechanism of political meaning-making in platformized environments.

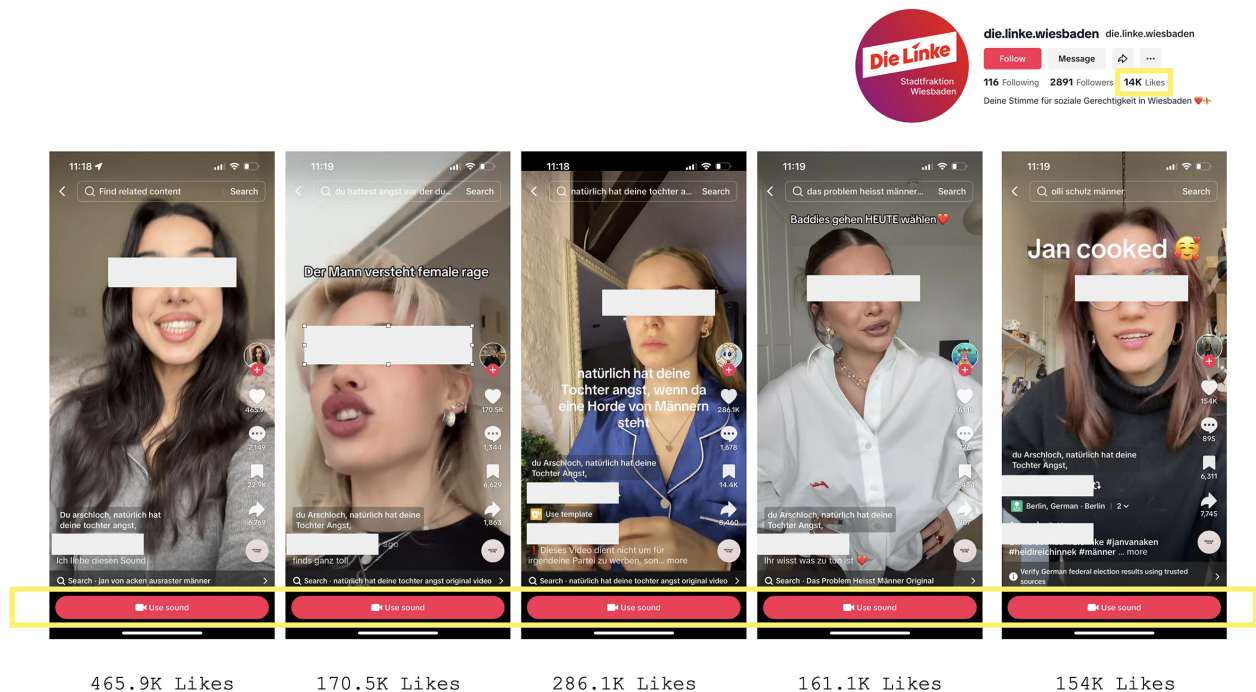


**Figure 1.** Overview of TikTok edits under #aliceweideledit portraying Alice Weidel as a central, fan-framed protagonist, illustrating the aestheticization and affective personalization of political figures through platform vernaculars. Source: TikTok (n.d.-a).

#### 4.2. Audio Memes: Sonic Templates of Participation (Co-Option/Co-Production)

Audio memes mobilize the algorithmic power of sound. Their prominence in German political communication became visible in August 2024 when Caren Lay, then deputy chairwoman of Die Linke, published a female “empowerment version” of German rapper Shirin David’s hit “Bauch Beine Po.” The video garnered 1.8 million views, triggered coverage in major German media, and inspired further politically modified songs. Facing poor polling results, Die Linke increasingly relied on sound-driven campaigning that enabled decentralized dissemination and amplification. However, reach and interaction were not primarily driven by official accounts. A sound snippet from a speech by Die Linke’s top candidate Jan van Aken became a successful audio meme in February 2025. In the now-deleted original video posted by @die.linke.wiesbaden, van Aken states: “You a\*\*hole. Of course your daughter is scared when there’s a bunch of men standing around—but it doesn’t matter whether they’re migrants or not. The problem isn’t migration, it’s men.” The sound was predominantly adopted by accounts presenting as young women. It was re-used in 3,292 videos between February 11 and February 24, 2025. Figure 2 provides a selection of five of

these 3,292 videos. Most videos feature young women lip-syncing or dancing, with captions expressing approval (e.g., “I love this sound,” “Exactly what he said,” “Oh he cooked”). This mass replication exemplifies marker 5, as participants become new originators of the message.



**Figure 2.** Illustration of an audio meme’s circulation showing that five non-elite TikTok creators achieved substantially higher engagement with a reused campaign sound than the official Die Linke Wiesbaden account that originally posted it, exemplifying bottom-up amplification. Source: TikTok (n.d.-b).

In terms of likes, the popularity of these 3,292 videos distinctly exceeded that of the original. By February 24, 2025, the source account had generated 14,000 likes, while the five most prominent derivative videos alone exceeded 1.2 million likes. The statement’s spread was thus outsourced to audiences, becoming emotionally charged, relatable, and credible through affirmation. The “you a\*\*hole” sound exemplifies successful co-option of audiences into message proliferation. The case also demonstrates markers 1 and 2: remixable content and implicit invitations to participate. TikTok’s sound-driven logic enabled Die Linke to gain audience buy-in rather than merely push a message. The message gained urgency and credibility when performed by thousands of female creators potentially affected by misogyny, rather than delivered by van Aken himself. Van Aken was recast as a sympathetic ally through captions and comments. This case exemplifies co-option: the strategic repurposing of emotional speech into participatory sound templates.

A contrasting dynamic appears in the AfD’s use of sound memes, characterized by co-production and inauthentic amplification. A deep, echoing—likely AI-generated—male voice intones “AfD, Deutschland braucht die AfD” (AfD, Germany needs the AfD), followed by the rhythmic refrain “Ja, nur die AfD” (Yes, only the AfD). Layered beats and hi-hats build an earworm-like 15-second loop that circulated widely. By February 2025, the sound had been used in over 9,000 videos promoting the AfD. The original creator remains unknown as the original video has since been deleted. The name of the song “BeatBackDrop” links to an anonymous account re-publishing successful songs with generic landscape and motorsport video content. It has been released under multiple author names across platforms including Spotify, YouTube, and

Apple Music. While it is not possible to trace back the original creator, the entirety of videos using the sound offers a glimpse into the world of AfD supporters. Alongside authentic users lip-syncing alone or in groups, numerous inauthentic accounts (e.g., @afdsupporter73, @afddeutschland5) disseminate edits, digital posters, or AI-generated content such as dancing smurfs. A dominant visual indicator is the blue heart emoji in all sizes, signaling pro-AfD sentiment as sticker, comment, or caption. Only isolated official AfD accounts (e.g., @afd.rheinpfalzkreis) use the sound; most videos reflect bottom-up co-production that extends beyond one-to-many communication into one-to-many-to-many dynamics. Across both cases, the prioritization of sonic affect over rational debate reflects marker 4, while dissemination practices illustrate marker 5. These cases show that audio memes are a core feature of participatory propaganda, combining co-option and co-production into a hybrid dynamic of elite direction and grassroots creativity. Studies focusing solely on official accounts thus overlook how unofficial actors dominate dissemination and amplification, often exceeding engagement levels of party accounts.

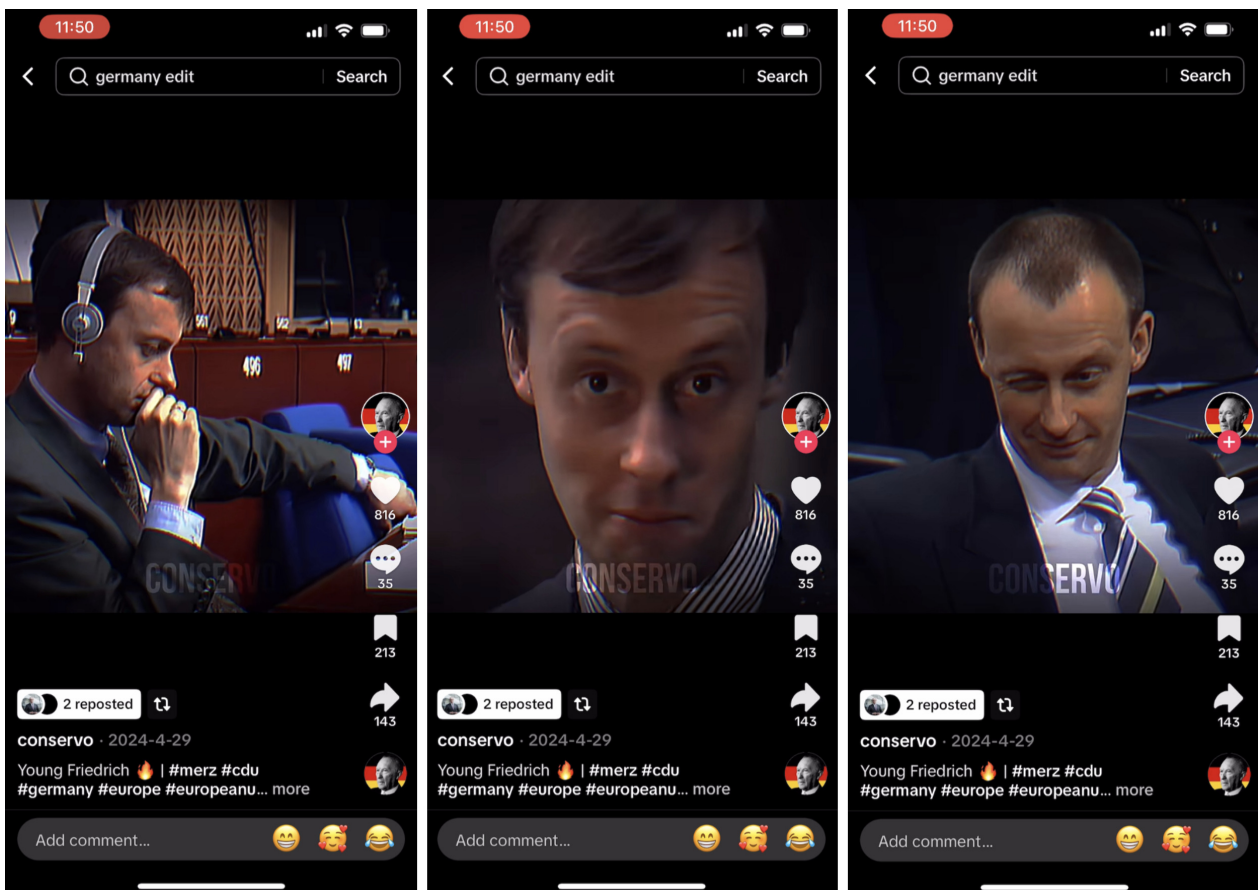
Audio memes extend theories of participatory propaganda by foregrounding sound as a key infrastructural element of co-option and co-production. Rather than relying on explicit ideological messaging, audio memes function as reusable affective templates that lower the threshold for participation while embedding political meaning within popular cultural formats. This refines existing propaganda models by showing how co-option increasingly operates through templated participation, where audiences are invited to align affectively through repetition rather than persuasion through argument. At the same time, the AfD examples demonstrate how co-production can emerge through decentralized and opaque networks that blur the boundaries between authentic expression, strategic amplification, and inauthentic coordination. Together, these cases suggest that participatory propaganda on TikTok is less about controlling narratives than about stabilizing sonic environments that sustain circulation and visibility across heterogeneous actors.

#### **4.3. Vibes: Affective Infrastructures of Persuasion (Incorporation/Amplification)**

If audio memes mark the sonic dimension of participatory propaganda, vibes capture its affective atmosphere—how tone, style, and performed authenticity drive engagement. The misfire of FDP politician Christian Dürr exemplifies this dynamic. In October 2024, Dürr joined the “Gen-Z wrote the script” trend, reading slang-filled lines meant to display youthful flair (Booth, 2024). Yet despite repeatedly invoking the word *vibe*, his delivery felt inauthentic, prompting mockery on TikTok and in traditional media (Skibbe, 2024). The misfire highlights a “vibe economy,” where success depends less on factual accuracy than on convincingly performed authenticity and affective alignment (Fendt, 2025; Lübke, 2021). In this context, parties such as the CDU pursued incorporation strategies spanning co-option and co-production (Asmolov, 2019; Wanless & Berk, 2021). Reflecting marker 3, official actors integrated user innovations into top-down messaging to amplify platform-native, affective narratives. “Young Friedrich” illustrates this: The official CDU account reproduced core elements of a video first posted by an inauthentic user to capture its *vibe*.

On April 29, 2024, @conservo.de posted an 11-second edit titled “Young Friedrich,” featuring archival footage of Friedrich Merz (as seen in Figure 3) set to a slowed-down version of ATC’s “Around the World.” The montage, combining 1994 campaign clips that Merz had re-uploaded to YouTube in 2021, shows a young Merz thinking, smiling, and nodding—stylized through synchronized cuts and filters (Terpak, 2024). As Munger and Li (2025) note, such edits embody political fandom, aiming to make politicians look good rather than persuade through policy or competence. Facticity is beside the point as Merz, 70 years old, is not a “Young Friedrich” any longer

but presumably has been—at least in this vibey fan-edit. Here a certain cheeky, mischievous yet friendly “Merz Vibe” is conveyed that feels relatable and aspirational for a younger target audience due to the fact that inside the political “icon” is still a young boy from the Sauerland region. The term “Merz Vibes,” often emphasized with glitter emojis, later appeared in official TikTok videos by CDU Deutschland. Team Merz, a self-proclaimed “officially unofficial” TikTok channel that is run by members of the CDU, publishes an edit on February 14 that tries to utilize affects and emotions. Team Merz uses the term “aura” positioned in bold captions as a textual overlay for the entire video. “Aura,” Germany’s youth word of the year 2024, denotes perceived charisma or presence. Aura functions as a mode of evaluation that can supersede policy or factual accuracy, privileging felt resonance over programmatic persuasion. The accompanying sound is a slowed-down track by electronic producer Ogryzek, reinforcing an aura of masculine power. The video’s style in tempo and visual design closely resembles that of @conservo.de’s version. Symbolically, Team Merz reads as an evolution of “Young Friedrich,” recoding the smirking youth into a figure of confident, near-term leadership. Merz Vibes and Aura have evolved into an official communication strategy.



**Figure 3.** Screenshots from a TikTok edit portraying Friedrich Merz in a stylized, aspirational manner as “Young Friedrich.” The vibe was later echoed in official campaign videos, illustrating the co-productive dynamic between vernacular and elite political communication. Source: Conservo (2025).

Robert Habeck, the Greens’ leading candidate, was similarly associated with a distinct set of “vibes.” Users attributed “Daddy Vibes,” “Schoolteacher Vibes,” and dubbed him a “Robrat”—a play on Kamala Harris’s “brat” meme coined by popstar Charli XCX—or a “Kanzlerbabe” (chancellor babe) in his “Kanzler era,” referencing Taylor Swift’s “eras.” The unofficial @robrathQ (first post: September 28, 2024), modeled after “Kamala HQ,”

preceded the official @roberthabeck account (first post: December 16, 2024) and may have shaped the uptake of “brat”-style language. While most videos gained modest traction, the Robrat phenomenon proved culturally significant: Imitation, derivatives, and hashtags such as #habeckcore illustrate marker 5—amplification via style replication. Habeck later reposted fan-made videos using slogans like “Green is brat,” demonstrating bottom-up to top-down incorporation. New inauthentic accounts such as @kanzlerxera by “Robrat Slaybert” (first post: February 5, 2025) extended this dynamic. This suggests that political communication on TikTok becomes embedded in a vibe-based infrastructure where emotional resonance and stylistic congruence outweigh rational argumentation. Participatory propaganda emerges as elite–non-elite interplay, where co-option and co-production converge through affective vernaculars that translate political identity into felt connection. Conceptually, “vibes” capture how affective atmospheres structure political evaluation as ambient signals inviting recognition, imitation, and alignment—often independent of programmatic content or factual claims. Incorporating fan-generated vibes into official communication creates a feedback loop in which elites adapt to non-elite affective registers, challenging linear persuasion models and reframing political influence as emergent from iterative remixing, stylistic convergence, and algorithmic amplification.

Taken together, the aestheticization of political communication across vibes, edits, and audio memes foregrounds all five markers of participatory propaganda—remixability, mobilization, coordination, affective prioritization, and snowballing circulation—as interdependent features of a hybrid communicative ecology. Across these vernaculars, participatory propaganda redistributes persuasive labor across elite and non-elite actors, though unevenly: Dense supporter networks such as those surrounding the AfD enable continuous bottom-up visibility that frequently surpasses official engagement metrics, while parties with thinner participatory ecologies (e.g., CDU, Greens) compensate by incorporating fan aesthetics and optimizing for templateability and vibe-congruence. Conceptually, these findings extend existing theories of propaganda by shifting attention from message content and sender intent to circulatory dynamics and affective infrastructures. Co-option and co-production do not operate as discrete strategies but as intertwined processes unfolding through remix practices and algorithmic amplification. These dynamics suggest that participatory propaganda on TikTok operates less through argumentative persuasion than through enrollment into ongoing practices of replication, stylization, and affective alignment within platformized campaign environments.

## 5. Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates how sound, affect, and audiovisual editing together form an affective infrastructure for electoral campaigning on TikTok. Across actor types, TikTok edits, audio memes, and vibes function as overlapping vernaculars through which participatory propaganda materializes. An edit may employ a viral sound to evoke a specific mood; an audio meme may circulate as a reusable sonic template that anchors political meaning across videos; and a vibe may emerge through iterative remixing of aesthetic templates. These dynamics thrive on both bottom-up and top-down processes, fusing co-option and co-production. Political messages are no longer owned but collectively re-authored as users embed them in affective, memeable formats. What emerges is a tendency towards permanent campaigning in a post-digital environment—that is less defined by deliberation than by continuous affective circulation. Vibing with audiences becomes as essential as convincing them while withdrawal from platform logics is no longer a viable political option (Klinger et al., 2023).

Conceptually, this study refines theories of participatory propaganda by demonstrating how platformization restructures persuasive labor through vernacular affordances. Whereas classical propaganda models emphasize message control and ideological coherence, participatory propaganda on TikTok operates through affective infrastructures that privilege remixability, visibility, and stylistic coherence over discursive consistency. By empirically grounding co-option and co-production in platform-native practices—edits, audio memes, and vibes—this study bridges campaign research and platform studies and shows how persuasion increasingly emerges from collective creativity rather than centralized strategy.

The findings reaffirm the article's central argument: Participatory propaganda on TikTok is a co-performed, affect-driven form of political communication. Success depends not on factual accuracy or argumentative rigor but on the capacity to be felt, imitated, and recontextualized. The asymmetries identified—particularly the organizational density of right-wing networks—underscore that participation is unevenly distributed. Conceptually, the study advances research on platformized campaigning by integrating digital platform studies with propaganda and election communication scholarship. Empirically, it demonstrates that focusing solely on official party accounts obscures where political meaning actually crystallizes: in unofficial, hybrid spaces of collective creativity. Normatively, it raises questions about how democratic discourse endures when emotional resonance and visibility outweigh factual deliberation.

Although this study is grounded in the German electoral context, the dynamics identified are not limited to Germany alone. Certain features, such as the organizational density of far-right supporter networks, party-specific campaign cultures, and the historical sensitivities shaping political symbolism, are clearly context-dependent. However, the core mechanisms observed in this study are platform-driven rather than nationally specific. The reliance on edits, audio memes, and vibes as vernacular forms of political participation reflects TikTok's affordances as a sound-driven, remix-oriented platform operating across democratic systems. Similar participatory propaganda dynamics have been documented in the US, Romania, Ukraine, and other contexts, suggesting that platformization standardizes modes of political expression even as ideological content varies. The German case thus serves as a theoretically instructive example of how participatory propaganda emerges when platform logics intersect with competitive democratic campaigning, offering insights applicable to other electoral democracies operating under similar conditions.

As participatory propaganda becomes routine in democratic campaigning, future research must further examine not only its campaign effects but its cumulative role in shaping political subjectivities, affective publics, and the conditions of democratic engagement in platformized societies.

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The author declares no conflict of interests.

### **Data Availability**

Please contact the author for anonymized data access.

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# Experimentation on TikTok, Standardisation on Reels? Party Short-Form Video Use in the 2024 UK General Election

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## Abstract

Campaign practices evolve alongside technological change. We examine one of the most salient current developments: the rise of short-form video on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram Reels—often termed the “TikTokification” of election campaigns (Gerbaudo, 2024). The adoption of short-form video may signal the arrival of Römmele and Gibson’s (2020) “subversive” fourth era of campaigning, characterised by emotion, disruption, spontaneity, and the mimicry of authenticity. Here, we examine how the five main UK parties used short-form content during the 2024 UK General Election through a manual content analysis of all TikToks and Instagram Reels posted during the campaign period ( $N = 887$ ). We find evidence of extensive but uneven adoption of short-form video across parties, with TikTok generating substantially higher reach and engagement than Instagram Reels. Whereas Reels were largely used to repurpose traditional campaign material, TikTok served as a site of experimentation, with parties more frequently deploying humour, memes, and in-app music. Leader-centred communication remained dominant overall, but traditional campaign functions were more pronounced on Reels than on TikTok. Thus, results suggest a compressed cycle of experimentation and standardisation. Furthermore, TikTokification occurred mainly on TikTok itself rather than diffusing across short-form platforms.

## Keywords

elections; Instagram Reels; political campaigning; short-form video; social media; TikTok

## 1. Introduction

The rapid mainstreaming of TikTok has reshaped the social media landscape, introducing new challenges and opportunities for political communication and campaigns. Since its global launch in 2018, TikTok's short-form, algorithmically curated video format has driven a broader shift in social media towards visually oriented, algorithm-centred modes of communication, often described as the TikTokification of social media (Gerbaudo, 2024). This shift has implications not only for how voters consume content but also for how political actors communicate, campaign, and seek visibility in increasingly crowded and fragmented digital environments, making it an important site for the study of campaign change. Platforms such as TikTok de-prioritise overt political content (Hagar & Diakopoulos, 2023), privilege algorithmic distribution over follower networks, and reward content that aligns with platform vernaculars such as memetic communication, direct-to-camera delivery, and visual storytelling. This raises important questions about the extent to which political parties are effectively adapting to this new context, and what this signals in the context of cycles of digital adoption for campaigning.

This article examines how UK political parties adopted and used short-form video during the 2024 UK General Election. Using an original dataset of 505 TikToks and 382 Instagram Reels posted by the five major UK parties, it assesses the reach and content of short-form video campaigning during this election period and furthermore assesses whether parties followed familiar patterns of experimentation and standardisation seen with earlier waves of party adoption of digital technologies (Gibson, 2020). The findings show that parties engaged extensively with short-form video but adopted markedly different strategies by platform. TikTok generated substantially higher reach and engagement, and parties deployed several TikTokified features and affordances, as well as deploying TikToks as a channel for humour and memetic content. Despite Reels being a direct competitor to TikTok, few features that typify short-form video content appeared in the Reels here, and they were more often used to repurpose traditional media campaign material such as interviews clipped from broadcast news. The analysis reveals evidence of partial TikTokification of UK campaigns. It also suggests a compressed cycle of experimentation and standardisation compared to the waves of social media that have gone before, as, despite having only been adopted by parties for a relatively short period, there is substantial evidence that Reels had already settled into the standardisation phase, whereas TikTok was a site of experimentation.

## 2. The Rise of TikTok and the Implications for Campaigns

TikTok is a hugely popular short-form messaging app, which has caused a significant shift in the social media landscape (Stokel-Walker, 2021). TikTok debuted in 2018 after Chinese tech giant ByteDance bought out the Musical.ly app and combined it with Douyin. TikTok's rise was rapid due to several influencing factors, including its creator-friendly features and distinctive "For You" algorithm which is actively designed to learn user preferences and keep them on the app as long as possible (Guinaudeau et al., 2022; Stokel-Walker, 2021). Although social media had already begun to move towards algorithmic feeds by combining user follows with algorithmically-curated content (Guess et al., 2023), the For You feed was somewhat different in being largely focused on serving content to users top-down. The algorithm then learns from the user's activity on the site and shows content similar to posts they have previously lingered over or watched in their entirety (Chen et al., 2023). The Covid-19 lockdowns further hastened TikTok's popularity as people sought connection, meaning that TikTok grew from 11 million monthly active users in January 2018 to 92 million in June 2020 (Guinaudeau

et al., 2022). Thus, TikTok established itself as the new star social media app. In response, many established social media platforms raced to keep up with this shift in the social media landscape. Twitter (now X) launched its own For You feed, as well as expanded and improved video features (Peters & Clarke, 2023). Perhaps the clearest imitator of this was via Instagram, which became popular as a still-image picture app but which launched “Instagram Reels,” their own short-form video feed, at the end of 2020 (Perez, 2020). This led to scholars and commentators referring to this shift in the culture of social media towards short-form video and For You style feeds as the TikTokification of social media (Gerbaudo, 2024).

Assessing the implications of this for politics, the rise of TikTok has posed some challenges for politicians and parties hoping to adopt and capitalise on this new, popular platform. Firstly, TikTok specifically de-prioritises political content (Hagar & Diakopoulos, 2023), creating an extra barrier to gaining the audience’s attention. Secondly, producing content for short-form video is time-consuming and potentially resource-intensive, particularly compared to posting pictures and captions, which were the core content on more established social media platforms. There is a growing body of evidence that to be successful on a platform, campaigns must adapt to the format and style of that platform (Kreiss et al., 2017), meaning even eschewing content that matches the platform it is posted on will leave parties at a disadvantage. Thirdly, platforms like TikTok are distinct from other social media due to the reduction of defined social networks and communicative reciprocity, and a layout that favours broadcast models of communication rather than interactivity (Faltsek et al., 2023). This, combined with the de-prioritisation of political content, could make it hard for parties to gain a following. However, to temper this, it has often been the case that politicians and political parties have used platforms intended for many-to-many communication as broadcast platforms (McLoughlin, 2019) and indeed may prefer to communicate in this way (cf. Stromer-Galley, 2000).

There are also potential advantages for campaigns. Firstly, it is possible to gain “virality from nowhere” as Guinaudeau et al. (2022, p. 471) describe it, because the For You algorithm means parties can gain a potentially huge number of views on their short-form content even without a large following, so long as they can tap into popularity on a platform (see Moir, 2023). Secondly, it is one potential route to reaching the youth vote, due to the younger user base (Ofcom, 2025). Thirdly, older social media platforms appear to be stagnating or declining in political relevance. Twitter, once central to political communication, has become a damaged brand following Elon Musk’s takeover, prompting many politicians to abandon the platform (Crowther, 2024). Parties are therefore incentivised to seek alternatives that allow them to reach new and growing audiences.

Fourthly, parties were in some sense already primed for the TikTokification of social media and have been moving towards incorporating cross-platform and visual elements in their social media campaigning. Political campaigns are now characterised by complex, visual, multi-channel strategies tailored to the affordances and user cultures of specific platforms (Chadwick, 2017; Esser & Pfetsch, 2020). This may be because campaigns are aware that visual content communicates information more rapidly, is more memorable, and generates higher engagement than text alone (Farkas & Bene, 2020; Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Muñoz & Towner, 2017; Steffan, 2020). Visuals also act as heuristics, particularly for low-information voters. For example, Ahler et al. (2017) show that candidates’ visual appearance can influence voter decision-making, while visual strategies that enhance a candidate’s image or diminish opponents are effective campaign tools (Farkas & Bene, 2020). Strong visual cues shape perceptions of ideology and voting intention (Dan & Arendt, 2021). These developments coincide with a longer-term trend towards the personalisation of politics (Kriesi, 2012).

Visually-oriented platforms are particularly effective for projecting candidate traits such as competence, compassion, or ordinariness, as demonstrated in Grabe and Bucy's (2009) concept of "image bite politics," which remains relevant today (Muñoz & Towner, 2017; Steffan, 2020).

Finally, political campaigns increasingly embrace digital cultures and subcultures. Platforms host distinct vernaculars, memes, and folk cultures that shape engagement (Phillips & Milner, 2017; Theocharis et al., 2022). Memetic communication has long featured in formal campaigns (Wallsten, 2010), but has become increasingly mainstream, as seen in recent US and UK elections (McLoughlin & Southern, 2021), including the "meme wars" between the Conservatives and Labour in the run up to the 2024 UK General Election (Southern, 2026) and the "brat" and coconut tree memes which were incorporated into Kamala Harris' campaign in the 2024 US Presidential election (Southern & Leicht, 2024). Memes are central to TikTok culture (Zeng & Abidin, 2021), making short-form video a particularly fertile environment for this specific type of contemporary political campaigning.

There has been a small amount of scholarship assessing TikTok and political campaigning to date. Some suggest that candidates are beginning to fully inhabit the platform affordances and cultures of newer short-form platforms, perhaps seeing an electoral advantage in doing so. An analysis of the 2021 Peruvian General Election found examples where one presidential candidate had leaned heavily into the platform's culture, regularly posting video aesthetics native to the platform to appear as authentic to audiences (Cervi et al., 2023). The Canadian politician and leader of the New Democratic Party, Jagmeet Singh, had success in building an "influencer" profile through the creation of authentic memetic content on TikTok to maintain visibility (Moir, 2023). Similarly, Ada Colau, a candidate in the 2023 Barcelona Municipal elections, tapped into the vernaculars of TikTok's culture, using commonly found educational video formats and attempting to match her personal brand with the style and tone of the platform's culture in their campaign content (Cervi, 2023). Thus, the rise of short-form video has broad implications for campaigns and how they respond to this shift in social media affordances and cultures. Assessing how parties and politicians respond to the mainstreaming of a new digital communicative technology is a well-established literature. This shift in the social media landscape necessitates looking at this afresh. Thus, this article aims to do so by assessing the short-form content posted by the main UK parties during the 2024 UK General Election.

### 3. Political Campaigns and the Adoption of New Media

Assessing how short-form video is adopted by UK parties at this election allows us to test whether similar patterns of adoption and use to those that occurred in earlier eras of online campaigning hold for this new technology, or whether these patterns have changed over time. Gibson (2020, p. 30) documents an "experimentation" phase followed by a "standardisation and professionalisation" phase in relation to parties adopting new digital media tools in the past. When the internet first emerged as a means of communication, parties enthusiastically adopted websites. However, content on them was ill-thought-through and amateurish, with websites reusing traditional content as opposed to hosting interactive elements that cyber-optimists had been so hopeful about (Gibson, 2020; Gibson & Ward, 1998). Parties appeared to adopt websites because others did and took a scatter-gun approach before settling on strategies that worked (Selnow, 1998). The same experimentation phase was reflected in the "Web 2.0" era with the emergence of social media, where parties adopted apps such as Facebook and Twitter in a chaotic manner, including several gaffes (Al-Othman, 2015). In this era, there was a little more readiness to adopt these tools in the

manner to which they were meant to be used, with around half of candidates campaigning interactively on Twitter, for example (Southern, 2015).

However, this new era of digital tools also moved into a standardisation phase, whereby parties settled on not fully embracing interactivity but instead, as Jackson and Lilleker (2009) found, preferred a more cautious “controlled interactivity,” or “Web 1.5” style campaigning. That is, not a full move towards incorporating the real interactive spirit of these social media platforms, but a halfway house between this and more top-down communication practices, showing that parties and politicians potentially moved through these phases more quickly with the second era of digital media. Here, we ask whether a similar pattern of adoption will occur with new short-form video platforms or whether a standardised approach may appear fully-formed in the era of short-form video. With parties now having been through two iterations of new digital tools becoming mainstream and thus, in theory, having a playbook for how to respond to this, this is a plausible scenario and would suggest a shift in attitudes and strategies among UK parties with regard to new social media tools.

In addition, assessing the adoption of short-form video informs our knowledge around campaign evolution. It has been widely established that there have been three broad areas of political campaign evolution, which Norris (2004) outlined as the “pre-modern,” “modern,” and “post-modern” campaign eras. More recently, however, leading scholars have argued that campaigns are entering a fourth era, although debate over this remains. Scholars who argue we are in a fourth era point to social media as one of the key driving forces propelling us into it. Römmele and Gibson (2020) attempted to firm up what a fourth era resembles in terms of characteristics and how it differs from the post-modern era. They posit that there are two elements to it—the “scientific” and the “subversive.” The scientific here largely refers to data-driven forms of campaigning when “digital technology and data occupy a central role to such an extent that it becomes part of the DNA or ‘operating system’ on which the campaign functions” (Römmele & Gibson, 2020, p. 600). In terms of the subversive element, this has been less explored in the campaign literature, but several aspects Römmele and Gibson outline as subversive refer to content regularly seen on and which have come to exemplify the content found on TikTok. Römmele and Gibson (2020) suggest that responding to viral trends in real time and spontaneously (or at least seemingly spontaneously) can be a boon for campaigns. Furthermore, they emphasise the role of emotions, disruptive elements of communication such as trolling and content that mimics the authenticity of citizen-made content (amateurish, quickly made, memetic), as features of campaigns that would be considered subversive, and is the type of content regularly found on TikTok. Evidence here of the widespread adoption of new short-form video affordances, features, and platform cultures in campaigns, or, in the parlance outlined above, TikTokification of campaigns, would provide more evidence for a shift to this era.

Research on the rise of TikTok and the history of campaign change, therefore, leads to the following questions:

RQ1: To what extent did UK parties adopt short-form video during the 2024 General Election, what levels of reach did it generate, and how did patterns differ by party and platform?

RQ2: How did parties use short-form video to (a) perform traditional campaign functions (leader focus, policy communication, mobilisation), (b) post original content rather than repurposed content, and (c) adapt to platform-specific cultures and affordances?

RQ3: Do these patterns indicate (a) a familiar cycle of experimentation and standardisation in line with earlier waves of digital campaign adoption, and (b) evidence of TikTokification consistent with the fourth era of campaigning?

## 4. Data and Methods

The analysis draws on an original dataset comprising every TikTok and Instagram Reel posted by the five main UK parties (Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Green Party of England and Wales, and Reform UK) during the election period (23 May–4 July 2024), yielding a full sample of 887 posts (505 TikToks and 382 Reels). Engagement metadata (views, likes, comments, shares) were recorded manually between 4–7 December 2024 after concerns about inaccuracies in the TikTok API (Pearson et al., 2025; see also Appendix 1 in the Supplementary File). Although this may slightly inflate figures beyond the campaign period, post-peak engagement typically declines sharply (Bhattacharya et al., 2017), making these data a broadly reliable estimate. The same procedure was applied to Reels for consistency.

The videos were subject to manual content analysis by four coders. The coders were all trained extensively by the lead author, and regular adjudication meetings occurred. In these meetings, discrepancies, edge cases, or difficult-to-code cases were reported, adjudicated, and collectively decided upon by two coders and the lead author. Furthermore, 10% of the fully coded dataset was then coded by a fifth coder and subject to inter-coder reliability tests. Krippendorff's alpha scores were calculated to assess intercoder reliability (see Appendix 2 in the Supplementary File). The lowest intercoder reliability was observed for the variable "presence of mash-up/montage/duet" ( $\alpha = .663$ ). As detailed in Appendix 3 in the Supplementary File, this reflects definitional boundary cases within a heterogeneous and rapidly evolving content format. Findings based on variables with  $\alpha < .80$  should be interpreted with caution (Krippendorff, 2018); we acknowledge this limitation and interpret these results conservatively in the results section (see Appendix 3 for further detail on this).

Three traditional campaign functions were coded, in line with the first part of RQ2: (a) dominant figure (leader, other party politician, opposition figure, or non-political actor, based on prominence in the video); (b) presence of a clear policy proposal (measured as present or absent; a proposal must be specific and clearly identifiable, for example "improve the economy" would not count here); and (c) presence of a call to action (measured as present or absent; for example "vote Labour"). Moving on to assess whether parties were trying to adapt their content to short-form video platforms in their campaign outputs, we assessed whether parties were producing original content for their outputs on these platforms or whether they saw them as a means to increase views on more traditional media or more established social media content in order to answer the second part of RQ2 and RQ3. Content was coded as (a) original (appearing only on TikTok and/or Reels and not on other platforms), (b) repurposed (previously published on other social media or traditional media), or (c) original infographic content produced for short-form platforms but not constituting a conventional video.

Finally, to answer the third part of RQ2 and RQ3, the presence of six features which are typical of short-form video platforms were coded (all as a binary): (a) the presence of a meme, (b) use of humour, (c) use of the walk-and-talk video format, (d) use of the in-app music feature, (e) slide shows, and (f) use of mash-up/montage/duets. See Appendix 3 for the full codebook.

## 5. Results

RQ1 addresses the extent to which parties adopted short-form video, their reach, and how patterns differed by party and platform. Assessing first the frequency of posting short-form videos by party, as highlighted in Table 1, there is a statistically significant association between the variables. The two largest parties, Labour and the Conservatives, posted on TikTok and Reels to a similar extent. The smaller parties, however, appeared to prefer one platform over another, with the Liberal Democrats and Reform posting more on TikTok, and only the Green Party favouring Reels. Labour were most active overall, posting 349 times across both platforms, significantly more than the Liberal Democrats, who were second most active at 206 posts, followed by Reform, the Green Party, and the Conservatives. This suggests that parties were not just “cross-posting” to both short-form video platforms. However, it is also clear that parties had different strategies for short-form video output and platform emphasis.

**Table 1.** Number of videos posted by party and platform.

	Conservatives	Labour	Green	Liberal Democrat	Reform	Total
TikTok	48	175	32	147	103	505
Reels	51	174	69	59	29	382
Total N	99	349	101	206	132	887

Notes: Pearson Chi-Square 77.15;  $p = .00$ .

As can be seen in Table 2, there was substantial engagement on short-form content across the campaign. Overall, all posts across parties and platforms received a total of over 164 million views and over 17 million likes. There were large differences by platform, however, with the majority of the engagement coming from TikTok. Shares were not available on Reels during the campaign, however TikToks from all parties received over 1.5 million shares. There were almost 400,000 comments across all posts, suggesting that party short-form videos can spark a considerable amount of political discussion. Despite Labour and the Conservatives posting on both sites to a similar extent, both parties received more engagement on TikTok. Reform and the Liberal Democrats both received more views on TikTok, reflecting their strategy of posting more frequently on this platform. Conversely, the Green Party were the only party to gain more views on Reels, where they preferred to post over TikTok. Interestingly, however, despite posting far less frequently on TikTok, they still received over 2 million views. This suggests that although TikTok attempts to deprioritise political content, there is a potentially extensive audience for party political content, and even minimal efforts can pay off for parties in terms of viewership.

**Table 2.** Engagement by party and platform.

	Conservatives		Labour		Green		Liberal Democrat		Reform		Total	
	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels
Views	25,595,800	3,639,418	77,977,300	26,258,500	2,028,792	3,833,200	8,675,738	872,620	13,941,800	1,400,600	128,219,430	36,004,338
Likes	8,004,267	81,405	6,228,904	710,576	204,674	182,013	745,077	37,807	939,235	98,151	16,122,157	1,109,952
Shares	107,186	–	1,215,605	–	16,453	–	118,229	–	53,965	–	1,511,438	–
Comments	88,956	7,985	194,087	37,749	6,956	4,560	9,111	1,046	25,036	4,280	324,146	55,620
Highest viewed Reel/TikTok	5,100,000	984,000	5,300,000	4,600,000	404,100	371,000	2,600,000	77,900	994,100	112,000		
Highest liked Reel/TikTok	3,132,000	17,696	745,800	130,000	57,900	17,700	247,500	2,467	31,600	9,520		
Highest shared Reel/TikTok	50,300	–	312,200	–	7,470	–	19,600	–	7,362	–		
Highest commented on Reel/TikTok	27,300	1,151	13,500	3,788	1,571	501	2,201	270	2,278	443		

The data for the most popular individual video underline this. Individual posts captured wide attention, with both Labour and the Conservatives gaining over 5 million views on a single TikTok. Smaller parties were also able to capture attention, with the Liberal Democrats receiving over two and a half million views on one individual TikTok. All of this suggests that, even with the cold start the Conservatives, Labour, and Liberal Democrats had, adopting TikTok late, they were still able to garner extensive engagement on the platform. They will likely have this in mind when designing their strategies going forward. The analysis now moves to assess how central more traditional forms of campaigning were on short-form video content, assessing leader focus, information provision, and mobilisation in Tables 3, 4, and 5, respectively.

### ***5.1. Traditional Campaigning Techniques: Leader Focus, Information Provision, Mobilisation, and Original Content***

To address RQ2, asking whether parties fell into well-rehearsed tactics when campaigning on newer short-form video platforms, we assessed their outputs on these platforms for traditional features of campaigning by firstly examining leader focus, followed by policy communication, and then mobilisation. All results show statistically significant associations between the variables.

In theory, the use of the short-form video format may allow extra space for campaigns to broaden their remit in terms of the range of actors they feature and perhaps include focus on ordinary voters, experts, and other non-politician figures who are often sidelined from more mainstream coverage (Deacon et al., 2018). For the most part, this did not appear to be something widely adopted by parties here. The most common dominant figure in short-form video campaign content was the leader of the party that posted, often followed by the leader of the opposition. However, there were also attempts by some parties to move away from a hyper-focus on their leader, as demonstrated by the Green Party, which featured candidates or representatives who were not the leaders in over a third of their Reels and over a fifth of their TikToks. This also appeared to be true for Reform, with a caveat. Reform changed leader just over a week into the election campaign, switching from Richard Tice to Nigel Farage. Before he became leader, Farage had featured prominently, as Reform's most recognisable face, and the patterns here reflect Tice featuring heavily after the switch. Interestingly, the Liberal Democrats featured other political figures from their party who were not the leader significantly on Reels but rarely on their TikTok, which largely focused on the leader, perhaps reflecting that Ed Davey, their leader, adopted a campaign persona seemingly tailor-made for TikTok (see Southern, 2026). Only Labour appeared to include non-political actors on their short-form video content to any significant degree and only on Reels. Here, they often featured contributions from ordinary voters and why they were voting for Labour, often in "out and about" settings. This was still relatively uncommon compared to their focus on leaders (their own or the opposition leader) in their Reels. Overall, then, short-form video did appear to open up space for a broader range of politicians within the party to be showcased than one would see in traditional coverage, but there was still a heavy focus on leaders. For an overview, see Table 3.

**Table 3.** Dominant figures by party and platform.

	Conservatives		Labour		Green		Liberal Democrat		Reform		Total
	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels	
No figure	6.25%	7.84%	27.43%	9.77%	12.5%	2.9%	31.97%	6.78%	5.83%	3.45%	15.33%
Leader*	43.75%	35.29%	23.43%	33.33%	53.13%	49.28%	51.02%	55.93%	48.54%	55.17%	40.92%
Minister/secretary of state/candidate/other politician from the party	16.67%	15.69%	8.57%	9.77%	21.88%	34.78%	6.8%	33.9%	33.01%	34.48%	17.25%
Opposition leader	14.58%	17.65%	30.29%	22.99%	6.25%	1.45%	8.16%	1.69%	11.65%	6.9%	15.67%
Opposition politician	12.5%	11.76%	4%	5.17%	—	—	.68%	—	.97%	—	3.38%
Non-politician figure	6.25%	11.76%	6.29%	18.97%	6.25%	11.59%	1.36%	1.69%	—	—	7.44%

Notes: \* Reform changed leaders on the 2nd of June 2024; Richard Tice was coded as leader up until this announcement was made, and Nigel Farage thereafter; Pearson Chi-Square 58.33;  $p = .00$ ).

Information provision is also a key traditional function of campaigns, and we measured this by assessing whether content contained references to an identifiable policy the party in question was proposing (see Table 4). Overall, just over a quarter of Reels and TikToks appeared to contain a policy. Some fascinating patterns emerged by platform. For Labour, the Greens, and the Liberal Democrats, Reels were far more likely to include a clear policy proposal than on their TikTok. This was especially true for the Liberal Democrats, where over half their Reels contained a policy compared to just over a quarter of TikToks. By contrast, Reform displayed little difference by platform, and the Conservatives were far less likely to focus on policy on Reels compared to TikTok. Overall, this suggests that parties did not see TikTok as a space for policy focus, preferring to use Reels for this. This will be explored further when assessing the results in Table 7, but these findings suggest that parties saw Reels as a platform for more “serious” policy-based content. Perhaps with it being born from a more well-established and older social media platform and, having been adopted by parties at an earlier date, also provides evidence that Reels has now moved into the standardisation phase of platform adoption by parties (Gibson, 2020), in answer to RQ3a. It appears they saw TikTok as a platform for more jokey, eye-catching, or at least, policy-free content. This also raises the possibility that parties are responsive to platform cultures and restrictions (such as the de-prioritisation of politics content on TikTok) and may seek to circumnavigate this by matching platform cultures.

**Table 4.** Identifiable policy by party and platform.

	Conservatives		Labour		Green		Liberal Democrat		Reform		Total
	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels	
No	79.2%	94.1%	82.3%	73.6%	65.6%	52.2%	73.5%	45.8%	80.6%	82.8%	74.1%
Yes	20.8%	5.9%	17.7%	26.4%	34.4%	47.8%	26.5%	54.2%	19.4%	17.2%	25.9%
N	48	51	175	174	32	69	147	59	103	29	887

Notes: Pearson Chi-Square 9.53;  $p = .00$ .

When assessing mobilisation (see Table 5) as the final measure of more traditional campaign functions, a somewhat similar pattern to that of policy focus emerges. Overall, just under a third of posts by parties on Reels and TikTok contained a call to action. For the Green Party, Reform, and Labour, calls to action, which were usually a final call to “Vote [Party],” were far more common on Reels compared to TikTok. However, the Greens, Labour, and Reform, to a lesser extent, did not pull this across onto TikTok. Again, it does appear that, although Reels was released as a direct response to TikTok and contains many of the same features, parties see it as the short-form platform for more traditional campaign content and have standardised the content thereon. From these results, it is also clear that parties view these platforms very differently and were tailoring their content accordingly, not just producing videos and posting them on both platforms.

**Table 5.** Call to action by party and platform.

	Conservatives		Labour		Green		Liberal Democrat		Reform		Total
	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels	
No	79.2%	80.4%	80.6%	39.1%	81.3%	23.2%	85.7%	89.8%	66%	48.3%	66.5%
Yes	20.8%	19.6%	19.4%	60.9%	18.8%	76.8%	14.3%	10.2%	34%	51.7%	33.5%
N	48	51	175	174	32	69	147	59	103	29	887

Notes: Pearson Chi-Square 79.59;  $p = .00$ .

The analysis now moves to assess the amount of original content campaigns were producing for short-form platforms (Table 6) and how they incorporated elements of short-form platform cultures and affordances into their campaign content (Table 7), in line with RQ2b and RQ3. Once again, an overarching observation is that parties were tailoring their short-form content by platform. Each party produced more original content for TikTok than for Reels. Reform especially appeared to focus heavily on producing original content for TikTok. By stark contrast, over 70% of the content they posted for Reels was largely reused content, usually clips from mainstream media appearances. It is clear they saw TikTok as a place where clips from traditional media would not gain engagement, but saw Reels as a place to boost the audience of traditional media appearances in an online space with minimal effort, which could be considered a savvy platform strategy.

**Table 6.** Original content vs re-use of media by party and platform.

	Conservatives		Labour		Green		Liberal Democrat		Reform	
	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels
Original content	64.6%	39.2%	63.4%	38%	46.9%	36.2%	65.3%	30.5%	79.6%	17.2%
Re-use of content from mainstream media/other party social media	6.3%	54.9%	20.6%	18.4%	50%	63.8%	22.4%	66.1%	12.6%	79.6%
Equal mix	16.7%	–	12.1%	35.6%	3.1%	–	3.4%	3.4%	6.8%	–
Original infographics	12.5%	5.9%	4%	8%	–	–	8.8%	–	1%	3.4%
Total N	48	51	175	174	32	69	147	59	103	29

Notes: Pearson Chi-Square 93.06;  $p = .00$ .

**Table 7.** Adoption of platform cultures and affordances.

Feature (Pearson Chi-Square <sup>sig</sup> )	Conservatives		Labour		Green		Liberal Democrat		Reform		Total
	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels	TikTok	Reels	
Post contained a meme (49.64 <sup>***</sup> )	10.42%	3.92%	34.86%	12.07%	9.38%	2.90%	32.65%	0%	5.83%	0%	16.69%
Use humour (66.65 <sup>***</sup> )	25%	9.80%	46.29%	14.94%	9.38%	5.80%	40.14%	8.47%	18.45%	3.45%	24.24%
Talking while walking/selfie video (1.30)	6.25%	11.76%	2.29%	3.45%	9.38%	1.45%	.68%	3.39%	1.94%	0%	3.16%
Music via in-app widget (134.37 <sup>***</sup> )	25%	0%	38.29%	0%	18.75%	0%	38.78%	0%	5.83%	0%	16.69%
Slide show (76.71 <sup>***</sup> )	18.75%	0%	26.29%	0%	15.63%	0%	19.05%	0%	2.91%	0%	10.26%
Mash-up/montage/duet (9.56 <sup>***</sup> )	16.67%	25.49%	36.57%	58.62%	6.25%	15.94%	22.45%	8.47%	22.33%	13.79%	29.88%
Total N	48	51	175	174	32	69	147	59	103	29	887

Note: <sup>\*\*\*</sup>  $p \leq .00$ .

The Conservatives, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats displayed similar patterns, largely focusing their efforts on original content for TikTok more than Reels. Again, much of the content these three parties posted on Reels were clips of mainstream media appearances. Reform deployed a similar strategy but to an even greater extent. Reels were seen as a way to push out content that already existed and increase the audience on efforts that had already been made via traditional media. By contrast, the Conservatives, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats clearly saw benefit in creating original content for TikTok. As these three parties were new to the platform, some of this may have been an effort to grow their following on TikTok as well as an attempt to win votes. The Green Party were more likely to produce original content for Reels, in line with what appears to be their overall strategy of preferring this platform for their short-form content over TikTok. Nevertheless, they still produced a significant amount of original content for TikTok, with almost half of their TikToks being largely original. Overall, it does appear that parties were willing to put effort into their content on TikTok rather than treating it as simply another channel for reposting content from more traditional media or other social media. This was not the case for Reels, where parties seemingly viewed the platform as a good avenue for gaining an online audience for traditional media content.

## ***5.2. TikTokifying the Campaign? Content, Cultures, and Affordances***

Finally, to address RQ2c and RQ3a and b, we consider the adoption of six features which might be considered typical of TikTokification in terms of platform culture or affordances, what this means both for experimentation and standardisation, and the subversive 4th era of campaigning. We caveat that we are aware that TikTok does not have a monopoly on memes and humour, and that these exist on all social media platforms; however, TikTok is also a highly memetic platform, and it bills itself as an entertainment platform. The other aspects here are all hallmarks of the TikTok platform in terms of its affordances or common uses by creators on this platform. Firstly, in assessing memes and more broadly the deployment of humour, parties saw TikTok as the place to post memes and humorous content, rather than Reels. This broad finding suggests that parties further tailor content to platform cultures. All parties posted memes and humorous content at far higher levels on TikTok compared to Reels. Reform and the Liberal Democrats posted humorous content on TikTok at four times the rate they did on Reels, and both parties posted no memes on Reels at all. Labour posted three times more humorous content on TikTok compared to Reels. Beyond this, however, adoption of memetic content on TikTok was mixed. The Liberal Democrats and Labour embraced this with over a third of their TikTok posts featuring a meme. Conversely, the Conservatives, Greens, and Reform largely avoided memetic content on TikTok, with the Conservatives and the Greens posting memes in about 10% of their TikToks and Reform only 5%. This shows that some parties embraced the experimentation with platform cultures, while others did not.

Secondly, in terms of other TikTok-typical styles and affordances, “walk and talk” videos have not been widely adopted by parties here, and this was the only variable where party and platform differences are not statistically significant. On TikTok, the Greens adopted this to some extent, but only in 10% of their posts. Interestingly, the Conservatives adopted this too, but on Reels rather than TikTok, where almost 12% of their videos were in this style. Assessing adding music to posts, and the posting of slide shows, there were some stark and interesting findings. Despite these two features also being present on Reels, hardly any parties at all adopted either feature there. They were widely deployed on TikTok among every party except Reform. For example, the Liberal Democrats enhanced almost 40% of their TikToks with the in-app music feature, but none of their Reels. This does seem to suggest that parties do adapt their content to platform cultures specifically, rather than the availability of a certain affordance, and that they enforce this separation

strictly. Finally, assessing the adoption of mash-ups, montages, or duets, due to a Krippendorff's alpha of .66, we tentatively suggest that adoption was variable by party and largely patchy. The use of these features appeared to be a widespread practice, especially by Labour on Reels, while the Greens and Liberal Democrats rarely deployed such content in their TikToks and Reels, respectively.

## 6. Conclusions

This article aimed to assess the adoption and use of short-form video by parties at the 2024 UK General Election. Taken together, the findings suggest that all parties attempted to “TikTokfy” their campaigns. All major parties engaged with short-form video to a substantial degree, but the intensity and manner of adoption differed markedly. These differences were not only quantitative but reflected distinct strategic and stylistic patterns across parties. Every party, except the Green Party, evidently favoured TikTok over Reels and gained more views on TikTok. TikTokification is not simply the adoption of short-form video, but the selective internalisation of platform-specific cultural logic. Most parties saw TikTok as a space for more original and experimental content, as well as content that attempted to match the short-form video platform's culture and affordances, whereas Reels was used to repost more traditional campaign content to increase views on those appearances.

To address RQ3a on whether this new wave of social media follows earlier patterns of experimentation and standardisation (per Gibson, 2020), we can offer a cautious affirmative answer. The findings suggest that short-form video was widely used to perform traditional campaign functions, yet its execution varied markedly across platforms. On Reels, far fewer short-form-native features were deployed, with most parties using the format in a more conventional and standardised manner. This likely implies that standardisation had appeared at a relatively advanced stage by the time the election was called. For most parties, Reels functions primarily as a distribution channel for repurposed traditional media campaign content, reflecting an already stabilised and professionalised mode of use. In contrast, TikTok remained in a more pronounced experimentation phase, with many parties creating TikTok accounts only days after the election was called. The newness of TikTok within party campaigning encouraged risk-taking, allowing this study to capture an experimentation phase in real time. Parties engaged extensively with platform-specific cultures, incorporating memes, humour, informal performance style, and multimodal features such as in-app music and editing tools. Internet memes and informal campaign styles are now a mainstream form of political communication, even as part of the formal party campaign (see Southern, 2026, for an extensive discussion of this). These elements signify subversive features (Römmele & Gibson, 2020), yet TikTokification occurred unevenly and, in a strict sense, was largely confined to TikTok itself. In short, experimentation on TikTok appears more extensive and radical than earlier Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 phases of digital media (Gibson, 2020; Jackson & Lilleker, 2009); meanwhile, the adoption of Reels suggests a compressed experimentation-standardisation cycle. Overall, then, the evidence here suggests that the experimentation-standardisation cycle for short-form video may be expedited compared to previous waves of digital campaigning, and furthermore that contemporary campaign change is shaped not only by technological innovation but by platform-specific cultural logics and accumulated organisational experience with prior waves of digital media. Whether this experimentation continues remains an open question. TikTok may follow the now-familiar trajectory toward standardisation, as earlier digital media tools did.

In terms of limitations, firstly, the analysis focuses on official party accounts, excluding candidates' and party leaders' personal short-form video profiles, particularly Reform UK's Nigel Farage, which may exhibit distinct patterns of platform adaptation. Future research should apply and refine the framework across these actor types to assess whether TikTokification operates differently at organisational and individual levels. Secondly, conclusions drawn from half of the coded variables should be interpreted cautiously because some intercoder reliability scores fall below the conventional threshold. While these variables offer suggestive patterns, the interpretations based on them should be understood as indicative rather than definitive. Further refinement and testing of the codebook is therefore necessary. More broadly, these challenges highlight a methodological difficulty for political communication research, especially on emerging multimodal platforms where meaning is produced through audio, visual editing, performance styles, and platform-specific affordances rather than textual content alone.

To conclude, despite somewhat patchy adoption, there is evidence that UK parties were open to adopting, and even embracing, certain affordances, features, and styles of TikTokification in their campaigns. Since the election, several political figures have risen to prominence and enjoyed successes deploying TikTokified techniques in their campaigns. These include New York mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani and the new leader of the Green Party of England and Wales, Zack Polanski (Gabbatt, 2025). This suggests that the patterns identified in this article are unlikely to be unique to this context. The platform affordances shaping campaign behaviour operate transnationally. The uneven yet widespread attempt at TikTokification may therefore reflect a broader shift in digital campaigning across established democracies. Comparative research is needed to assess whether the compressed experimentation-standardisation cycle generalises across political systems and electoral contexts; however, the use of TikTok and TikTok-style communicative practices will likely continue.

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### **Conflict of Interests**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The corresponding author also works for Ofcom—the communication services regulator in the UK. This article represents the views and opinions of the author(s) and should not be taken as a statement of Ofcom policy/opinion.

### **Data Availability**

We are happy to share the data used here upon reasonable request. Please contact the corresponding author in the first instance.

### **Supplementary Material**

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

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# The “TikTok Messiah”: Ritualized Emotional Performance, Memetic Sound, and Mobilization in Romania’s 2024 Presidential Elections

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## Abstract

Since 2024, TikTok’s potential to influence political outcomes has gained heightened visibility. In Romania, the unexpected success of an independent far-right candidate in the first round of the presidential election was widely attributed to his TikTok-based campaign. On the platform, supporters combine text, sound, and image, making a multimodal analytical approach appropriate. We integrate Nabi’s emotion-as-frames model and Tagg’s musical communication model to examine how popular culture and political expression intersect on TikTok. The analysis draws on two datasets analyzed using two complementary methods. First, we employ quantitative content analysis to examine videos and metadata from the calingorgescuofficial TikTok account (742 items) alongside metadata from 1,400 videos using aural meme templates. Second, we apply a newly developed qualitative approach to an in-depth analysis of a subsample of 150 videos employing popular memetic sounds in support of the politician. The novelty of the proposed multimodal analytical approach consists of two layers, denotative and connotative, and two dimensions, visual and aural, to provide an analytical model for memetic expressions of political support on TikTok that lack verbal elements. The results reveal the strategic use of a wide range of memetic sounds—from hip-hop and pop-folk to military marches and religious chants—to mobilize voters dissatisfied with the political establishment and to amplify nationalist sentiment centered on claims of national sovereignty around the candidate. We identify how established narratives are repurposed and performed on camera through emotional cues. Visuals anchor these emotions in diverse settings—from everyday life to protest scenes—while sounds provide scripts for communal performance.

## Keywords

emotional framing; memetic sounds; musical communication; political communication; popular culture; presidential elections; Romania; sovereigntism; TikTok

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## 1. Introduction

The major change brought by social media has been described as the creation of a network media logic. It differs from mass media logics in several crucial aspects concerning media production, distribution, and use. Network media logic focuses on media as an information environment and ways in which access to, use, and misuse of information have changed, including the spread of disinformation (Cardoso, 2023; Klinger & Svensson, 2024). This information environment, in which strategic campaign communication also takes place, functions as a platform on which individual identities are performed by algorithmic remixing and distribution of content (Cardoso, 2023). TikTok, the fastest-growing social and video network (Newman et al., 2025), is accelerating the shift towards digital platforms, eroding the influence of professional, institutional journalism, while nurturing a fragmented, alternative media landscape. Significant scholarship has been dedicated to the role played by Facebook or Twitter in elections in the past two decades, but emerging research into TikTok use in strategic campaign communication shows significant differences. Grantham (2024) highlights the importance of integrating popular culture trends, manifested through music or visuals with legacy approaches such as humor or negative campaigning. Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2021) propose that popular culture functions as a shared symbolic resource, stimulating communication across political differences and engagement of new participants in political expression. TikTok is widely recognized for its focus on trends and unpredictable negotiation of virality through its algorithm, breaking away from the context of the content creator and their audience of followers. The platform's affordances anchor new forms of political expression and mobilization.

TikTok has indeed emerged as a major source of information and news for audiences around the world (Newman et al., 2025), and increasingly so in Romania, where the platform already had around 9 million accounts in 2024—one of the highest user penetration rates in the EU, at approximately 47% of the population (Ernst, 2024). Our empirical research focuses on the case of the annulled 2024 Romanian presidential elections, where the surprising first round win of far-right independent candidate Călin Georgescu was widely associated with the use of TikTok campaigning, with media and political commentators using labels such as the “TikTok Candidate” or the “TikTok Messiah” (O’Sullivan, 2024).

### 1.1. Understanding TikTok’s Model of Communication

TikTok’s model of communication can best be understood through the lens of media ecology and Carey’s (2008) ritual model of communication. Marshall McLuhan (1964) pointed out that the effects of radio were different in the different contexts in which the technology was adopted. Less developed, less literate societies could not, in his view, “neutralize the radio implosion without revolution” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 138). In the paradigm of media ecology, radio encouraged tribal village tastes for gossip, rumor, and personal malice, acting as a decentralizing, pluralistic force (McLuhan, 1964). The concept of “secondary orality” (Ong, 2013) describes the orality of electronic media such as radio or television. In the same vein, “tertiary orality” (Logan, 2010) expands Ong’s considerations on literacy to the new digital forms of speech used in emails, blogs, and instant

messages. Print syntax fades in the dialogical nature of new forms of computer-mediated communication, allowing utterances to be replies that rely on the previous utterances of others. Finally, drawing on McLuhan, Ong, and Logan's works, Andrey Mir proposes that the newsfeed used by most mobile-first digital media platforms, such as TikTok, is a flow that has no structure or completeness typical of literacy, which dismantles other logical structures determined by literacy (Mir, 2025). In this view, in the feed, deliberation and abstract consideration are replaced by impulsive reaction, personal anecdotes, and other features of primary orality—"bragging, truth relativity, analog thinking, and magical consciousness" (Mir, 2025).

TikTok's role in the campaign environment should be seen as a space for ritual performances of community and belonging, in line with James Carey's ritual model of communication. Carey (2008) argued that communication is not only about transmitting information but about expressing shared values and reinforcing social bonds. Symbolic practices—such as dance, play, or news—help create a shared sense of reality by confirming collective identities and beliefs. These ritualized performances have been identified as central to online digital activism and social movements (Cervi & Divon, 2023), and the case of the Georgescu campaign, regardless at this point of the manner in which it was orchestrated, shows how it can become central to an election campaign as well.

Central to these ritual performances is the importance of audio in TikTok, an aspect that has been described as an "aural turn": from lip-syncing to remixing sounds or using lyrics as punchlines (Abidin & Kaye, 2021), and where hashtags and sounds can turn into a source of mutual amplification (Pilipets, 2023). TikTokers engage in practices that embody the performance and participation-oriented nature of secondary orality (Ong, 2013), but also the relational bias, truth relativity, and impulsivity that tertiary, digital orality retrieves from primary orality (Logan, 2010; Mir, 2025). In addition to supporting sound-based memetic forms, TikTok's Green Screen, Duet, and Stitch features promote the dialogical nature of digital orality and facilitate political discourse. The Green Screen feature is used to provide citational evidence for legitimation, the Duet feature allows users to express agreement or disagreement through nonverbal cues or superimposed text, and the Stitch feature enables users to provide additional commentary (Quick & Maddox, 2024).

The participatory affordances of TikTok made the performance of the repertoire and audience practice a new element in political communication. In social media discourses, the templates of political communication acquire both their form and meaning by employing a wide range of extant cultural references, from songs becoming memetic sounds to visual memes. Thus, historical and popular cultural references become framing devices with a new element of remediation: TikTokers perform iconic gestures or facial expressions that embody the reference, but at the same time use a reference to frame their message or experience.

## ***1.2. Discursive Strategies: History and Popular Culture as Framing Devices***

The role of social media platforms in election campaigns has long been described as providing venues for reinforcement-based or preference-based persuasion. This involves tailoring content towards audience preferences, creating content communities or echo chambers, and increasing the effectiveness of messages despite the fragmented information environment (Cacciatore et al., 2016, p. 17). This "preference-based reinforcement" is achieved by activating existing knowledge structures in the audience involving textual, visual, auditory, and nonverbal cues (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017). These cues will vary by context as they are culturally shared schemas.

However, leveraging popular culture and historical narratives for political purposes is not a new or context-specific phenomenon, although the specific examples are. Historical myths have always been part of a politician's rhetorical toolbox. The power of music to communicate a sense of belonging, protest, and resistance in a participatory manner is also a known staple of political communication, though it is less well documented (Street, 2014). Popular culture has gained increased political relevance with the mediatization of politics and the accompanying increased emotionalization, particularly on social media platforms that cultivate affective publics (Papacharissi, 2014).

Authoritarian and populist leaders, particularly, have strategically appropriated cultural and historical references. Populism has even been defined as a “discursive and stylistic repertoire” (Brubaker, 2017), relying on templates or schemata like “the people” or “crisis.” For example, projections of “historicized victimhood” in Central and Eastern Europe relies on and activates extant representation of people as oppressed underdogs, either historically or economically: In both Poland and Hungary, tropes of historical injustices have been utilized to frame the people versus the elites opposition, or cast the EU as an oppressor to be fought (Meijen & Vermeersch, 2024). Political leaders or movements may be associated with popular songs to construct oppositions and collective identifications. Political parties may embrace or endorse specific styles and artists, or even commission songs that strategically construct “the people” (Barna & Patakfalvi-Czirják, 2022). These are strategic communication tools employed by political parties in countries such as Austria, Italy, and Sweden. The aim is to cast actors as ordinary people or as “aligning themselves with popular identifications” (Dunkel & Schiller, 2024).

In line with the European trend, Romania has observed a rise in a movement that combines nationalism and populism. This movement involves journalists, media outlets, social media influencers, politicians, and public figures, and frequently exploits religious and ethnic minority-related sensitivities to fuel anti-EU and anti-Western sentiments (Cucu, 2025). The interplay between media sources, narratives, and citizens has become evident following the unprecedented political developments in Romania. Presidential elections were annulled after the first round, which was won by Călin Georgescu. Previously a largely unknown independent candidate, Georgescu ran on an anti-system, nationalist, and anti-EU platform, attracting significant support from voters disillusioned with mainstream parties (Damian, 2024).

### ***1.3. Romanian Elections in the Context of the Rise of Sovereignism in Europe***

The election results and the extraordinary annulment of the election mark a turning point both in Romanian political history and a major shift in the role of platforms in Romanian politics. The unexpected result was widely attributed to the success of his social media campaign, particularly using TikTok, and was followed by widespread public debates on the role of the platform in the election, including allegations of Russian interference (Cistelean et al., 2025). Declassified reports have argued, on the one hand, that Georgescu's #echilibrusiverticalitate campaign, modelled on Russia's “brother next to brother” campaign in Ukraine in 2022, engaged the services of micro-influencers who were unaware of the broader agenda and were paid approximately 80 EUR per 20,000 followers (Administrația Prezidențială a României, 2024). Since then, literature has also shown that the TikTok campaign capitalized on divisive sentiments and rhetoric. It used aggressive digital marketing tactics, such as granular voter profiling, microtargeted ads, and emotionally polarizing content, to mobilize disillusioned voters, disproportionately amplifying existing narratives of the far right (Cistelean et al., 2025). In the context of the 2024 Romanian presidential elections, high social

media engagement was correlated with increased support for nationalist populist parties (Botan et al., 2025). This research analyzes the mediated logics that shaped these processes on TikTok. The scientific objectives underpinning our research are to identify and attempt to explain the changes brought on by the use of new platforms such as TikTok, characterized by affordances such as algorithmic curation and visuality (Hase et al., 2023), as well as support for the emergence of imitation publics (Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

## 2. Extending the Emotions-as-Frames Model

### 2.1. A Multimodal Extension of the Emotion-as-Frames Model

Political TikToks contribute to the emergence of “affective networked publics,” a concept proposed by Papacharissi (2014). These publics are structured around expressions of sentiment on digital platforms. We employ the emotion-as-frames model proposed by Robin Nabi (2003) to explore these expressions of sentiment with respect to the affordances of TikTok. Nabi’s model conceptualizes emotions as perspectives through which stimuli can be interpreted. It focuses on message features that are likely to elicit specific emotions. Furthermore, the model posits that emotional experiences may influence the seeking and accessibility of information, leading to emotion-consistent decisions and actions (Nabi, 2009). Nabi’s work extends beyond fear appeals research. It explains through a cognitive functional model how “message-relevant negative emotions (e.g., fear, anger, sadness, guilt, disgust) affect the direction and stability of persuasive outcomes” (Nabi, 2009, p. 211). Three constructs are fundamental to this: emotion-driven motivated attention, motivated processing, and expectation of message reassurance (Nabi, 2009). She notes, however, that less work has been done on positive emotions. Nabi differentiates between message-relevant negative emotions and ambient mood states, the latter of which lack distinct action tendencies (De Los Santos & Nabi, 2019). In methodological terms, emotional reactions or discrete emotions have been coded by facial expression (Ekman & Friesen, 1971, 1978): happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust, and surprise. More recent research (De Los Santos & Nabi, 2019) integrates the emotions-as-frames model and cognitive functional model to study anger, fear, and hope as different motivational goals, frequently emphasized in news coverage.

Emotions and emotional framing are linked to facial expressions in short-form videos. But TikTok facilitates imitation and aggregation through sounds, which, according to mood management theory (Zillmann, 1988), influence mood states and may connect specific performances within communal, interactive, and meta-communicative forms and participation rituals (Schellewald, 2021).

TikTok is a multimodal platform where meaning is generated through the sequencing and recontextualization of text, sound, and image. When information is presented multimodally, the audience tends to give precedence to visual modes (Kress, 2010, p. 187; Molin & Godhe, 2020, p. 162). However, the structural architecture of the platform is fundamentally audio-centric with sound as a pivotal element, often acting as a main conduit for trends, memes, challenges, and group affiliation (Radovanović, 2022). These affordances of the platform facilitate a manifestation (Darvin, 2022; Radovanović, 2022) of aural discourse similar to the call-and-response songs found in religious, military, and other communal contexts (duets, sequencing, recontextualization, and reuse of sounds; Medina Serrano et al., 2020; Peterson, 2018; Vizcaíno-Verdú, 2024). Although harmonious audiovisual combinations promote an integrated understanding of the message, research suggests that audiences create coherent mental models when confronted with

multimodal discourse. However, this comes at the expense of a detailed analysis of the individual components of the message (Mayer & Moreno, 2003). Together with the inherent nature of TikTok sounds—short, in the background, repetitive, and associated with different visuals—they are placed lower in the modal density continuum. This attracts lower levels of attention and awareness (Norris, 2012, p. 3998). As such, the meanings directly associated with the sounds are simplified and interpreted at superficial levels. Thus, the emotions visually encoded in facial expressions need to be analyzed together with affective frames encoded in the aural mood of the videos. To achieve this, we employ the Thayer (1989) energy-stress model. It categorizes emotions along two dimensions: energy and stress (both low to high). Thus, the emotions as frames model can be extended by dividing the aural mood space into four quadrants or clusters: “exuberance” (high energy/low stress), “anxious/frantic” (high energy/high stress), “depression” (low energy/high stress), and “contentment” (low energy/low stress).

## ***2.2. A Multimodal Model for Sound-Induced Emotional Framing***

To articulate what a sound generally evokes, we have followed Tagg’s structure of Parameters of Musical Expression, Connotative, Metaphorical, and Anaphonic (what the music sounds like and what it refers to aurally), and the Paramusical Field of Connotation (culturally specific “identifiable semantic fields”; Tagg, 2013).

Our conceptual framework proposes integrating the distinction between monological and dialogical expression, which correspond to the features of secondary and tertiary orality, respectively. These features are mapped to specific TikTok affordances, which are identified here and in previous works (Quick & Maddox, 2024). The emotion-as-frames model (De Los Santos & Nabi, 2019) is integrated in two aspects of the proposed multimodal analysis model: (a) the emotion performed nonverbally—using categories of facial expressions (Ekman & Friesen, 1971, 1978) where the face is visible; and (b) the sound-induced mood—using the Thayer (1989) energy-stress model for the soundtrack of the videos. The Thayer (1989) model was chosen due to its potential for use in automated classification as the emotion-as-frames model was used recently in conjunction with automated classification of facial expressions (Kim et al., 2024). Lastly, the final components of the proposed multimodal analysis model address the verbal and visual narrative elements of the messages. These components identify the collective actors, groups, or social categories portrayed in the video as well as whether the message references the past, present, or future.

## ***2.3. Research Design***

The goal of this research is to explore emergent communication strategies employed in Romania’s Presidential elections by analyzing both content shared by candidates and content created and distributed by propagators and supporters, the imitation publics created by TikTok’s memetic function. By identifying the factors that contributed to the success of Călin Georgescu’s campaign on TikTok, using the emotion-as-frames model, the research endeavors to also fill in a gap in existing literature with respect to multimodal analysis of strategic communication campaigns on TikTok. Since the tertiary orality of digital media has a strong dialogical aspect, analysis of aural memes employed to affectively engage and mobilize users is essential. We thus formulated the following research questions:

RQ1: How did the calingeorgescuofficial account content adapt to TikTok’s affordances?

RQ2: What is evoked by the sounds used as memetic templates by supporters of the campaign?

RQ3: How is support for the candidate expressed with respect to TikTok’s affordances?

RQ4: How is political mobilization for the candidate articulated through emotional and narrative framing devices?

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Data Collection and Sampling

In order to answer the RQs, two datasets were collected. One dataset was collected from the “calingeorgescuofficial” TikTok account using the Apify actor TikTok Data Extractor. The account had 259,600 fans at the time of data collection, making it the most followed TikTok account associated with the candidate. The account was not marked as verified by the platform and its bio section indicated a link to the Telegram channel “propagatorcg.” The dataset collected on November 30, 2024, comprised seven slideshows and 742 videos. None of the posts were marked as sponsored on the platform.

To identify the sounds used as memetic templates by supporters of Călin Georgescu, we examined the content associated with #calingeorgescu hashtag, and we identified several sounds that served as audio templates for videos either explicitly supporting the candidate or aiming to mobilize voters. Since the data was collected in the aftermath of the intensely debated first round election results, when some of the content had already been removed, it was not possible to gather a large sample with temporal coverage over the entire electoral campaign. We selected seven sounds (Table 1) that had been used in over 2,500 videos, according to the count provided by the platform. Thus, the dataset includes popular memetic sounds used by supporters of Călin Georgescu, both before and after the first tour of the 2024 Romanian Presidential elections. Some of these sounds predate the campaign and were being used as memetic sounds in other contexts (see Figures 2 and 3, and the analysis of S02–S07 in the Supplementary File). The sounds were analyzed using Tagg’s musical communication model. Using the Apify actor TikTok Sound Scraper, on November 30, 2024, we collected a

**Table 1.** List of sounds used as aural templates.

Sound code	Videos using sound on 30.11.2024	Sound source/song
S01	23,600	“AventuraROLive—Privim spre libertate” (Looking towards freedom; 2024)
S02	17,400	“B.U.G. Mafia—În anii ce-au trecut” (In the years gone by; 2003; instrumental intro to a live rendition)
S03	25,800	“Rahat Fateh Ali Khan and Shreya Ghoshal—Teri Meri” overlapping a group of soldiers taking the Romanian Army’s military oath (2011)
S04	13,600	“Marian Hulpus—Imnul diasporei” (The diaspora’s Anthem; 2020)
S05	18,700	“Moromeții—România, trezește-te!” (Romania, wake up!; 2004)
S06	7,720	“Jador, Costi, Vlăduța Lupău—Mare e lumea” (The world is large; 2021)
S07	2,923	“The TRONOS Psaltic Group of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchy—Se-aude glas peste Carpați” (A voice is heard over the Carpathians; 2018)

dataset of 200 video metadata for each sound. In the third step, we filtered a subsample of 150 posts using popular memetic sounds that had used hashtags associated with the Călin Georgescu campaign. These were coded for the manual multimodal analysis. One major limitation in terms of sampling is that some of these posts were removed (either by the creator or by the platform) after suspicions were officially raised regarding the conduct of Călin Georgescu's electoral campaign.

### 3.2. Data Analysis

For the quantitative data analysis, Tableau Public, Google Pinpoint, and KH Coder were used to analyze both datasets: metadata from the calingeorgescuofficial account (749 posts) and the sample of videos using memetic aural templates (1,400 posts). All the audio from the videos published by the calingeorgescuofficial account was processed using speech-to-text and named entity recognition, tools provided by Google PinPoint. The seven sounds identified as relevant for the case study (see S01–S07 in the Supplementary File) were analyzed using a qualitative approach based on Tagg's structure of Parameters of Musical Expression, Connotative, Metaphorical, and Anaphonic and the Paramusical Field of Connotation to articulate what a sound generally evokes. The multimodal coding model described in Table 2 integrates the emotion-as-frames framework across two dimensions: nonverbal emotional expression (analyzed through facial expression categories) and sound-induced mood.

**Table 2.** Multimodal emotion-as-frames coding model.

Video types	Original	Vlog (face on camera): subject directly addresses their audience and their face is visible on camera  POV video: filmed from the perspective of the person creating it, giving the viewer a sense of being present and experiencing events as they happen
	Re-mediated	Distributed: the video from a different source (TV or digital platforms) is distributed without minimal modification  Interpreted: the video from a different source (TV or digital platforms) is distributed with a personal note or interpretation added through superimposed text edits
	Remix	Green Screen: allows users to superimpose images or videos onto the background of their creation  Duet: allows users to post an original video side-by-side with another user's publicly accessible video  Stitch: enables users to integrate other publicly available TikTok videos into their own
Emotion performed nonverbally (only for original videos where faces are visible)	Fear Anger Sadness Disgust Joy/elation Surprise	
Sound-induced mood	Anxious/frantic (high energy/high stress) Exuberance (high energy/low stress) Contentment (low energy/low stress) Depression (low energy/high stress)	

**Table 2. (Cont.) Multimodal emotion-as-frames coding model.**

<b>Reference</b>	<p>Past: historical events, historical figures</p> <p>Present: the context of the elections, current political actors, references to current issues</p> <p>Future: projections of positive or negative events or phenomena, promises, future challenges</p>
<b>Collective actors</b>	The video shows, mentions, or the subject is identified as a member of: diaspora, farmers, military, drivers, family, protesters, etc.

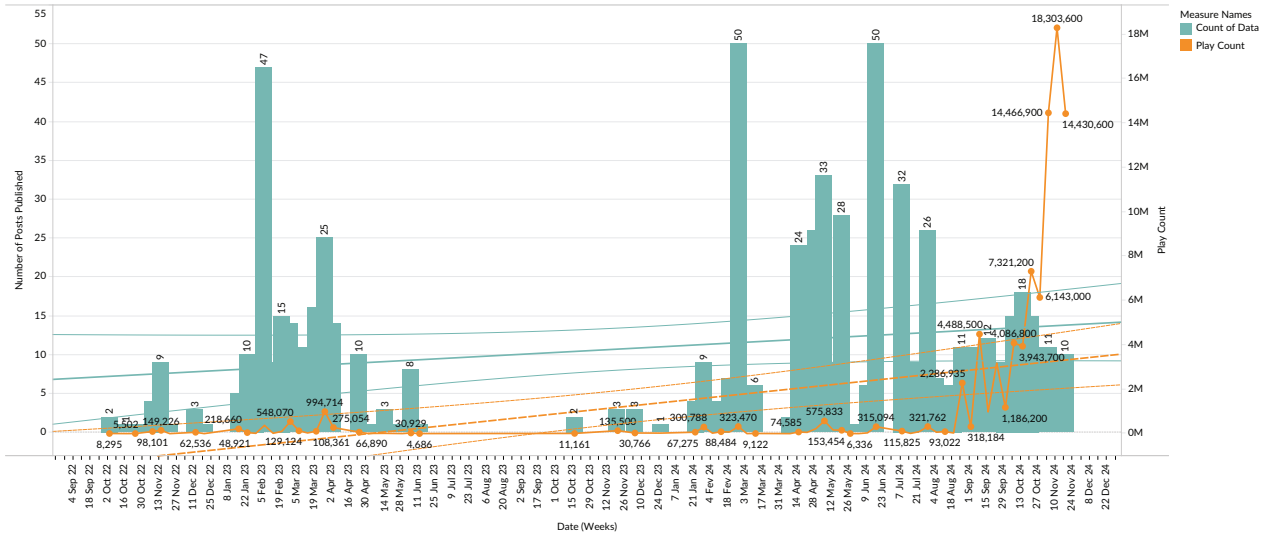
The subsample of popular memetic sounds used by the supporters of Georgescu (150 videos) was coded by four coders using the multimodal model described in Table 2. Prior to full coding, all four coders participated in a training phase that included joint review of the codebook, pilot coding of a subsample, and clarification of ambiguous categories. Further, a randomly selected subsample of 20 videos of the dataset was independently coded by all four coders to assess intercoder reliability, and the pairwise agreement between coders ranged from 84 to 96 identical coding decisions out of 100, which was considered an acceptable level of agreement.

### 3.3. An Analysis of Calingeorgescuofficial Videos

The calingeorgescuofficial account's activity dates back to the middle of 2022, with intense posting activity registered in early 2023, followed by a brief discontinuation, then an increase in posting activity in late 2023 and throughout 2024. Interest in the posted content registers an increase in the number of plays only in late August 2024, followed by a sharp increase in plays and overall engagement in late October and early November 2024, as shown in Figure 1. The weekly posting activity shows periods of intense activity, with 40 or 50 videos posted in the same week. The increases in the number of video plays follow a distinct pattern, with significant changes in weeks starting on 09-Sep-24, 11-Nov-24, and 18-Nov-24, respectively. The average duration of videos decreases from over 400 seconds in October 2022 and June 2023 to under 60 seconds in November 2024. The evolution of shares, digs, and comments over time on calingeorgescuofficial follows a similar pattern, with engagement numbers climbing sharply in late October 2024 to reach a peak just before the first round of the 2024 presidential election.

The videos posted between August 2022 and August 2024 are mostly recut and remediated from various TV appearances and only videos posted in the context of the presidential election campaign are more adapted to the TikTok format. To provide an overview of the candidate's verbal discourse throughout the entire video dataset, we employed named entity recognition (Table 3). The entities (persons, organizations, and locations) mentioned in the transcripts of 720 videos from the calingeorgescuofficial dataset ( $N = 749$ ) illustrate that the discourse relies heavily on references to historical and cultural figures that were cultivated by Romanian exceptionalist discourses (Țăranu, 2025) and which are familiar to all Romanians (figures featured frequently in primary and secondary education as well as featured on Romanian currency). The discourse blends these familiar symbols with discourses on world leaders, national institutions (The Church, The Army, The Academy), global powers, and global organizations. The global scope of the discourses is highlighted by frequent use of the words "world" and "earth," making use of simple yet relatable notions. Georgescu instrumentalizes national symbols to evoke both pride in a glorified past and dissatisfaction with Romania's current place in the world.

TikTok Publishing Patterns (Published Content & Video Plays) by Week



**Figure 1.** The distribution of posts and post playcounts over time on the calingeorgescuofficial account (August 2022 to November 2024) including trend lines: posts per week ( $R^2 = 0.0360$ ,  $p = 0.118117$ ), play count per week ( $R^2 = 0.0187$ ,  $p = 0.000199$ ). Notes: Outliers were detected in play count per week in weeks 09-Sep-24, 11-Nov-24, and 18-Nov-24.

**Table 3.** People, organizations, and locations identified through named entity recognition.

People	Organizations	Locations
Călin Georgescu (53)	EU (24)	Romania (258)
Mihai Eminescu (27)	UN (16)	World (101)
Mihai Viteazu (12)	NATO (11)	Europe (60)
Donald Trump (8)	Orthodox Church (10)	Earth (52)
Constantin Brâncuși (7)	Club of Rome (8)	USA (35)
George Simion (7)	Romanian Army (7)	Ukraine (31)
Ștefan cel Mare (7)	Romanian Academy (6)	Russia (23)
Vladimir Putin (6)	Social Democratic Party (6)	Bucharest (21)
George Soros (6)	BRICS (4)	China (20)

To summarize and answer RQ1, calingeorgescuofficial employs remediation of TV appearances and only content posted in the context of the election campaign clearly adapts to the affordances of TikTok. Popularity of the account spikes at the beginning of September, and then in the two weeks prior to the first round of the elections.

The calingeorgescuofficial account adapted to TikTok’s affordances only in a small number of videos that are either produced for digital distribution or remediated and edited to durations under 60 seconds. Eight out of the top 10 most-played videos are under 90 seconds long. Overall, the discourse focuses on familiar symbols, incorporating national icons and global themes.

### 3.4. Memetic Sounds as Affective Scaffolding in Political Campaign Communication

Our qualitative analysis of the aural templates indicates that TikTok's sounds feature is a low-friction source for elements that function as a collection of affective scripts for political expression that people can selectively draw upon to perform their political identity, in a "call-and-response" performance that does not require generating original content. These sounds contribute to the framing of the content they background, translating non-verbal, musical structures into fields of connotation that outline the public's political views. The modularity offered by TikTok's affordances allowed the campaign to scale rapidly, as supporters did not need to articulate policy; they only needed to perform the sound.

The qualitative mapping of these sounds, treated as museme stacks (Tagg, 2013), demonstrates a process of intense recontextualization. Rather than relying on purpose-built campaign materials, the observed content frequently repurposed existing cultural repertoires including hip-hop, pop-folk, and religious chants. This process of recontextualization allowed the campaign to scale rapidly across diverse demographic segments, "hijacking" the sounds to activate culturally shared schemas that align with the candidate's narratives.

We can organize these scripts into four primary thematic clusters:

- Messianic adoration: Scripts evoking religious and spiritual authority, positioning the candidate as a redemptive figure of hope.
- Martial ethos and sovereignty: Scripts involving military oaths and national anthems activate narratives of national pride, state duty, and protection against external threats.
- Identity and diaspora: Most frequently found in combination with the previous theme, these scripts are centered on themes of class struggle, the resilience of cultural identity, and a desire to overthrow the political order to reclaim their common roots.
- Anti-establishment resistance: Scripts involving repurposed subcultural symbols and anthemic calls-to-action are used to perform communal defiance against the perceived establishment—"the system."

To answer RQ2, the strategic use of these templates amplifies individual positions, grievances, and opinions into collective action. This repetition of the same affective scripts in widespread sharing contributes to the appearance of inevitable support, facilitating the "majority illusion" (Lerman et al., 2016). Our multimodal coding confirms that high-energy and high-stress aural moods are dominant, evoking a sense of urgency and struggle that is reinforced by on-camera performances. This approach to political communication suggests an "aural turn" which enables rapid mobilization through mimicry rather than a deliberative engagement. The ability to surface versatile, high-affect audio templates is a significant factor in achieving visibility within TikTok's algorithmic environment and this has potential implications for political movements that intend to adopt it as a communication platform for their movement.

The analysis assumes an assonant model reader. All sounds are subject to ironic interpretation by dissonant readers or may become inefficient in their communication to an unfamiliar reader (Eco, 1984, p. 7). Other issues that may show up in interpretation are codal incompetence—when the receiver and the transmitter do not share a common code (references, vocabulary, cultural awareness, etc.)—and codal interference—when even if the understanding can be shared, the meaning is distorted by personal contexts. But, as Tagg argues,

codal incompetence and interference are also essential to the renegotiation of music's meanings (Tagg, 2013, p. 178), which is especially relevant in the appropriation of sounds on TikTok.

The sounds used as memetic templates by supporters of the campaign attune to the identities of specific categories from which they emanated in previous months or years—the military, the police, the diaspora, the farmers, the transporters, the young, etc. Support for the candidate is expressed through participation in memetic phenomena that use the official campaign sound (S01) or reuse sounds that were previously attached to rituals of passage (S03), memorialization and nostalgia (S06, S07), participation in mobilization for a previous cause (S02), a specific group identity (S04), and older or relatively newer (S05) anthemic “wake up calls.”

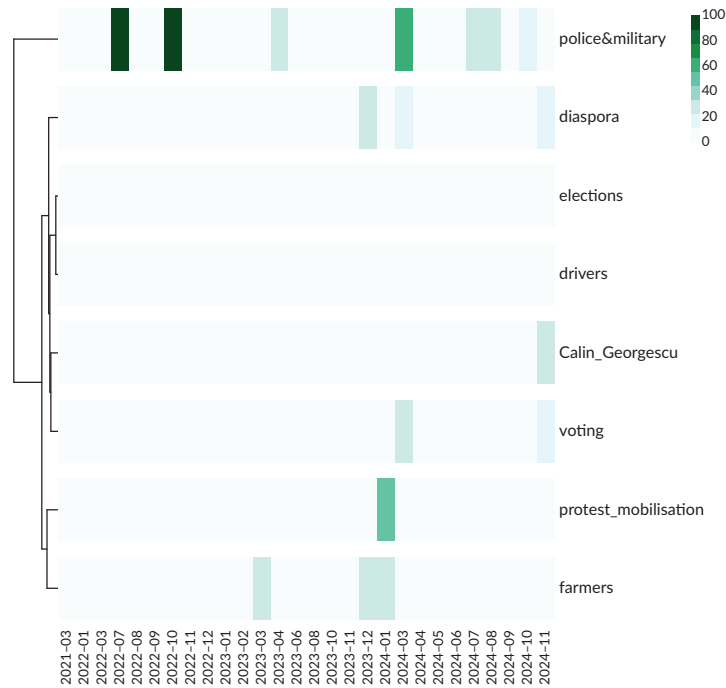
### ***3.5. An Analysis of Hashtags Associated With Aural Templates***

The analysis of sounds used as aural templates and a sample of associated video metadata (1,400 posts) shows that with the exception of S01, which was a template of explicit support, most templates were repurposed or “hijacked” by supporters of Călin Georgescu in the weeks preceding the first round of the Romanian presidential elections.

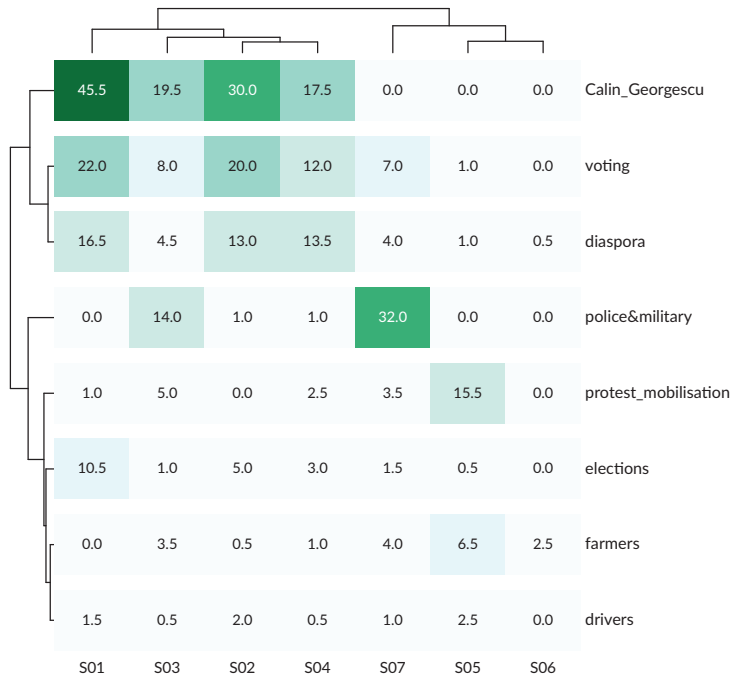
Figures 2 and 3 further show that videos using most of the sounds described above in our analysis were already being used on TikTok before Călin Georgescu's campaign in various contexts related to categories such as police, riot police, and military (S03, S07), Romanian diaspora (S02, S04), farmers and drivers (S05, S06). Aural templates which were already successful in other contexts are repurposed to express support for Călin Georgescu. Figure 2, based on a crosstab analysis of coded hashtags in the text of the 1,400 posts that used one of the seven aural templates (S01–S07), shows that use of hashtags supporting the candidate specifically is exhibited only in the first weeks of November 2025. For Figures 2 and 3, the total frequencies are as follows: Calin\_Georgescu ( $n = 225$ ), reply ( $n = 93$ ), duet ( $n = 11$ ), elections ( $n = 43$ ), voting ( $n = 140$ ), protest\_mobilisation ( $n = 55$ ), viral\_fyp ( $n = 380$ ), diaspora ( $n = 106$ ), farmers ( $n = 36$ ), drivers ( $n = 16$ ), and police&military ( $n = 96$ ).

Especially in the case of the templates used in relation to the military or police, we can observe that their use predates the 2024 presidential campaign. Use of hashtags and aural templates associated categories, such as farmers and drivers or transporters, peaks in late 2023 and early 2024 in conjunction with protests on the Bucharest bypass which leaders of the two right-wing populist parties (George Simion and Diana Șoșoacă) attempted to capitalize upon, but were denied by protesters (Ștefănescu, 2024). Hashtag hijacking is not a new phenomenon (Hadgu et al., 2013) but the reuse of sounds and audio meme templates for coordinated campaigns has been recently studied in the context of computational propaganda on the invasion of Ukraine (Bösch & Divon, 2024).

The analysis of the aural templates' field of connotation shows that the campaign adapted to TikTok's affordances by leveraging the platform's “use this sound” feature to create a discursive repertoire (Brubaker, 2017), which also served as an aural architecture on which supporters could rely to express, or rather perform, their connection. This repertoire evoked culturally shared schemas (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017) including the figure of the messianic leader, historical victimhood, oppression and revolt (RQ2), and constructions of “the people” and of a sense of belonging by communal musical performances and subcultural symbols (RQ3), also mobilizing via references to crisis and awakening, emotionalized duty, military and religious, but also threats of violent revolt (RQ4).



**Figure 2.** Overview of hashtag categories by month of use in the memetic sound dataset (N = 1,400). Notes: Chi-square for hashtag categories by months—Calin\_Georgescu (278.231\*\*), reply (426.195\*\*), duet (511.711\*\*), elections (29.28), voting (112.345\*\*), protest\_mobilisation (393.981\*\*), viral\_fyp (209.116\*\*), diaspora (90.978\*\*), farmers (233.618\*\*), drivers (48.850\*\*), police&military (171.616\*\*); \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .



**Figure 3.** Overview of hashtag categories by sound used in the memetic sound dataset (N = 1,400, 200 documents per sound S1-S7). Notes: Chi-square for hashtag categories by sounds—Calin\_Georgescu (274.117\*\*), reply (189.260\*\*), duet (12.645\*), elections (54.895\*\*), voting (98.222\*\*), protest\_mobilisation (93.642\*\*), viral\_fyp (87.771\*\*), diaspora (74.224\*\*), farmers (25.318\*\*), drivers (8.598), police&military (279.588\*\*); \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

### 3.6. A Multimodal Analysis of Videos Using Memetic Sounds

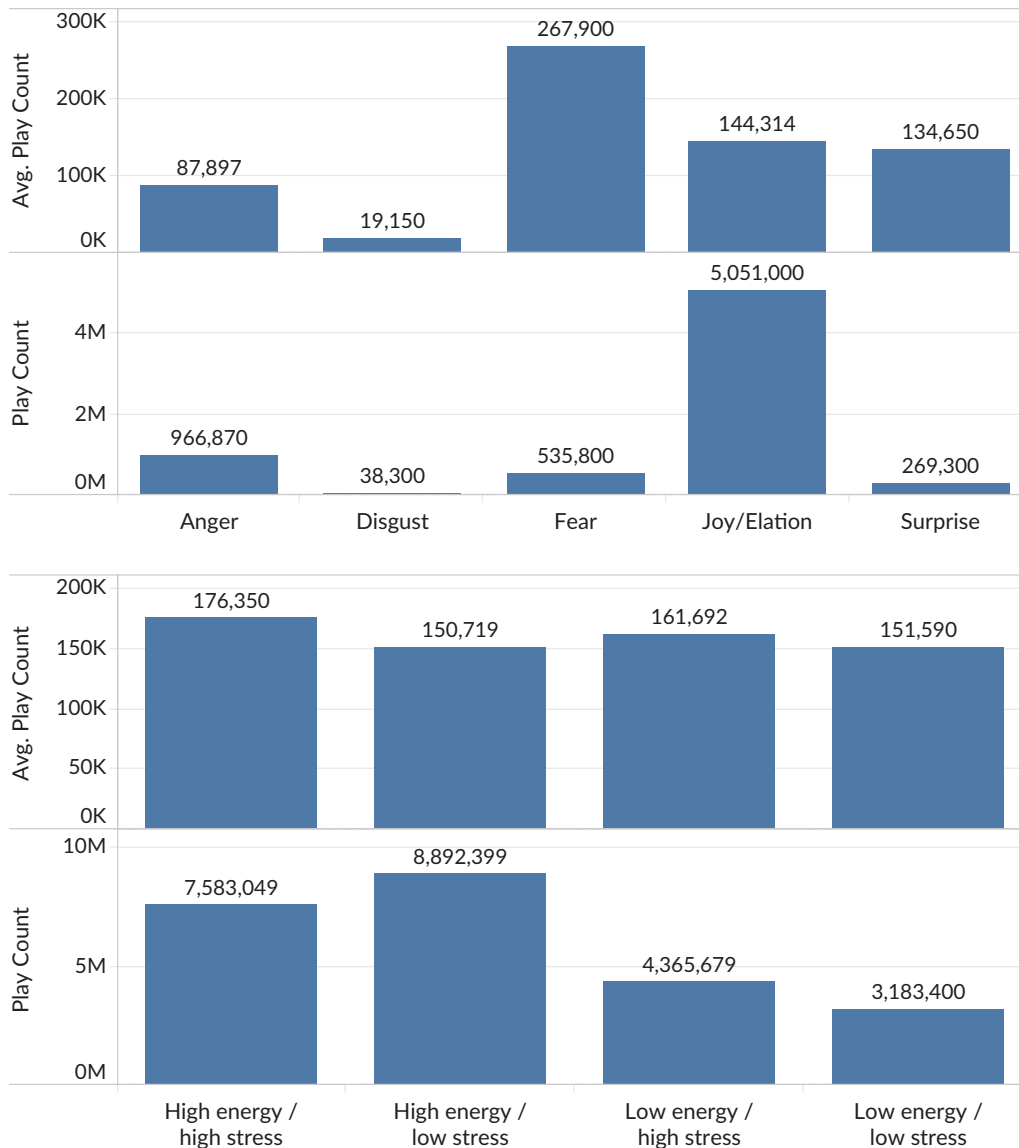
The 150 coded memetic videos show that, although joy/elation is the most frequently performed emotion on camera, fear generates more engagement on average. Analysis of sound-induced moods shows that high-energy sound templates are preferred and generate more engagement on TikTok. We found that most videos adopt a POV or a Vlog format and the use of the platform's dialogical remix affordances is limited (as seen in Table 4).

**Table 4.** Sound-induced moods by video types ( $N = 150$ , Chi-square = 11.10357).

Video type/Sound-induced mood	High energy/ high stress	High energy/ low stress	Low energy/ high stress	Low energy/ low stress
Original video—POV	22	21	12	11
Original video—Vlog	13	24	10	5
Remediated—Distribution	1	4	1	3
Remediated—Interpretation	5	9	4	2
Remix—Duet	1	1	-	-
Remix—Stitch	1	-	-	-

The mode of address in both POV and Vlog formats is, however, marked by the context of a polarized public and the elections, with most verbal (voice or text) expressions being formulated as agonistic, reactive to perceived disrespect from politicians or unnamed others, future threats of war, either over land or resources, or more frequently over issues of culture and identity. The use of audio meme templates corresponds to categories of users from whom they originated: on-camera performances using S03 emphasize martial ethos or POV performances using S02 feature the driver's perspective or cars. Performances over S01 are expressions of enthusiastic support, often featuring families or young adults.

The analysis of the videos using the predominant aural templates and supporting the candidate shows that the preferred platform affordance adopted was the individual-led formats, POV or Vlog, thus building the affective public via individual authenticity and repetitive reinforcement rather than dialogical commentary (RQ3). The preferred affective frames (Figure 4) are exuberance (high energy/low stress) in both Vlog and POV videos. High energy/high stress mood is dominant in POV videos, evoking a sense of urgency, stressed by on-camera performance. While joy is more frequently performed, fear generates more engagement, which, combined with the larger average play count of the high energy/high stress videos, contributes to the sense of urgency and struggle, also evoked by the cultural repertoires connoted by the templates (RQ2). Thus, support for the candidate is expressed primarily as a ritualized performance of personal emotion, individual testimonies recalling Carey's notion of confirmation (RQ3), creating an affective frame for support dominated by anxious/frantic or exuberant moods (RQ4).



**Figure 4.** Total and average number of plays by dominant emotion expressed (top) and sound-induced mood (bottom;  $N = 150$ ).

#### 4. Conclusion

TikTok’s memetic function is used to create “a complex ecology of users’ imitation, affective attunement, and attention hijacking” (Bösch & Divon, 2024, p. 5086) through automated indexing and amplification based on users’ previous engagement. In the Romanian 2024 presidential election case, the grievances of farmers and transporters, the military ethos, and especially the feeling of disenfranchisement of the sizeable Romanian diaspora are effectively hijacked through the use of relatable memetic templates.

The use of a broad spectrum of sounds from different musical styles and categories contributes to the impression of widespread societal support—an effect dubbed the “majority illusion” in social networks (Lerman et al., 2016). This effect can be achieved through algorithmic hacking: Artificially boosting videos the moment they are posted to signal to the algorithm that the content is “viral.” Supporters of the

Georgescu campaign appear to have used memetic sounds to simulate and subsequently stimulate massive popular support. They targeted already mobilized communities of discontent (diaspora members, transporters, farmers, military personnel, and police officers) who were ready to rally around familiar and accessible symbols and references. These findings also demonstrate how TikTok's audio-centric architecture can serve as an affective scaffold for a political campaign by building discursive audience repertoires and ritualized performances of emotion. These performances connect individual testimony with collective action and function as an effective tool for networked mobilization.

New strategic communication in election campaigns may employ pop culture references, memetic sounds that are already familiar and relatable to many users to flood the feeds of large numbers of users with explicit or covert messages of support for a candidate or a cause. Communities connected by rituals anchored in sounds, hashtags, and verbal and non-verbal performances may be targeted by concerted political messages. The political candidate and their explicit presence manifested through content published on primary channels become just vessels, performing vague or familiar statements, maintaining wide addressability and relatability. These are then imbued with meaning by appropriating rituals associated with existing causes and grievances and adapting them for the performance of political support. In electoral communication, TikTok's feed seems to encourage acclamation by emoting and imitation, not abstract consideration and deliberation.

The research faced some limitations with respect to data collection since only data collected in the context of the aftermath of the first round of the annulled 2024 Romanian presidential elections could be used reliably. Controversy over the outcome and subsequent developments led to much of the content being removed. Within hours of the confirmation of the results of the first rounds of the election, during first data collection tests, content and entire accounts became unavailable. Subsequently, the analysis of content supporting Călin Georgescu was limited to a smaller sample of sounds since the data collection also included uses of the sounds unrelated to the Georgescu campaign. Mitigation was attempted by extending the analysis to include video types classification.

The proposed model, which extends the use of Ekman's classification of emotions expressed through facial expressions to sound-induced mood using Thayer's classification, coupled with qualitative analyses of sound templates informed by Tagg's parameters of musical expression and semantic fields, proved useful in integrating the analysis of the aural and visual dimensions in multimodal research. This is especially true since categories based on Ekman's or Thayer's models can be classified automatically and show promise for use in future mixed-methods research on larger samples.

The findings of the research on the Romanian 2024 "TikTok Messiah" align with recent scholarship on the intersection of far-right narratives and disinformation campaigns (Innes et al., 2021), including propaganda in the context of the invasion of Ukraine (Bösch & Divon, 2024), the utilization of historical references in addressing alleged crises within populist discourse (Meijen & Vermeersch, 2024; Menke & Wulf, 2021), and in-depth analyses of the exploitation of exceptionalism, protochronism, and autarky in recent sovereignist discourse (Țăranu, 2025).

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Supplementary Material

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

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# “Liars” and “Frauds”: A Longitudinal Study of Negativity on Austrian Election Posters

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## Abstract

This article studies negative advertising on election posters in Austria over a time period of 79 years. Election posters are still one of the most important and long-lasting campaign tools in Austria, therefore allowing for the examination of long-term trends in political communication. The article uses data from 1,082 posters from 24 national legislative elections. A multilevel model is used to test whether the level of negativity decreases over time, whether opposition parties and smaller parties resort to negative messages more often, and whether the degree of negativity varies with party system polarization. The results indicate that negativity on election posters has steadily decreased. Parties choose to use the public space to promote their own strengths rather than the opponent’s weaknesses; negative messages may have disappeared or moved to the digital sphere. The article contributes to the literature by explaining the seemingly “recent” phenomenon of negative advertising in a historical context.

## Keywords

Austria; election posters; negative campaigning; political advertising

## 1. Introduction

In every national election, political parties in Austria have spent up to 50 percent of their campaign budgets on election posters (Gärtner & Hayek, 2022). However, they have not used these costly means of communication to promote only their own qualities. “Beat the Fascists—vote Communist.” “Austria shall not become red!” “Less sheepish than the others.”—slogans like these, displayed on Austrian election posters in 1945, 1966, and 2013, respectively, illustrate the enduring appeal of negative advertising: political posters that attack opponents

rather than promoting one's own agenda. However, a puzzle emerges when examining these attacks across time: The fiercest confrontations occurred not in recent elections characterized by populism and polarization, but in the immediate postwar decades. By the 2000s, negative appeals had nearly vanished from Austrian poster campaigns, only to resurface modestly in 2013. This pattern contradicts widespread assumptions about the intensification of negative politics in modern democracies.

The dominant narrative in political communication research holds that campaigns have become increasingly negative as they professionalize and adopt tactics pioneered in the US (Plasser & Plasser, 2003). In American presidential contests, where television advertising dominates and two parties compete directly, negative ads are ubiquitous and appear to be rising over time. However, multi-party systems operate under fundamentally different strategic logics. When voters can choose among five or six parties, attacking Party B risks driving voters to Party C or D rather than to the attacker (Ridout & Walter, 2015). Coalition dynamics further complicate attack strategies, as parties must balance electoral competition with post-election cooperation (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2008).

The current study addresses two research questions: How has negative advertising evolved on Austrian election posters from 1945 to 2024? What factors at the poster, campaign, and electoral levels predict when parties deploy negative messages? To answer these questions, I analyze 1,082 election posters from Austrian national legislative elections (*Nationalratswahlen*) between 1945 and 2024. Posters in Austrian election campaigns are not only a means of advertising, but are central to manifesting a party's overall campaign strategy. They are usually revealed at large press events and broadly discussed in the media (see e.g., "Babler präsentiert die erste Plakatwelle," 2024). Even though it may seem anachronistic, surveys regularly show that more than 90 percent of voters have at least seen an election poster in the weeks before an election (Plasser et al., 2000; Roose, 2022).

The findings reveal a clear pattern: Negative advertising on election posters has declined substantially over time. The most aggressive periods were the 1950s and 1960s, when existential ideological conflicts shaped political competition. As coalition governance became routine and the party system fragmented, negativity diminished. Opposition parties campaign more negatively than governing parties, and greater system polarization predicts more attacks, but smaller parties do not attack more than larger ones. These results demonstrate that multi-party systems create distinctive incentive structures that discourage negative advertising on expensive, visible poster platforms, suggesting that attack politics may have disappeared or migrated to cheaper, more targeted digital channels rather than simply intensifying across all media.

## 2. Negative Advertising on Election Posters

### 2.1. Defining Negative Advertising

Negative advertising encompasses any form of political communication that attacks, criticizes, or otherwise disparages political opponents during electoral competition (Lau & Rovner, 2009). While some scholars distinguish between "negative" campaigning (legitimate criticism of policy positions) and "dirty" campaigning (personal attacks and misinformation; Reiter & Matthes, 2022), this study adopts a broader definition that includes any attack on political opponents, whether focused on policy positions, political strategy, personal characteristics, or party performance (Haselmayer, 2019). This study focuses specifically on negative

advertising—strategic messages disseminated through paid media that attack political opponents. While negative campaigning encompasses the full range of attack strategies, including debates, speeches, and press releases, negative advertising represents the subset of attacks that parties choose to amplify through purchased communication channels.

First, distinguishing between direct attacks and indirect attacks is often difficult in visual media where targets may be implied rather than named (Geise & Brettschneider, 2010). Second, strategic ambiguity about the target is itself a meaningful communication choice: Parties may deliberately avoid naming opponents to reduce backlash risk while still conveying criticism. Third, even system-level criticism (“politics is broken”) serves attack functions when deployed by outsider parties positioning themselves against established competitors.

The prevalence and effects of negative messages have generated extensive scholarly debate. Experimental and survey research demonstrates that negative messages can depress voter turnout, increase political cynicism, and contribute to partisan polarization (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1997). Yet negative appeals also convey substantive information, help voters distinguish between candidates, and may increase knowledge about candidate positions (Maier & Nai, 2023). From a strategic perspective, parties face complex calculations: Negative campaigning can damage opponents and energize core supporters, but risks backlash effects that harm the attacker’s reputation, particularly when attacks are perceived as unfair or excessively personal (Walter et al., 2014). These competing considerations shape when and how parties choose to go negative.

## **2.2. Strategic Logic in Multi-Party Systems**

Multi-party systems introduce distinctive dynamics that complicate negative campaigning strategies in at least three ways. First, party-system fragmentation creates uncertainty about attack effects. When Party A attacks Party B in a two-party system, weakening B directly benefits A. But in systems with five or six parties, voters defecting from Party B may support Party C, D, or E rather than Party A (Ridout & Walter, 2015). This diffusion of potential gains increases the risk that attacks will prove costly for the attacker while benefiting third parties. Rational parties should therefore exercise greater restraint in multi-party contexts, attacking only when they can reasonably expect to capture defecting voters.

Second, coalition formation necessities shape attack incentives. In fragmented party systems, most governments require multi-party coalitions. Parties that attack each other aggressively during campaigns may find themselves negotiating coalition agreements weeks later. Anticipating this possibility, potential coalition partners moderate their attacks to avoid creating obstacles to post-election cooperation (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2008). Governing coalitions typically exhibit this restraint during campaigns, while opposition parties face fewer coalition constraints and can afford more aggressive tactics. However, even opposition parties must consider that future coalition possibilities may include current governing parties, creating complex strategic calculations that extend beyond single election cycles.

Third, multi-party systems feature patterns of retaliation and alliance signaling. Dolezal et al. (2016) demonstrate that attacks in Austrian campaigns often represent retaliation for previous attacks rather than autonomous strategic choices. Party A’s attack on Party B may be responding to B’s earlier attack, or even to attacks by Party C on shared policy positions. This creates complex webs of interdependence in which

individual attack decisions cannot be understood in isolation (Song et al., 2019). Moreover, parties use attacks not only to damage specific opponents but also to signal ideological distance or proximity. Attacking the far-right may signal moderation, while attacking centrist parties may signal ideological purity (de Nooy & Kleinnijenhuis, 2013). These signaling functions add layers of strategic complexity absent from simple two-party competition.

### **2.3. The Case of Election Posters**

The medium through which campaigns are conducted shapes the strategic deployment of negative messages. While television advertising allows targeting specific demographic groups through program selection and social media postings additionally permit rapid response to opponents' messages, election posters occupy public space, reach broad audiences indiscriminately, remain visible for weeks, and rely primarily on visual imagery and brief text.

Recent comparative research suggests that negative appeals are less common on election posters than in other campaign media. Steffan and Venema (2019, 2020) find that German election posters contain relatively few negative messages, and that parties increasingly reserve attacks for online platforms where they can target specific audiences and respond rapidly to political developments. Similarly, Holtz-Bacha and Johansson (2017) document that while negative appeals persist on German and Swedish election posters, they remain at modest levels.

Several factors may explain posters' limited negativity. First, posters require substantial financial investment. The findings above indicate that parties may prefer to use this expensive public space to promote their own strengths rather than highlight opponents' weaknesses. Second, posters' public visibility creates reputational risks. While negative messages on social media or in television ads can be targeted and fleeting, poster attacks are witnessed by the entire community, including those who might find them distasteful or excessive. Third, posters' simplicity limits the sophistication of attacks. Without the time for detailed arguments, poster attacks risk appearing shallow or mean-spirited. Finally, the permanence of posters prevents rapid adjustment, as a poster displayed for three weeks cannot respond to changing campaign dynamics as quickly as social media posts or television spots.

### **2.4. The Austrian Context**

Austria exemplifies these multi-party dynamics while offering unique advantages for studying long-term trends in negative advertising. The Austrian party system has evolved substantially since 1945, beginning with social democratic (SPÖ) and conservative (ÖVP) dominance, incorporating the right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ) as a significant force from the 1980s onward, and subsequently fragmenting to include the Greens (from 1986), the liberal NEOS (from 2013), and various smaller parties. This evolution from effective two-party competition to multi-party fragmentation provides natural variation in party system structure across time.

Austrian campaigns also feature distinctive institutional characteristics that enhance the importance of poster campaigning. Political advertising is prohibited on public television, Austria's dominant broadcast medium (Holtz-Bacha, 2017). This restriction forces parties to rely heavily on alternative communication

channels, particularly election posters. Austria maintains exceptionally high billboard density with up to nine billboards per thousand inhabitants, the highest in Europe (Jobst-Rieder, ca. 2004). Poster advertising accounts for 6.6 percent of Austria's total advertising market, compared to 2.8 percent in neighboring Germany (Schierl, 2017). Since 2013, political parties have to submit their campaign budgets to the *Rechnungshof* (Court of Audit) and have them published, broken down to different sorts of expenses. We therefore know, at least for the last 10 years, that posters consume up to 50 percent of campaign budgets (Hayek, 2016, p. 6; Rechnungshof, 2024), far exceeding expenditure on any other communication channel. In the most recent 2024 elections, for example, party spending for out-of-home media was as follows: FPÖ 30.1 percent, ÖVP 25.4 percent, SPÖ 21.4 percent, Green party 50.4 percent, NEOS 30.3 percent (Rechnungshof, 2024). This sustained centrality of poster campaigning creates unusual consistency across time, enabling reliable longitudinal comparison.

Finally, Austria's democratic-corporatist media system and consensual political culture (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) may discourage aggressive campaign tactics. The dominance of coalition governments, the tradition of social partnership between major interest groups, and relatively restrained media coverage of political conflict all suggest that Austrian campaigns might exhibit less negativity than those in more adversarial political systems. Whether these cultural and institutional factors have prevented Americanization-style increases in negativity, or whether they have merely shifted attacks from posters to less visible media, remains an open empirical question.

### 3. Determinants of Negative Advertising in Multi-Party Systems

Drawing on the theoretical framework developed above, this section formulates testable hypotheses about the determinants of negative advertising on Austrian election posters.

#### 3.1. Temporal Trends

A dominant expectation in political communication research holds that negative advertising increases over time as campaigns modernize and professionalize (Plasser, 2012). According to this "modernization" perspective, the adoption of professional consultants, sophisticated polling, and media-centric strategies should drive rising negativity. Professional campaign management allegedly recognizes that negative messages attract attention, generate emotional responses, and create memorable contrasts, making attack advertising increasingly prevalent in modern campaigns.

However, multi-party systems may follow different trajectories than the American two-party context from which modernization theories derive. As Austria's party system fragmented from effective two-party competition to multi-party governance with routine coalitions, the strategic incentives for negative campaigning fundamentally changed. Attacking specific opponents became less efficient when voters could defect to multiple alternatives rather than benefiting the attacker. Coalition governance necessities created additional disincentives for aggression between potential partners who might need to cooperate in forming governments (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2008; Schmücking, 2015). These structural dynamics suggest that negative campaigning should decline rather than increase as multi-party fragmentation intensifies.

Empirical research on election posters supports this expectation of declining or stable negativity rather than increases. Schmücking (2015) demonstrates in his longitudinal study of German campaigns that negativity does not represent the adoption of an external trend, but has existed since the beginning of political competition without showing consistent increases. Similarly, Vliegthart (2012) finds no evidence of increasing negativity on Dutch election posters between 1946 and 2006. These studies suggest that expensive, highly visible poster campaigns may not follow the same professionalization-driven trajectory toward greater negativity documented in other media channels.

Moreover, Austria's early postwar period featured unique conditions, like intense ideological conflict, the presence of the Communist Party (1945–1959), and existential uncertainty about democratic consolidation, that may have generated particularly aggressive campaigns. As consensual political culture and coalition norms developed, these confrontational dynamics should have moderated. The combination of increasing party system fragmentation and the institutionalization of coalition governance created an environment inhospitable to aggressive poster campaigns.

Based on preliminary evidence from Austrian campaigns (Rußmann, 2015) and the distinctive logic of multi-party systems, this study expects:

H1: Negative advertising on election posters has decreased over time.

### **3.2. Message Content: Policy vs. Campaign Issues**

Negative advertising can target either substantive policy positions or campaign-related matters such as candidate characteristics, strategic behavior, coalition possibilities, or electoral prospects. The choice between policy-focused and campaign-focused negativity reflects different strategic objectives and risk calculations.

Policy-based attacks criticize opponents' ideological positions, programmatic proposals, or governing records. These attacks convey substantive information, help voters distinguish between alternatives, and can be framed as legitimate democratic debate (Maier & Nai, 2022). However, policy attacks require voters to process complex information and may not generate the emotional responses that drive media coverage and voter engagement. Campaign-based attacks, by contrast, focus on personalities, strategic failures, coalition maneuvering, or electoral viability (Pinkleton, 2008). These attacks are simpler to communicate visually, potentially more memorable, and may generate greater media attention.

From the attacker's perspective, campaign-focused negativity also carries lower reputational risks. Criticizing an opponent's coalition strategy or campaign style avoids the perception of undermining democratic discourse about substantive issues. Particularly in Austria's consensual political culture, personal and strategic attacks may be more acceptable than aggressive policy confrontation. This suggests:

H2: Posters addressing campaign issues are more likely to contain negative messages than posters addressing policy issues.

### 3.3. Candidate Gender

Gender shapes both the deployment and reception of negative advertising in complex ways. Research on gender stereotypes in politics consistently shows that female politicians face different expectations than male politicians. Women candidates are stereotypically associated with social policy domains such as healthcare, education, and social welfare, while men are linked to security and economic domains such as national security, defense, and economic management (Fox & Oxley, 2003; Hayek & Russmann, 2020). These stereotypes extend to campaign behavior: Female politicians who engage in aggressive attacks risk being perceived as violating gender norms, potentially triggering backlash from voters who expect women to be collaborative rather than confrontational (Gordon et al., 2003).

Empirical evidence generally supports the expectation that women campaign less negatively than men. Herrnson and Lucas (2006) find that female candidates in US elections employ fewer negative tactics than male candidates. Voters appear to reward this restraint—women who campaign positively are evaluated more favorably than women who attack aggressively, while men face weaker penalties for negativity (e.g., Tschla et al., 2023).

For Austria specifically, Ennser-Jedenastik et al. (2016) analyze press releases from four national campaigns and find that female top candidates employ negative messages significantly less often than male candidates. Female politicians appear to recognize that aggressive attacks could undermine their electoral appeal, leading them to emphasize positive messages even when serving in opposition roles that might otherwise encourage negativity.

However, this hypothesis faces an important empirical challenge in the Austrian context: Female top candidates have been rare. Across 24 elections from 1945 to 2024, only seven campaigns featured women as party leaders. Despite these limitations, testing gender effects remains theoretically important:

H3: Campaigns with female top candidates employ less negative advertising than campaigns with male top candidates.

### 3.4. Opposition Status

In parliamentary democracies, opposition parties play a constitutionally defined role in scrutinizing and criticizing government performance. This institutional position shapes campaign incentives in ways that should promote negative messaging by opposition parties relative to governing parties.

Opposition parties benefit from attacking the government for several reasons. First, criticizing government failures is their formal democratic function—voters expect opposition parties to identify problems and propose alternatives. Negative campaigning by opposition parties, therefore, appears legitimate rather than gratuitously aggressive. Second, governing parties must defend their records, leaving them less freedom to attack opponents without appearing to dodge accountability questions. Opposition parties face no such constraint and can focus entirely on government shortcomings. Third, opposition parties typically receive less media coverage than governing parties (Haselmayer et al., 2017).

Empirical research consistently supports these expectations. Hansen and Pedersen (2008) find that Danish opposition parties campaign more negatively than government parties. Walter et al. (2014) demonstrate that opposition status significantly predicts negative campaigning across multiple European democracies. For Austria specifically, Dolezal et al. (2016) show that opposition parties issue more attack-focused press releases than governing parties, particularly targeting the government's policy record and competence.

Therefore, I hypothesize:

H4: Opposition parties employ more negative advertising than governing parties.

### **3.5. Party Size**

Party size may influence negative campaigning strategies through multiple mechanisms (Hansen & Pedersen, 2008). Smaller parties face distinctive challenges in gaining media attention, establishing credibility, and differentiating themselves from larger competitors. Negative advertising offers one potential solution to these challenges.

An alternative expectation holds that small parties should focus on name recognition and positive messaging rather than attacks. However, the attention-seeking logic suggests that smaller parties use attacks to generate media coverage and public awareness. In crowded media environments, small parties struggle to break through with policy proposals or positive messaging. Attacking major parties, however, creates newsworthy conflict that media outlets are likely to cover, giving smaller parties visibility they could not otherwise achieve (Walter & van der Brug, 2013).

The differentiation logic emphasizes that smaller parties must distinguish themselves from larger competitors to justify their existence. One strategy is to position themselves as principled critics of mainstream parties, attacking established players as corrupt, complacent, or ideologically compromised. This oppositional identity can attract voters who are dissatisfied with major parties while establishing the small party's distinctive voice. Negative campaigning serves this positioning function more efficiently than detailed policy proposals that might overlap with larger parties' platforms. Therefore, I hypothesize:

H5: Smaller parties employ more negative advertising than larger parties.

### **3.6. Party System Polarization**

The ideological distance between parties should fundamentally shape the prevalence of negative campaigning. When parties occupy similar ideological positions, they compete primarily on competence, leadership qualities, and minor policy distinctions. Negative campaigning in such contexts risks appearing petty or fabricated, as parties struggle to identify genuine points of conflict. By contrast, when substantial ideological distance separates parties, attacks can target fundamental value differences and major policy disagreements, making negativity appear more legitimate and substantive.

The polarization–negativity relationship operates through multiple channels. First, ideologically distant parties have more to disagree about. Their policy positions genuinely conflict across multiple domains,

providing ample material for attacks. Second, polarization signals to voters that the stakes of electoral competition are high, justifying aggressive campaign tactics. Third, polarized parties typically have distinct electoral coalitions with different values and priorities, reducing the risk that attacks will alienate potential supporters. Fourth, polarization may reflect broader social divisions that parties both exploit and reinforce through negative messaging.

While parties might alternatively attack ideologically proximate rivals competing for the same voters, substantial empirical evidence suggests that ideological distance between parties is the primary driver of negativity. Dowling and Krupnikov (2016) show that negative campaigning increases when parties are more polarized. Walter et al. (2014) demonstrate that ideological distance between competitors predicts attack behavior across European democracies. Maier and Nai (2022) find that party system polarization correlates with campaign negativity globally. For Austria, the early postwar period featured sharp left–right divisions between social democrats and conservatives, while later decades saw ideological convergence toward the center, a pattern that should produce declining negativity over time if polarization drives attacks.

However, the causal relationship between polarization and negativity remains contested. Does ideological distance cause parties to attack each other, or does sustained negative campaigning create the perception of greater polarization? Longitudinal data cannot definitively resolve this question, but the weight of theory suggests that polarization primarily drives negativity rather than vice versa. Parties' ideological positions reflect long-term programmatic commitments shaped by core constituencies and historical traditions, making them relatively stable inputs to campaign strategy rather than outputs of campaign tactics.

This study operationalizes polarization using the party system polarization index from the Comparative Manifesto Project (Dalton, 2008; Lehmann et al., 2025). The hypothesis is:

H6: Elections with a higher party system polarization feature more negative advertising.

## 4. Data and Methods

This study includes all posters displayed nationwide by parties that successfully entered parliament in the respective election periods between 1945 and 2024. The dataset includes all posters produced by the national parties; however, we do not know anything about their actual placement patterns or geographical distribution. The nine parties included in the analysis are the Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs (Social Democratic Party of Austria [formerly Sozialistische Partei Österreichs], SPÖ—successfully competed in every election since 1945); the Österreichische Volkspartei (Austrian People's Party, ÖVP—successfully competed in every election since 1945); the Kommunistische Partei Österreichs (Communist party of Austria, KPÖ—successfully competed in the elections of 1945–1953); the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Freedom Party of Austria [formerly Verband der Unabhängigen/VdU], FPÖ—successfully competed in every election since 1949); Die Grünen (Austrian Green Party—successfully competed in the elections of 1986–2013 and 2019–2024); Liberales Forum (Liberal Forum, LIF—successfully competed in the elections of 1994–1995); the Bündnis Zukunft Österreichs (Alliance for the Future of Austria, BZÖ—successfully competed in the elections of 2006–2008); Team Stronach (successfully competed in the election of 2013); and NEOS – Das Neue Österreich, (NEOS – The New Austria—successfully competed in the elections of 2013–2024).

For the 24 national legislative elections between 1945 and 2024, 1,082 different posters were recorded (Table 1 provides their distribution across parties and elections). The highest number of different posters was employed by the SPÖ in 1949 (39) and NEOS in 2017 (42). Those years were also the election years with the highest number of posters overall. According to the media law (Bundeskanzleramt der Republik Österreich, 2023, §43), everything printed in Austria needs to be submitted to the Austrian National Library's poster archive (Austrian National Library, 2026), which is where most of the posters were retrieved from, especially up until the 2013 election (Hayek, 2016). In recent years, parties have not been as committed to this archive, which is why the collection was completed through enquiries to party headquarters and online archives. However, the collection only includes those posters that were physically printed and published (this was confirmed, for example, through media reports of physical poster presentations). It cannot be determined with certainty that all posters in the period were lawfully archived and therefore included in the sample, but the data constitute at least a near-exhaustive collection of post-war election posters. Local and regional regulations allow parties to put up posters and billboards six weeks prior to election day during the period of

**Table 1.** Number of posters per party and year.

Year	SPÖ	ÖVP	VdU/FPÖ	Grüne	BZÖ	LIF	KPÖ	Stronach	NEOS	Total
1945	16	24	-	-	-	-	8	-	-	48
1949	39	19	2	-	-	-	20	-	-	80
1953	14	10	5	-	-	-	14	-	-	43
1956	15	23	2	-	-	-	14	-	-	54
1959	19	26	7	-	-	-	-	-	-	52
1962	8	15	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	27
1966	19	14	11	-	-	-	-	-	-	44
1970	8	12	27	-	-	-	-	-	-	47
1971	7	14	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	25
1975	18	18	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	42
1979	12	27	7	-	-	-	-	-	-	46
1983	13	18	12	-	-	-	-	-	-	43
1986	10	13	7	3	-	-	-	-	-	33
1990	4	13	3	9	-	-	-	-	-	29
1994	10	5	4	12	-	3	-	-	-	34
1995	11	13	5	15	-	2	-	-	-	46
1999	9	7	12	6	-	-	-	-	-	34
2002	8	9	8	27	-	-	-	-	-	52
2006	11	17	7	9	2	-	-	-	-	46
2008	9	19	9	11	6	-	-	-	-	54
2013	10	9	7	12	-	-	-	10	2	50
2017	19	13	15	-	-	-	-	-	42	89
2019	6	4	2	4	-	-	-	-	2	18
2024	9	8	9	8	-	-	-	-	12	46
<b>Total</b>	<b>305</b>	<b>349</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>1,082</b>
<b>% of total</b>	<b>28.9</b>	<b>33.1</b>	<b>16.1</b>	<b>10.2</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4.3</b>	<b>100</b>

“intensive campaigning” (Jakubowski, 1998). Only posters from this campaign period are considered in the study. Furthermore, I only included posters released by national parties and affixed throughout the country (no advertisements for regional candidates or events). Quantitative content analysis was applied, and coding was conducted in three waves between 2011 and 2024. Posters from 1945 to 2008 were coded as part of AUTNES – Austrian Election Study, by a group of four coders (including the author). Reliability tests were conducted on a randomly selected subsample of 92 posters (10 percent), and a re-test took place after half the posters had been coded. Posters from 2013 to 2019 were coded in a smaller project funded by the University of Innsbruck’s Early Stage Funding in 2020, with a coding team of three (including the author). Posters from the 2024 election were coded solely by the author, using the codebook and coding experience from the previous waves. Comparability across coding waves relies on the consistent application of the same codebook and the author’s participation in all three waves, rather than formal cross-wave reliability testing, which constitutes a limitation of the study. Intercoder reliability 2011 (Holsti coefficient): 0.96 (see also Hayek, 2016). Intercoder reliability 2020 (Krippendorff’s alpha): 0.7588. Different reliability measures reflect evolving methodological standards across the coding waves. The Holsti coefficient, used in 2011, calculates the ratio of agreements to total coding decisions. Krippendorff’s alpha, used in 2020, applies a chance-correction and is therefore the more rigorous estimate.

The operationalization employed here (see Druckman et al., 2017) captures any poster content that criticizes, attacks, or otherwise negatively portrays political opponents, whether through direct attacks on specific parties/candidates, implicit criticism of governing coalitions, or attacks on the broader political establishment. Negative advertising as the dependent variable is therefore measured as a dichotomous variable with 0 for no negativity and 1 for any type of negativity (Druckman et al., 2017; see Table 2 in the current article). To facilitate the coders’ identification of negativity, several categories of negative appeals were provided in the codebook (see Supplementary File). These were then collapsed into a dichotomous variable. This inclusive approach enables comprehensive tracking of attack patterns across eight decades.

The poster issues were coded within 13 policy issue categories and three issue categories that dealt with campaign issues (Melischek et al., 2010). At the party’s campaign level, the independent variables are female

**Table 2.** Specifications of the negative advertising multilevel model.

Variable	Description	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
<b>Dependent variable</b>				
neg	negative advertising measure	0	1	0.186
<b>Independent variables</b>				
<i>Level 1: Poster</i>				
issue	campaign issue	0	1	0.5
<i>Level 2: campaign</i>				
female	female top candidate	0	1	0.061
opposition	party is in opposition	0	1	0.496
vote share	vote share in previous elections	0	51	26.25
<i>Level 3: Year</i>				
rile-polarization	polarization of the party system	0.255	3	1.57

for campaigns with a woman as the top candidate, the party's vote share in the previous election, and a variable indicating whether the party acted from the opposition bench. The index of polarization was obtained from the Comparative Manifesto Project (Lehmann et al., 2025). It has a value of 0 if all parties occupy the same position on the left-right scale and 10 when the parties are split between the two extremes (Dalton, 2008). For 1945 and 2024, I extrapolated a value using Stata's *ipolate* function, to avoid losing data points in the model.

The data are structured hierarchically: Single posters (Level 1) constitute the individual units, which are clustered into campaigns (Level 2). Campaigns refer to groups of all posters produced by a party in an election. Campaigns again are nested within elections (Level 3). As units of analysis are structured within clusters, we assume that units from the same cluster are more similar to each other than randomly selected units from different clusters. Multilevel analysis, therefore, is an adequate method to analyze these data and identify the effects on different levels (Bartholomew et al., 2008; Gelman & Hill, 2007; Hox, 2010). The models were estimated in Stata using the *gllamm* routine (Rabe-Hesketh et al., 2004).

## 5. Results

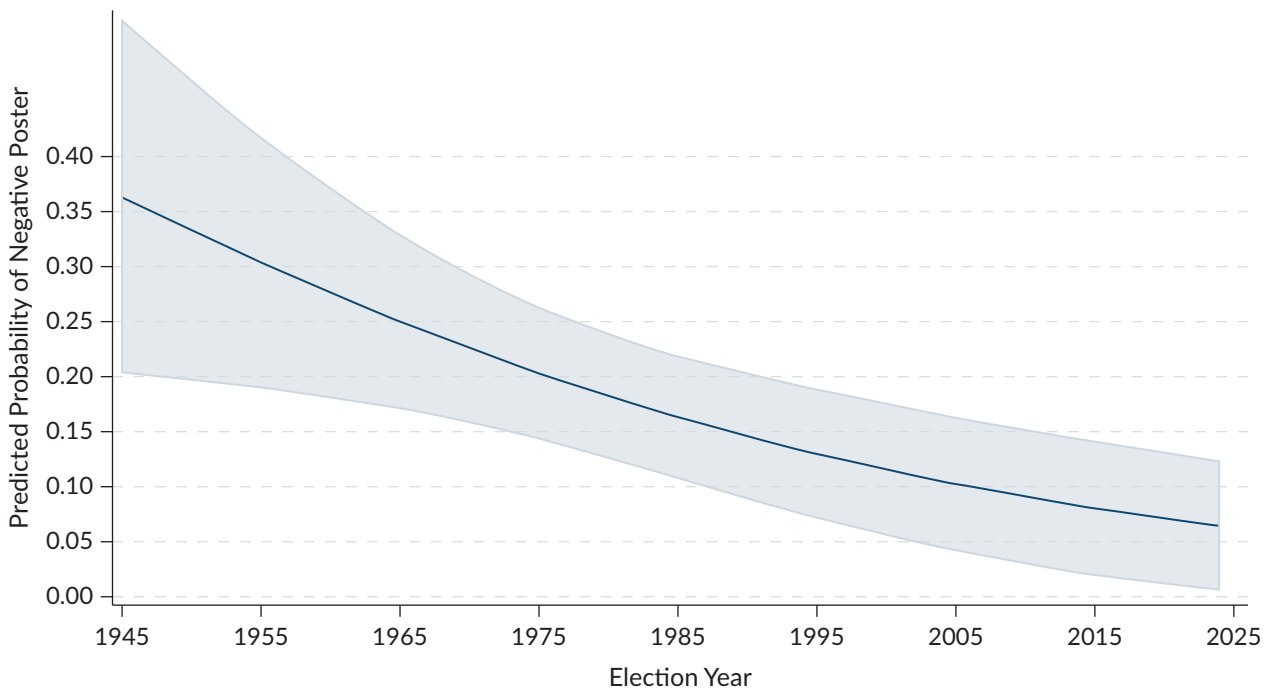
This section presents the empirical analysis in two parts. First, descriptive patterns reveal the evolution of negative advertising across time, parties, and content. Second, multilevel logistic regression models test the hypotheses formulated in Section 4.

### 5.1. Descriptive Patterns

Overall, 21.3 percent of the 1,082 posters contained negative messages, with substantial variation across parties and time. KPÖ (1945–1959) was most aggressive at 50 percent, while the FPÖ and ÖVP averaged 25 percent; the SPÖ, 15 percent. Parties entering parliament later used negativity sparingly.

To establish the temporal development of negative advertising, I ran a simple logistic regression predicting negativity from election year, with robust standard errors clustered by election. The model reveals a significant negative temporal trend ( $\beta = -0.026$ ,  $SE = 0.010$ ,  $z = -2.49$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ), indicating that each additional year decreases the log-odds of negative posters by 0.026. This 2.6 percent annual decline in the odds of negativity compounds to an 86 percent decline over the 79-year period. Figure 1 displays the predicted probabilities from this model, showing the decline from approximately 35 percent in the late 1940s to below 10 percent by 2024.

The immediate postwar period featured the most aggressive campaigns. During these elections, parties accused each other of failure, terror, establishing dictatorships, selling off state property, and lying. A 1956 ÖVP poster exemplifies this confrontational style: "This is how the SPÖ lied to you three years ago. Let them continue lying—vote ÖVP!" (Figure 2). From the mid-1960s onward, negativity declined markedly. The 1980s and 1990s featured largely positive campaigns, with the 2002 election producing not a single negative poster across all parties. This near-disappearance persisted through the 2000s before a modest resurgence in 2013, when parties employed humor and irony. The Green Party's 2013 poster "Less sheepish than the others" (Figure 3) illustrates this shift toward lighter, humorous attacks rather than existential accusations.



**Figure 1.** Decline in negative advertising, 1945–2024.

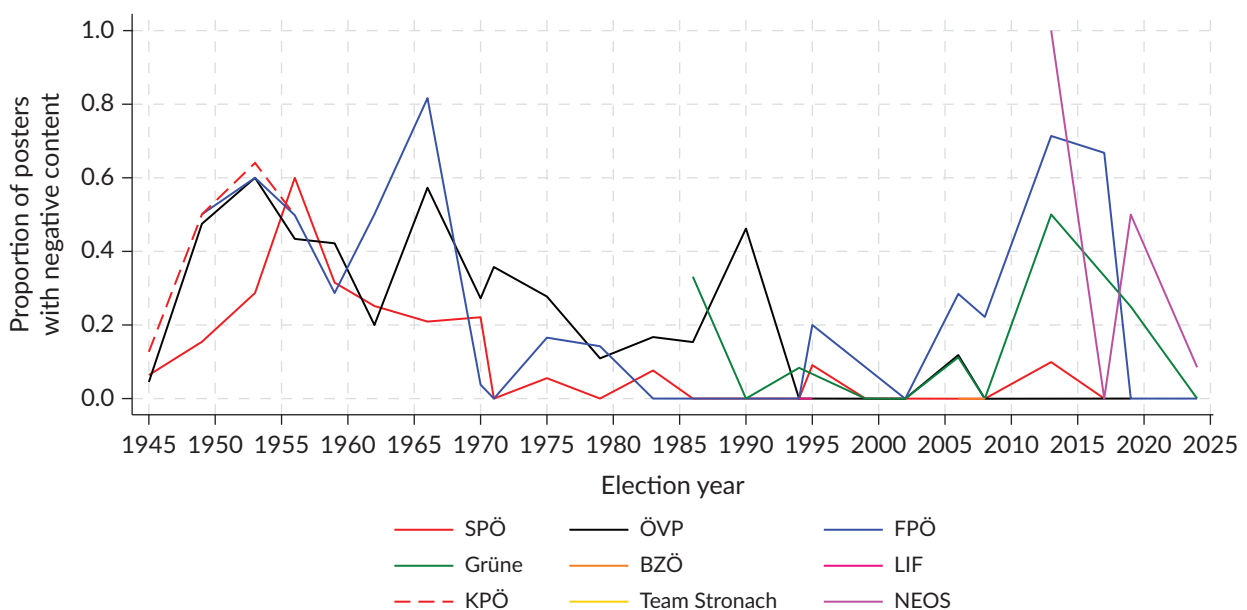


**Figure 2.** ÖVP election poster (1956). The poster shows a previous SPÖ poster (from 1953) that had criticized ÖVP governance, with a large red X crossed over it. The text reads: “This is how the SPÖ lied 3 years ago” (top), “let them continue lying” (bottom), and “VOTE ÖVP” (bottom).



**Figure 3.** Green Party election poster (2013) featuring a lamb. The text reads: “Less sheepish than the others” (playing on the German word “belämmert” which relates to lambs but colloquially means “stupid” or “daft”), with the tagline “Clean environment. Clean politics.”

Figure 4 shows that this decline occurred across all parties. Even the FPÖ, which produced the most negative single campaign in 1966, positioning itself as the alternative against both major parties, substantially reduced poster negativity in subsequent decades. The SPÖ almost entirely avoided negative messages from 1971 onward, even during opposition periods. Both major parties have largely refrained from employing negative messages since the late 1990s. The ÖVP’s transformation under Sebastian Kurz brought highly professionalized visual campaigns focusing solely on the candidate, leaving negative messages out altogether. In their first successful election in 2013, NEOS displayed only two posters, both of which bore negative messages. This small-n outlier causes the spike in Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** Negative advertising on election posters by party, 1945–2024.

## 5.2. Multilevel Analysis

I tested H1 separately using logistic regression predicting negative content from year, with robust standard errors clustered by year. Each additional year significantly decreases negativity odds (OR = 0.974,  $p = 0.006$ )—a 2.6 percent annual decline compounding to 86 percent over 79 years. This contradicts Americanization expectations and supports the hypothesis that multi-party fragmentation and consensual governance discourage attacks.

Table 3 presents three-level mixed-effects logistic regression results. The model significantly outperforms simple logistic regression (LR  $\chi^2 = 118.43$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Variance decomposition reveals substantial clustering: 29.1 percent of variance occurs between elections, 11.2 percent between campaigns, totaling 40.3 percent.

**Table 3.** Three-level mixed-effects logistic regression: Negative advertising.

Variable	OR	SE	95% CI	$p$
<i>Poster level (L1)</i>				
Campaign issue (vs. policy)	1.391	0.138	[1.146, 1.690]	0.001***
<i>Campaign level (L2)</i>				
Female top candidate	1.189	0.757	[0.341, 4.135]	0.786
Opposition party	7.013	3.332	[2.764, 17.797]	< 0.001***
Previous vote share (%)	1.037	0.013	[1.011, 1.063]	0.005**
<i>Election level (L3)</i>				
Party system polarization	2.458	1.155	[0.979, 6.176]	0.056 <sup>†</sup>
<i>Random effects</i>				
Election variance ( $\sigma^2$ )	1.605	0.698		
Campaign variance ( $\sigma^2$ )	0.618	0.283		
<i>Model fit</i>				
$N$ (posters/campaigns/elections)	1,082/96/24			
Log likelihood	-427.09			
ICC (total)	40.3%			

Notes: Odds ratios from three-level mixed-effects logistic regression; <sup>†</sup>  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

H2 predicted that campaign-issue posters would be more negative than policy-issue posters. Results confirm this expectation (OR = 1.39,  $p = 0.001$ ): Campaign-focused posters are 39 percent more likely to contain negative messages, supporting the depoliticization thesis that parties frame attacks around personality and strategy rather than policy.

H3 predicted that female-led campaigns would be less negative. The coefficient shows no significant effect (OR = 1.19,  $p = 0.786$ ), though with only seven female-led campaigns, statistical power is severely limited. H4 predicted that opposition parties would campaign more negatively. This receives exceptionally strong support: Opposition parties are seven times more likely to deploy negative posters than governing parties (OR = 7.01,  $p < 0.001$ ). This effect is substantially larger than reported in previous European studies (e.g., Hansen & Pedersen, 2008), suggesting that opposition parties' institutional role as critics fundamentally shapes communication strategies.

H5 predicted that smaller parties would attack more frequently. Results contradict this: Larger parties are slightly more likely to be negative (OR = 1.04,  $p = 0.005$ ), though the effect is substantively small. This likely reflects historical confounding—early elections featured both high negativity and two-party dominance. H6 predicted that greater party system polarization would increase negativity. The effect is substantial and approaches conventional significance (OR = 2.46,  $p = 0.056$ ). Each one-unit increase in polarization more than doubles the odds of negativity.

Figure 5 displays election-level random effects with 95 percent confidence intervals, showing which elections deviated from the model's predictions. Random effects capture election-specific variation not explained by the fixed predictors (opposition status, party size, polarization, campaign issues, and candidate gender). Positive residuals indicate more negative advertising than predicted; negative residuals indicate less. The 1966 election shows the largest positive residual, reflecting the FPÖ's increasingly antagonistic positioning and heightened ideological tensions. The 1953 election (with KPÖ still competing) and the 2013 one (with the modest resurgence of humorous attacks) also exceeded predicted negativity levels. Conversely, the 2024 election shows the strongest negative residual, with exceptionally positive messaging, even accounting for the overall declining trend. The 2002 and 2008 elections similarly featured less negativity than expected, consistent with the near-complete absence of negative posters during the 2000s. These patterns reveal that while our predictors explain substantial variation, election-specific dynamics matter. Particular campaigns featured unique circumstances that either encouraged or discouraged attacks beyond what systemic factors alone would predict.

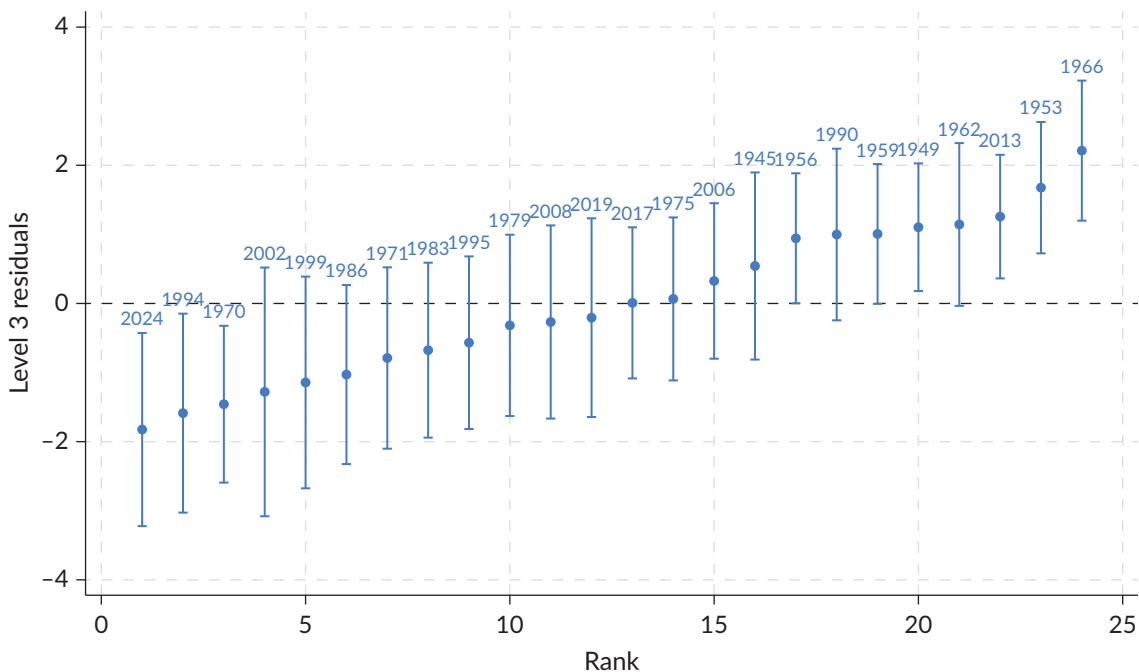


Figure 5. Caterpillar plot: Level 3 residuals.

### 5.3. Summary

The analysis tested six hypotheses. H1 received strong support: Negativity declined 86 percent over 79 years (OR = 0.974,  $p = 0.006$ ), contradicting Americanization expectations. Campaign-issue posters are

significantly more negative than policy-focused posters (H2 supported; OR = 1.39). Opposition parties are seven times more likely to attack than governing parties (H4 strongly supported; OR = 7.01)—the study's most striking finding. Party system polarization substantially increases negativity (H6 marginally supported; OR = 2.46), explaining why early high-polarization elections were more aggressive. Female candidate effects could not be reliably estimated (H3, limited cases), and party size showed unexpected positive effects (H5 contradicted), likely due to historical confounding. Results emphasize that negative advertising patterns reflect context-specific interactions between party system structure and competitive dynamics rather than universal modernization trends.

## 6. Conclusion

Negative advertisements do not promote a party or candidate's own views, but attack and criticize political opponents. This study analyzed negative advertising on Austrian election posters from 1945 to 2024, examining 1,082 posters from 24 national legislative elections. Election posters provide an excellent basis for longitudinal analysis, as they remain a long-lasting and important campaign tool in Austria, where parties continue to invest up to 50 percent of campaign budgets in this medium.

This study makes three key contributions to political communication research. First, it examines long-term trends in Austrian campaign negativity beyond simplistic modernization narratives, demonstrating an 86 percent decline in negativity over 79 years. Second, it identifies structural and strategic determinants of negative messaging in poster campaigns using multilevel modeling. Third, it analyzes these patterns using a comprehensive dataset spanning eight decades, providing one of the longest longitudinal studies of negative advertising in any democracy.

The findings directly contradict Americanization/modernization expectations that professionalization drives increasing negativity. Each additional year significantly decreased the odds of negativity, compounding to an 86 percent decline over the observation period. The immediate post-World War II period (1945–1960s) featured highly confrontational campaigns reflecting genuine ideological conflict amid uncertainty about Austria's political future. A 1956 ÖVP poster exemplified this: "This is how the SPÖ lied to you three years ago. Let them continue lying—vote ÖVP!" As consensual political culture developed and coalition governance became routine, negative messaging on posters became increasingly rare, nearly disappearing in the 2000s before a modest resurgence in 2013 with humorous attacks such as the Green Party's poster (Figure 3).

The multilevel analysis revealed four significant determinants of negative advertising. First, campaign-focused posters are 39 percent more likely to be negative than policy-focused posters, supporting the depoliticization thesis that attacks increasingly target personality and strategy rather than substantive policy. Second, opposition parties are seven times more likely to deploy negative posters than governing parties, confirming that institutional roles fundamentally shape communication strategies. Third, party system polarization substantially increases negativity, explaining why early high-polarization elections were more aggressive. Fourth, contrary to expectations, larger parties proved slightly more likely to be negative, likely reflecting historical confounding when early two-party dominance coincided with peak negativity.

These results demonstrate clearly that in multi-party systems, negative advertising is not a preferred campaign technique on expensive, highly visible platforms such as posters. As Austria's party system evolved from effective two-party competition to fragmented multi-party governance, attacking specific opponents became strategically inefficient: Voters turning away from one party could defect to multiple alternatives rather than benefiting the attacker. Coalition governance necessities created additional disincentives for aggression between potential partners. The combination of declining polarization, increasing fragmentation, and coalition norms explains the temporal decline independent of campaign professionalization.

The study has limitations. The variables tested do not constitute an exhaustive list of negative advertising determinants. Campaign context, candidate personalities, and financial constraints surely influence strategic decisions but prove difficult to measure systematically across historic campaigns. Moreover, the dichotomous dependent variable only captures whether the poster contains negative messages or not, and not the diversity of these negative messages, from harsh accusations to humorous jabs. Future research could delve deeper into variations in tone and target of negative advertising (across media channels).

Notably, the analysis only deals with election posters. Remembering the elections of the 1980s and 1990s, one thinks of controversial campaigns, with two new parties emerging and the FPÖ becoming a third strong player in the political system. Now, five to six parties regularly make it into parliament. This growth of the party system seemed to also have an effect on the level of negative advertising in poster campaigns: The new controversies were not played out on billboards in the public space, as they had been 30 years before. Over time, parties ceased using election posters for negative messages.

While the election poster is still an important means of campaign communication, negative messages have moved from posters to other communication channels. These findings from Austria can also hold true for countries with a similar system of political campaigning, such as Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, or Scandinavian countries (see e.g., Johansson, 2014; Johansson & Holtz-Bacha, 2019; Steffan & Venema, 2019).

Therefore, further research across European countries should consider the media mix employed during an election campaign. Although negative messages are nowadays less present on election posters, this does not mean the overall degree of negativity has decreased. Parties choose other media channels to attack their opponents; particularly, social media channels are being used with similar visual displays as posters. Using these channels is much less expensive—and more flexible. For example, even today, one wave of election posters stays up for at least two weeks, whereas the origin of negative or even dirty campaigning on the internet cannot be easily traced. However, while there would be incentives for political actors to act aggressively in the digital sphere, evidence shows that some communicate even more positively during election periods (Cowburn et al., 2025). Alternatively, other actors within the party universe (e.g., youth groups, unionists, local organizations) could be the bearers of negative attacks rather than the core national party. Future research on negative advertising should consider the full media mix and evaluate the links between the different communication channels.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

## Data Availability

The data can be requested from the author.

## LLMs Disclosure

Claude.ai was used to assist with statistical analyses.

## Supplementary Material

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

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## “Vote for Me, I Am Authentic”: Performed Political Authenticity on Social Media

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### Abstract

Authenticity has become a key concept in political communication, particularly during election campaigns, which offer opportunities for politicians to strategically convey an authentic image. Studies show that voters increasingly value politicians who appear authentic, a factor influencing their voting behavior. In particular, social media provides an ideal environment for politicians to perform authenticity during campaigns by allowing them to bypass traditional gatekeepers and present themselves in an unfiltered and intimate way. Previous studies have begun to analyze how politicians perform authenticity on social media. However, few have examined and compared how often and in what ways different politicians present themselves as authentic on social media during election campaigns. Drawing on scholarship on political authenticity and gendered self-presentation, this study examines how politicians construct authenticity through textual and visual elements across social media platforms. We conducted a manual quantitative content analysis of social media posts ( $N = 855$ ) on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter by the three German lead candidates running for chancellor during the 2021 federal election. Our findings show that authenticity and its facets were an integral part of all candidates' social media presence and their election campaign communication. Furthermore, we found differences in how the one female and the two male politicians in our sample perform authenticity.

### Keywords

authenticity; elections; gender; politicians; self-presentation; social media

## 1. Introduction

The authenticity of politicians is an important factor in their daily political communication, especially during election campaigns (Luebke, 2021; Sorensen & Krämer, 2024). Scholarly literature suggests that authenticity has become a more important political trait in the 21st century, possibly due to a greater focus on individual candidates in campaigns and news coverage (Balmas et al., 2014), as well as changing public expectations of what constitutes a “good politician” (Clarke et al., 2018). Accordingly, many citizens no longer seek only charismatic politicians with outstanding qualities but also want politicians who (also) appear approachable and ordinary (Valgarðsson et al., 2021, 2024). These latter qualities are often linked to political authenticity, which scholars have identified as a crucial factor in the public evaluation of political candidates and in voters’ decisions (Breitenstein et al., 2025; Luebke & Steffan, 2025b; Stiers et al., 2021).

Communication scholars describe social media platforms as an ideal environment for politicians to present themselves as authentic candidates (Kreiss et al., 2018; Luebke & Engemann, 2022; Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022). They offer politicians a new arena for impression management and provide an “expressive apparatus” (Shane, 2018, p. 3) to construct an authentic image. Yet they also function as digital environments where false and AI-generated content, including deepfakes, spreads widely. This feature heightens the relevance of questions of realness and authenticity in digital political discourse (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

Scholars have begun to analyze politicians’ strategic efforts to perform authenticity on social media. These pioneering studies explore how authenticity is conveyed through visual and textual communication (Enli, 2015; Holtz-Bacha, 2025), formal cues (Shane, 2018; Sonnevend & Steiert, 2022), or the performance of a populist outsider (Enli, 2025; Lacatus & Meibauer, 2022; Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022). However, these approaches offer limited insight into how prevalent such performances are on social media. The few studies that address the salience of performed authenticity in election campaigns have focused on political content outside of social media (Sposito, 2025).

Furthermore, empirical research into politicians’ performed authenticity rarely adopts comparative approaches, so little is known about how such performances differ. For example, politicians’ gender is a particularly relevant factor that deserves greater attention as audience research found that citizens often judge authenticity based on idealized notions of womanhood and manhood (Parry-Giles, 2014). It is therefore plausible that male and female politicians perform authenticity differently to meet these gendered expectations (Luebke & Steffan, 2025a).

The present study aims to address these research gaps by analyzing how frequently and in what ways German politicians perform authenticity on social media during an election campaign. Theoretically, we conceptualize political authenticity as a form of self-presentation through which politicians aim to create impressions that they are and will remain true to themselves (Luebke, 2021; Parry-Giles, 2014). Drawing on literature on political authenticity and gendered self-presentation in politics, we conducted a quantitative manual content analysis of 855 social media posts from Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter (now X) by the three candidates running for the office of chancellor in the 2021 German federal election: Annalena Baerbock, Armin Laschet, and Olaf Scholz. These candidates were selected because they were the only ones with realistic prospects of winning the election and becoming chancellor throughout the campaign.

## 2. Political Authenticity in Electoral Decisions and Election Campaigns

The popularity of authenticity in political communication has inspired diverse research perspectives on the concept. While researchers have applied various definitions, one strand of research in communication and political science clearly distinguishes authenticity from related concepts, such as honesty, and defines it as the degree to which politicians remain true to themselves (Enli, 2025; Jones, 2016; Luebke, 2021). Accordingly, politicians are considered authentic when they appear unaffected by outside influences, reveal their true selves to the public, and demonstrate consistency in their views, insights, and actions, which are grounded in their convictions rather than strategic considerations (Luebke, 2021). This conceptualization by Luebke (2021) has served as a framework for recent empirical studies analyzing authenticity in political communication and providing evidence of its role in election campaigns and its impact on electoral decisions.

### 2.1. Authenticity and Voting

Scholars describe authenticity as a highly “sought-after quality” (Breitenstein et al., 2025, p. 241) in politics and view it as a key factor in the electoral success of individual politicians. Evidence from survey and experimental studies supports this claim and shows that voters tend to vote for candidates they perceive as authentic (Breitenstein et al., 2025; Kenny et al., 2021; Luebke & Engelmann, 2023; Luebke & Steffan, 2025b; Stiers et al., 2021). The effect of authenticity on voting patterns is evident across political systems and even emerges when voters evaluate hypothetical or fictional politicians (Breitenstein et al., 2025; Luebke & Steffan, 2025a). Evidence on the electoral role of authenticity aligns with political science research showing that candidate evaluations can exert short-term influences on electoral decisions (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008). As a component of candidate orientation, authenticity can influence voting but also depends on long-term factors such as party attachment (Luebke & Steffan, 2025b). In less personalized voting systems, as in Germany, candidate effects tend to be weaker because citizens do not elect the chancellor directly.

Studies comparing the relative influence of different candidate traits have demonstrated that, even when controlling for other traits, authenticity ratings continue to significantly affect voting decisions and are more influential than ratings for attributes such as empathy or sincerity (Kenny et al., 2021; Luebke & Steffan, 2025a; Stiers et al., 2021). However, these studies also find that ratings for competence and leadership have a greater influence on voting than perceived authenticity.

Previous research has identified various factors that influence whether and why politicians are perceived as authentic. Studies on perceived political authenticity find that authenticity ratings largely depend on voters’ political preferences. For example, voters often consider politicians more authentic the more they identify with their party (Luebke & Engelmann, 2023). Consequently, conservative politicians are more likely to be rated as authentic by conservative voters (Brewer et al., 2014). However, research has also shown that authenticity ratings are not solely determined by voters’ political attitudes, but can also be influenced by politicians’ self-presentation (Luebke & Steffan, 2025a; Stein et al., 2025). This finding raises the question of how politicians perform authenticity, particularly during election campaigns, to appear authentic to the electorate.

## 2.2. Performed Political Authenticity in Election Campaigns

Since voters tend to support candidates they perceive as authentic, we assume that politicians seek to appear authentic to the electorate, especially during election campaigns. Research on performed political authenticity defines it as “a specific type or mode of performance that aims to construct an authentic image for the audience” (Luebke, 2021, p. 638). This communicator perspective suggests an understanding of authenticity as a performative act in which politicians (aim to) present themselves as being true to themselves (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018; Lacatus & Meibauer, 2022; Luebke, 2021). The performance of authenticity, however, is not necessarily a sincere presentation of politicians’ inner selves to the outside world (Luebke, 2021) but rather the product of self-presentation strategies applied by politicians to create the impression that they are acting according to their inner belief system (Alexander, 2010; Enli, 2015; Kreiss et al., 2018). This creates a paradox: Authenticity must be performed to be perceived by voters, yet voters often prefer a controlled, strategic presentation of authenticity to a genuine, uncontrolled one (Holtz-Bacha, 2025).

The constructivist understanding of authenticity as a performance has led to the formulation of four concept dimensions that are derived from a review of existing literature in the field and illustrate how politicians perform authenticity: consistency, ordinariness, intimacy, and immediacy (Luebke, 2021). Scholars have applied these four dimensions to describe how politicians present themselves, but they have rarely quantified the level of performed political authenticity. Accordingly, performed political authenticity manifests first in the consistency of politicians’ self-presentation across time and contexts, e.g., through presenting similar messages, actions, and stances. Enli (2015) illustrates the consistency dimension by examining Barack Obama’s use of autobiographical narratives in campaign speeches to create an image of a man who remained true to his values and convictions. Sonnevend and Steiert (2022) show how former German Chancellor Angela Merkel cultivated an authentic image on social media through visual consistency by wearing similar formal attire and posting images with recurring gestures.

A second way to perform authenticity is through ordinariness. For example, politicians construct authenticity by presenting themselves as down-to-earth and close to “ordinary people” (Lacatus & Meibauer, 2022). Szebeni and Salojärvi (2022) illustrate how populist politicians use small displays of everydayness to appear authentic. Populists like Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump cultivate an image of an ordinary person who is one of the people by eating simple food, wearing ordinary clothes, and interacting with average citizens (Enli, 2025; Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022).

Third, the political performance of authenticity can mean revealing personal or private details and exposing intimate moments from non-public contexts to the public (intimacy). Thus, politicians can present themselves as authentic by sharing information about leisure activities, their childhood, or their roles as spouses or parents (Enli, 2015; Manning et al., 2017; Stein et al., 2025). Sharing images from private and family settings, or presenting oneself as a caring mother or father, can also contribute to an aura of political authenticity (Enli, 2015; Holtz-Bacha, 2025). The same holds true for the communication of private political views, which appears more authentic when linked to personal, biographical experiences (Enli, 2015; Gaden & Dumitrica, 2015).

Finally, performed authenticity shines through spontaneous and immediate actions, directly translating politicians' selves to others (immediacy). In addition to being immediate in a temporal sense through real-time communication, the spontaneity of the performance is particularly evident in the expression of emotions (Luebke, 2021). Other indicators of immediacy include impoliteness and politically incorrect language, as these give the impression that politicians are revealing their true selves (Theye & Melling, 2018). A study by Lacatus and Meibauer (2022) on the authenticity of right-wing populist politicians finds that these politicians use emotional, spontaneous communication to create the impression of authenticity.

The research on performed political authenticity that we referenced above provides valuable insights into how politicians present themselves as authentic during election campaigns. To date, however, few studies have examined the prevalence of authenticity and its facets in election campaigns. One exception is a study by Sposito (2025), which examines the frequency of authenticity performances in political texts by Brazilian and US presidents and presidential candidates since 1988 using an automated dictionary approach. The results show that authenticity is expressed more frequently by Brazilian politicians than by their US counterparts. However, the study does not observe a systematic increase in authenticity performances across settings in either country over time (Sposito, 2025). Nevertheless, this analysis does not include social media data.

Thus, there is still a lack of evidence on (a) how often politicians perform authenticity on social media, (b) which dimensions they use (and how often) to create an authentic appearance, and (c) how different politicians differ in their authenticity performances. This issue is even more pressing today given that social media has become an important source for political information for citizens and provides politicians with new technologies to perform these different authenticity elements (Holtz-Bacha, 2025; Manning et al., 2017; Shane, 2018). Since social media platforms allow politicians to bypass traditional gatekeepers and “speak directly to followers in a more personalized way” (Weeks et al., 2019, p. 375), they help politicians control the impressions others form of them (Kreiss et al., 2018). Due to the more dialogic, direct, and personal interaction among its users, social media are considered “an ideal platform to show authenticity and realness” (Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022, p. 813). Thus, we pose the following research question:

RQ1: How and to what extent do politicians employ performed authenticity elements across social media?

### 3. Political Authenticity and Gender

Previous studies have shown that politicians' gender influences how they are perceived by the public and the strategies they employ to present themselves. Gender has also been discussed as a relevant factor for the perception and performance of authenticity (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018; Holtz-Bacha, 2025; Luebke & Steffan, 2025a). Audience research on political authenticity reveals that female politicians also experience a double bind when it comes to their perceived authenticity among voters (Holtz-Bacha, 2025). The double-bind problem refers to a dilemma faced by female politicians arising from stereotypical expectations of leaders (Jamieson, 1995). Since leadership qualities are typically associated with masculine traits, women must adopt behaviors traditionally considered masculine to be perceived as effective leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002). However, if they appear confident and strong, they may be judged as unfriendly or unsympathetic. Conversely, if they emphasize more traditionally feminine traits, they contradict common expectations of leadership qualities and may be perceived as less competent (Bast et al., 2022). As citizens

often base their authenticity ratings on idealized notions of authentic femininity and masculinity, it may be (more) difficult for female politicians to be perceived as authentic (Hahl et al., 2018; Parry-Giles, 2014).

Stereotypical beliefs about traits associated with men or women shape how citizens evaluate politicians. These beliefs are commonly summarized along two dimensions: agentic and communal (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Men are generally thought to be more assertive, competitive, and dominant (agentic), whereas women are expected to be more friendly, emotional, and unselfish (communal; see Eagly & Wood, 2012; Mattan & Small, 2021; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014). Politicians are assumed to be aware of these stereotypes and respond to them in different ways, which Schneider (2014) summarizes as four strategies: exploiting gender stereotypes, counteracting them, using a mixture of stereotypical elements, or avoiding them altogether. Research on gendered self-presentation has yielded mixed findings, with moderate differences in the self-presentation of male and female politicians on social media (for an overview, see Magin et al., 2024).

Despite the lack of comparative results on the performed authenticity of male and female politicians, several authors have argued that men and women may perform it differently. For example, Liu et al. (2015) argue that presenting oneself as authentic also means behaving in accordance with gender stereotypes. The authors define authenticity not as something people have or are, but rather as something they *do*. They observe that authenticity is more likely to be attributed to individuals when they behave in accordance with gender stereotypes associated with masculinity or femininity in a given (professional) context, such as political leadership (Liu et al., 2015). Therefore, how politicians perform authenticity on social media may reflect responses to gender-based stereotypes held by citizens and the media (Mattan & Small, 2021; McGregor et al., 2017). Notably, surveys show that male and female politicians are often rated differently in terms of authenticity (e.g., Enli & Rosenberg, 2018). However, these differences in ratings disappear in experiments when self-presentation styles are controlled for, suggesting that they may result from candidates' gender-specific self-representation (Luebke & Steffan, 2025a). This reasoning is in line with assumptions from the strategic stereotype theory by Fridkin and Kenney (2014), which argues that politicians capitalize on stereotypes when they serve their self-presentation goals "while simultaneously trying to revise potentially damaging stereotypes" (Fridkin & Kenney, 2014, p. 15).

Similarly, Holtz-Bacha (2025) argues that female politicians use different strategies to perform authenticity than their male counterparts, while their performances also differ from each other depending on their political ideology. To this end, she analyzes the performed authenticity of various female politicians from the recent past and demonstrates that some deliberately exploited female stereotypes to appear authentic, while others actively challenged or simply disregarded stereotypes in their performance (Holtz-Bacha, 2025).

In our view, findings from previous research suggest we should also examine whether and how male and female politicians differ in the specific authenticity elements (consistency, ordinariness, intimacy, immediacy) they use to present themselves as authentic. We ask:

RQ2: How and to what extent do the two male and the one female politician differ in the performed authenticity elements they use on social media?

RQ2 asks about general differences in the authenticity elements used by male and female politicians on social media. However, given the findings from previous research, we expect differences in performed

intimacy specifically. Previous studies in this area demonstrate that women with different ideologies frequently employ self-presentation strategies that involve disclosing personal information (Holtz-Bacha, 2025). This approach includes, above all, constructing authenticity through the role of motherhood, which Holtz-Bacha (2025) describes as a “quasi-universal role for women” (p. 419). We therefore assume that:

H1: The female politician Annalena Baerbock uses more intimacy elements than the two male politicians Olaf Scholz and Armin Laschet.

## 4. Method

To answer our RQs and test the hypothesis, we conducted a manual content analysis of social media posts published by the three candidates running for chancellor in the 2021 German federal election: the female candidate Annalena Baerbock (Greens) as well as the two male candidates, Olaf Scholz (the Social Democrats [SPD]) and Armin Laschet (the Christian Democrats [CDU]). Appendix 1 in the Supplementary File provides an overview of the candidates’ characteristics, their popularity and election results in 2021, and their portrayal in the news media during the campaign. The CDU is a center-right party in Germany, whereas the SPD is considered a center-left party and the Greens a left party. CDU and SPD formed the governing coalition in Germany when this study was conducted.

We selected the three politicians because they were the only candidates from the 2021 election campaign with a realistic chance of becoming chancellor, as indicated by opinion polls at the time (Scholz, 2021). This situation is also well illustrated by the fact that TV broadcasters selected these three candidates to compete in three televised debates (Oltermann, 2021). Scholz, Laschet, and Baerbock are thus ideal cases for a quantitative comparative analysis of the role of authenticity in the self-presentation of key politicians for the campaign and election period. However, the fact that the sample includes only one woman and two men is a significant limitation for interpreting gender differences. We will discuss the implications of this limitation in more detail below.

All three candidates used Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter to post content during their campaigns. We examined authenticity elements across all 855 social media posts that the three candidates published on their accounts from June 12, 2021 (the date when all three parties had nominated their candidates) to September 26, 2021 (election day). The posts were distributed equally across Facebook ( $n = 283$ ), Instagram ( $n = 284$ ), and Twitter ( $n = 288$ ). However, the three candidates differ in how often they posted on each social media platform (Baerbock:  $n = 215$ ; Scholz:  $n = 378$ ; Laschet:  $n = 262$ ). While Annalena Baerbock posted actively on all three social media platforms, Olaf Scholz relied more often on Twitter ( $n = 164$ , 43.4%), and Armin Laschet posted more often on Instagram ( $n = 110$ , 42%) and Facebook ( $n = 107$ , 41%) than on Twitter. Three out of four social media posts from our sample contained at least one image ( $n = 647$ , 75.7%), but the share of social media posts with images varies across the three candidates (Baerbock: 65%; Scholz: 72%; Laschet: 90%). Overall, the two male candidates posted more frequently on social media and shared more pictures than Baerbock (see Appendix 2 in the Supplementary File). However, all three candidates seem to have tailored their posts to the platforms. Although they used similar topics, texts, and images on Instagram and Facebook, their Twitter posts were often shortened and split into multiple tweets. The candidates also published fewer posts that included images on Twitter.

We developed a new codebook to analyze authenticity elements in the textual and visual materials in social media posts. The codebook, data, and analyses are publicly available at: <https://osf.io/se3bz>

Politicians' performed political authenticity was operationalized based on the four concept dimensions: intimacy, immediacy, ordinariness, and consistency. This conceptualization is based on a literature synthesis by Luebke (2021) which organizes research on political authenticity and presents preliminary indicators for each dimension. Based on this synthesis and the additional literature cited in Section 2, we developed a set of indicators that were further refined through a close, inductive analysis of the empirical material. We coded intimacy when politicians released personal details (statements or pictures from their childhood or youth, expressions of personal wishes and thoughts), appeared in a private context (statements or pictures about their families, hobbies, or friends), and used confessional rhetoric (revealing negative details from their past, such as poor grades in school) or released images with remorseful or apologetic facial expressions linked to life reflections.

Immediacy was coded when politicians published content that seemed spontaneous (e.g., a spontaneous selfie with citizens), contained strong emotions (e.g., descriptions of emotional outbursts and intense emotions; pictures with deep laughter, crying, or anger-distorted face of candidates, but not everyday emotions such as "I was happy"), or used political incorrectness (e.g., slang or words used by young people).

We used three indicators to code ordinariness. Performed ordinariness was selected when posts contained markers of imperfection (e.g., admission of mistakes such as lateness or the wrong choice of words, images with visible mishaps such as clothing stains), down-to-earthness (e.g., textual or visual enactment of everyday situations such as shopping, riding the bus, buying and/or eating pizza, playing with children), and amateurism (e.g., trying niche activities, looking into a microscope in a science lab, blurred images).

Finally, we coded consistency based on the coherence between candidates' statements and actions in connection with the positions held by their parties. For this purpose, we compiled a list of slogans from each party's election campaign as a reference in the codebook (e.g., the Green candidate visits an organic farm in line with the ecological slogans of the Green Party). For example, a meeting between the Green Party candidate and representatives of the fossil fuel lobby would not have been coded as consistent if there was no reference to a campaign slogan. Furthermore, the category includes descriptions or pictures of the candidate at significant anniversaries and commemorations.

Two coders were trained to analyze the posts from all three platforms. To ensure reliable coding, each coder independently coded a random subset of about 10% of the final sample ( $n = 84$ ). We calculated pairwise agreement and Krippendorff's alpha intercoder reliability ( $K-\alpha$ ) values for all indicators using the R package tidycomm (Unkel et al., 2025). All variables achieved satisfactory pairwise agreement values (see Appendix 3 in the Supplementary File), above the threshold for content analysis (Frey et al., 2000). Krippendorff's alpha shows lower values for some variables, which may be due to insufficient data variability (Krippendorff, 2011). This finding indicates that some of the categorical variables are highly skewed. In this case, using percent agreement is preferable to calculating Krippendorff's alpha as random agreement is minimal (Feng, 2014). All statistical analyses were performed using R Version 4.5.1 (for packages, see R script on OSF).

## 5. Results

RQ1 asked about the prevalence of performed authenticity and its elements in the 2021 German federal election. To answer RQ1, we calculated the share of posts that contained at least one authenticity indicator per dimension. Table 1 shows that the three politicians regularly use authenticity elements and rely on all four authenticity dimensions in their social media self-presentation. Across the candidates, three out of four campaign posts contain at least one authenticity element. They most frequently used the consistency dimension, constructing authenticity through similar messages, actions, and stances in nearly two out of three posts (62.6%). In contrast, the three politicians rely much less frequently on ordinariness (26%) or immediacy (12.7%). Intimacy is the least salient dimension with only around 4% of posts offering insights into politicians' private lives or sharing intimate moments or personal information.

**Table 1.** Share of social media posts with at least one authenticity element (in %).

Performed Authenticity	Politicians				Chi-Square-Tests	
	Baerbock (female)	Laschet (male)	Scholz (male)	Total	Chi <sup>2</sup>	<i>p</i>
Authenticity	70.7	75.2	78.6	75.6	4.63	0.099
Intimacy	7.9 <sup>a</sup>	1.5 <sup>b</sup>	3.7 <sup>ab</sup>	4.1	12.51	0.002
Immediacy	24.2 <sup>a</sup>	11.1 <sup>b</sup>	7.4 <sup>b</sup>	12.7	35.64	<0.001
Ordinariness	34.4 <sup>a</sup>	14.9 <sup>b</sup>	28.8 <sup>a</sup>	26	26.34	0.001
Consistency	54 <sup>a</sup>	67.9 <sup>b</sup>	63.8 <sup>ab</sup>	62.6	10.27	0.006

Notes: *N* = 855 social media posts; 7.9% of social media posts by Baerbock contain at least one intimacy indicator; cells with different superscript letters are significantly different; cells with the same superscript are not statistically different (pairwise Fisher's tests with Bonferroni correction,  $\alpha = 0.05$ ).

RQ2 asked about differences in the prevalence of performed authenticity and its elements among the two male (Scholz and Laschet) and the one female candidate (Baerbock). Although our study is based on a complete census of posts from the election campaign, we also calculated global chi-square tests and post hoc pairwise analyses to better interpret the observed associations. When we compare the share of posts containing at least one authenticity element for all three candidates (Table 1), we find that authenticity is prevalent across the candidates, though the male candidates, Olaf Scholz (78.6%) and Armin Laschet (75.2%), have slightly more posts with authenticity than Baerbock (70.7%). However, a global chi-square test shows no significant association between the politicians and the degree of authenticity they perform.

We find greater differences in performed authenticity when comparing how often politicians rely on specific authenticity dimensions in their self-presentation. Although all three politicians most often emphasize consistency, the shares across the dimensions differ significantly between candidates. The two male politicians, Laschet and Scholz, rely more frequently on consistency than Baerbock, although only the difference between Laschet and Baerbock is statistically significant. Baerbock, on the other hand, publishes significantly more posts in which she constructs her authenticity through immediacy than Scholz and Laschet (RQ2). Post hoc analyses show that Baerbock presents herself significantly more often as intimate than Laschet, while Laschet presents himself less often as ordinary compared with both Baerbock and Scholz. These differences are also largely reflected in the various indicators within the dimensions (for details, see Appendix 4 in the Supplementary File).

In answering RQ2, we find that the female politician presents herself more often as down-to-earth than the male politicians and establishes her authenticity more strongly through spontaneous, direct, emotional statements and insights into her private life. However, the only significant gender difference appears in immediacy. In terms of intimacy, this means that Baerbock shares more personal details about her life, such as references to her family or childhood. However, this difference is only significant compared to Laschet, not to Scholz. This result leads us to reject the hypothesis that the female politician in our sample uses elements of intimacy more often than the two male politicians.

To test whether the extent and nature of performed authenticity vary across social media platforms and campaign phases, we also calculated five logistic regressions (Appendix 5 in the Supplementary File). The dependent variable in each model was the presence of at least one authenticity indicator per dimension. The predictors included the politician's gender, a dummy variable for the hot campaign phase (four weeks before the election), the number of images per post, and dummies for Instagram and Facebook (reference category: Twitter).

The results show that gender significantly influences the use of individual authenticity dimensions (see Models 2-5 in Appendix 5 in the Supplementary File). Male politicians are more likely to rely on consistency ( $OR = 1.65$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ; Model 5), while they are less likely to perform intimacy ( $OR = 0.28$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Model 2), immediacy ( $OR = 0.32$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Model 3), and ordinariness ( $OR = 0.58$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ; Model 4). We also find platform effects: The likelihood of performed authenticity is higher on Facebook ( $OR = 1.87$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ) and Instagram ( $OR = 2.27$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) than on Twitter (Model 1). This correlation holds across all four dimensions of authenticity which occur more frequently on Instagram and Facebook than on Twitter. Since we have also controlled for the number of images per post, these differences cannot be attributed solely to differences in platform architecture but are likely the result of different platform strategies. Finally, the analysis of the campaign phase as an additional influencing factor shows that the overall extent of performed authenticity does not change throughout the campaign ( $OR = 1.13$ ,  $p = 0.52$ ; Model 1). However, the campaign phase positively influences the occurrence of intimacy ( $OR = 4.61$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Model 2) and immediacy ( $OR = 1.61$ ,  $p = 0.045$ ; Model 3). These two dimensions are performed more frequently as the election campaign progresses.

## 6. Discussion

Authenticity has become an increasingly important criterion among the electorate when evaluating political candidates (Stiers et al., 2021), and politicians apply different authenticity strategies to create an authentic image during election campaigns (Sposito, 2025). Social media is often regarded as an ideal environment for performing authenticity because it provides politicians with means to bypass gatekeepers and directly promote a positive image among citizens (Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022; Weeks et al., 2019). In particular, social media allows politicians to construct an authentic image by sharing spontaneous, unfiltered insights into their work and personality (Shane, 2018). However, neither the extent to which politicians perform authenticity on social media nor the strategies they use to present themselves as authentic have been analyzed systematically. Moreover, potential differences in the prevalence and styles of performed authenticity between male and female candidates have not been studied in previous research. To address these gaps, we developed a new codebook for the quantitative analysis of performed authenticity on social media. Using this novel instrument, we conducted a manual quantitative content analysis of social

media posts published by the three chancellor candidates during the 2021 federal election campaign in Germany.

Our study found that authenticity was a prevalent aspect in the German candidates' self-presentation across three social media platforms during the 2021 campaign. The politicians in our sample frequently used social media as a strategic tool to present themselves as authentic candidates. We identified at least one element related to authenticity in three out of four social media posts during the election campaign. While we cannot compare these numbers with the prevalence of other candidate traits during the same campaign, we interpret this as evidence of the prominence of political authenticity in digital election campaign communications in Germany.

The three candidates constructed their authenticity using all four authenticity dimensions on social media, but consistency was by far the most used of the four dimensions. The German candidates thus often aimed to highlight the stability of their political stances and convictions during their campaigns. Conversely, we observe that the candidates used the facets of ordinariness, immediacy, and intimacy less frequently on social media. This pattern may indicate a general focus in the 2021 campaign on presenting candidates as authentic representatives of their parties' political messages rather than showing their emotional and personal sides. This view resonates with earlier findings on personalization in German campaign communication, which suggest that candidates tend to share more professional insights and fewer details on their private lives (Hermans & Vergeer, 2013). Since the three candidates used fewer ordinariness, intimacy, and immediacy strategies, they rarely harnessed the potential of social media to construct an intimate or more emotional image.

However, we also find that the three politicians differ in how often they performed authenticity and how often they relied on specific aspects of authenticity in their performance. First, we observe slight differences in how often the candidates performed authenticity in their posts. Olaf Scholz and Armin Laschet, the two male politicians, have a slightly higher share of social media posts in which authenticity elements were present compared to Annalena Baerbock, the female politician. This finding suggests that the candidates and their parties may have placed different levels of importance on authenticity in their social media campaigns.

Second, and more striking, the three candidates differ in the strategies they used to construct authenticity. Baerbock performed authenticity significantly more often via immediacy than Laschet and Scholz. She also used more intimacy elements than the other candidates, although this difference is only significant in comparison to Laschet. There are several possible explanations for the differences in self-presentation among the three candidates.

The varied use of authenticity dimensions may result from candidates' ideological differences. For example, one factor that may indicate an ideological difference is that Baerbock and Scholz, who ran for left and center-left parties, emphasized ordinariness more than Laschet, who ran for a conservative party. One explanation could be that politicians from left parties, with their stronger focus on social policy, have more opportunities or a higher interest in presenting themselves as down-to-earth and close to the people. Differences in immediacy among the candidates may be explained by their parties' general election campaign strategies. The Green Party and its candidate may have run a campaign that was more emotionally oriented than the other two parties, encouraging the use of immediacy elements by their candidate, such as emotions, spontaneity, and the embrace of less technical language (e.g., slang). This style may also be more compatible with Baerbock's profile, as she is younger than Scholz and Laschet.

However, the differences in how politicians present themselves may also be interpreted as reactions to stereotypical expectations. Male and female candidates more often use stereotypes that serve their presentational goals and reject those that may harm them (Fridkin & Kenney, 2014). Accordingly, Baerbock's greater focus on performing authenticity through posting spontaneous, emotional content (immediacy) aligns more closely with stereotypical notions of womanhood. While Baerbock's performed authenticity is more focused on the emotional and private dimension, the male candidates tend to rely more on the consistency dimension. According to our operationalization of consistency, male politicians more often present themselves as authentic representatives of their parties' programs.

Baerbock's more immediate self-presentation may also be explained within the context of the campaign. Shortly before the election, polls showed her lagging behind the two male candidates, with her party losing ground—a situation likely worsened by negative media coverage (see Appendix 1 in the Supplementary File). At the same time, her party ran a highly personalized campaign (Holtz-Bacha, 2023). Therefore, her more intimate and spontaneous style may have been a strategic move to align her social media image with a more personal side to counter declining support.

We also assumed that the prevalence of authenticity and its individual dimensions are likely influenced by factors that interact with or transcend the gender of politicians. The regression models with additional contextual factors, such as campaign-specific dynamics, indeed show that intimacy becomes more important over time for all three politicians (Appendix 5 in the Supplementary File). During the hot campaign phase, the level of performed intimacy and immediacy increases, though the overall frequency of performed authenticity remains stable throughout the different phases of the campaign. While campaign communication often intensifies during the final phase of an election campaign (Peeters et al., 2023), the level of performed authenticity did not change throughout the 2021 election campaign.

Beyond campaign timing, our analysis also highlights the potential of different platforms for performing authenticity. Politicians in our sample used more authentic elements on Instagram and Facebook than on Twitter. Since our model controls for the number of images, this variance cannot be attributed solely to technical differences. It is more plausible that politicians consider Twitter as a less suitable environment for presenting themselves as authentic. Given Twitter's reputation as a platform for political and journalistic elites (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Steffan, 2020), politicians may primarily use it to express political views and comment on events rather than for personal self-presentation. These differences between the platform communities also help explain the slightly higher performed authenticity on Instagram than on Facebook. While Facebook tends to appeal to a broad user base, Instagram is particularly popular with a younger audience (Steffan, 2020).

## 7. Limitations and Conclusion

This study is among the first to apply a quantitative approach to measure performed authenticity and thus comes with limitations that need to be noted and addressed in future research. First, we find that politicians in our sample of German candidates running for chancellor often use authenticity elements in their self-presentation. This result supports assumptions from the literature that politicians try to present themselves as authentic on social media and that performed authenticity is an essential part of modern election campaign communication. However, our study lacks a benchmark, such as the prevalence of other

traits, to further evaluate the role of political authenticity on social media. Future research comparing the prominence of authenticity with that of other traits would provide a reasonable basis for further interpreting our findings. The same applies to a longitudinal perspective that compares the prevalence of performed authenticity during and outside of election campaigns.

Second, our data cannot clearly indicate whether the performed authenticity found in our study is the result of an intentional strategy by politicians and their campaign teams or a byproduct of other self-presentation goals. The frequent use of consistency elements across candidates suggests that they were not only concerned with pure self-presentation but also aimed to emphasize party and program positions in their posts. Interviews with politicians and campaign teams could provide further insights into the importance of authenticity and the strategies used in campaigns.

Third, the study analyzed the performed authenticity of lead candidates in Germany and thus investigated a multi-party context with a less personalized voting system. In contexts where individual politicians play a greater role in the electoral system, authenticity may be even more important and therefore even more prevalent in politicians' self-presentation. Furthermore, considering the various dimensions of authenticity, it is also possible that the focus on consistency is a consequence of German consensus democracy. Since German parties have to compromise in order to form a government, politicians may be more interested in presenting themselves as authentic by aligning with party positions.

Moreover, we examined the profiles of three German candidates who ran for chancellor. These candidates were the only federal politicians who could reasonably be expected to win the election (Scholz, 2021). Unlike in an artificial experimental study, the candidates differed according to several characteristics, including gender, party affiliation, and age (see Appendix 1 in the Supplementary File). The observed differences among them may be explained by one or more of these factors, or by their interactions. Our findings regarding candidate and gender differences must thus be interpreted with caution. Future studies examining performed authenticity should analyze a larger number of female and male politicians in Germany and other national contexts to assess whether our results can be extended beyond our small candidate sample and the 2021 election campaign. Nevertheless, the present study provides a new, now-tested instrument for the field to address these limitations in the future and quantify the prevalence of performed authenticity and its impact on social media.

Fourth, our content analysis measures performed authenticity using four dimensions, but does not provide detailed information about strategic differences within these dimensions. Therefore, it is likely that additional variance exists within the dimensions. For instance, politicians from different parties and genders may employ distinct strategies to convey ordinariness or intimacy. Future research that analyzes these more nuanced differences in performances could contribute to this field by revealing additional, potentially more significant variance within dimensions. This also includes future work that, unlike ours, uses multiple indicators of consistency. Our operationalization of consistency as meeting the public's general expectations of a party's candidate is limited and leaves room for improvement.

Despite these limitations, the study makes several contributions to our understanding of current campaign communication and the role of authenticity in election campaigns. It is among the first to apply a quantitative approach to investigate the prevalence of politicians' performed authenticity during campaigns.

To this end, we provide a novel operationalization of political authenticity as a multidimensional construct for standardized content analysis, enabling analysis of its performance across different facets of authenticity on social media (Luebke, 2021). This approach allows for systematic comparisons of performed authenticity across candidates and platforms based on four conceptual dimensions. Our results show that politicians regularly present themselves as authentic in election campaigns, and that the authenticity they perform differs across candidates and social media platforms. Finally, this study advances research on authenticity and gender from a performance perspective, providing preliminary evidence in a field that has primarily focused on audience perception.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Data Availability

The codebook, the data, and the analyses are publicly available at: <https://osf.io/se3bz>

### LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT was used for language editing and the debugging of R code.

### Supplementary Material

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

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## Faces of Europe: Structural Drivers of Visual Personalization in Political Parties' Facebook Campaigns

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## Abstract

Social media platforms have become central arenas for election campaigning, pushing political actors to adapt to their attention-driven logics. One prominent strategy is visual personalization, reflecting the platforms' person-centered, image-driven design. This study offers the first large-scale, cross-national analysis of how political parties across 23 EU countries strategically employed two dimensions of visual personalization—individualization and privatization—on Facebook during the 2024 European Parliament election campaign. It examines how their digital campaign output was shaped by two party-level factors (populist vs. non-populist status; government vs. opposition) and two country-level factors (electoral systems; degree of authoritarianism). Based on a manual content analysis of 14,553 posts, we find that individualization was far more common than privatization and that party-level characteristics exerted stronger influence than country-level contexts. Populist and governing parties used more individualization. Privatization was more prevalent among non-populist parties and in more liberal environments. These findings challenge assumptions about populist and authoritarian communication styles and make a theoretical contribution by demonstrating that visual personalization is a multidimensional phenomenon whose specific dimensions respond differently to structural incentives. Our results underscore the need to analytically separate individualization and privatization and to account for their distinct contextual drivers when assessing political personalization in digital environments.

## Keywords

election campaigning; European Parliament; social media; visual personalization

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## 1. Introduction

Scholars have long examined political personalization, defined as an increasing focus on individual politicians rather than parties or institutions (Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007). As party loyalties decline and politics becomes more individualized and lifestyle-oriented (Bennett, 2012), politicians increasingly construct personal images that transcend traditional party boundaries (Metz et al., 2020). The democratic implications of this trend remain contested. Personalization has been linked to rising populism, democratic erosion, and polarization (Frantz et al., 2021). Critics argue that personalization shifts attention from parties and policy issues to individuals. It is also argued that privatization, as a sub-type of personalization, oversimplifies politics, limits rational opinion formation, and reduces citizens' access to substantive information (Adam & Maier, 2010). Such concerns may be intensified in visual communication, where space for political issues is inherently constrained. Personalization may also weaken accountability and fuel cynicism by prioritizing charisma over institutions and blurring public–private boundaries (Pedersen & Rahat, 2021; Van Aelst et al., 2012). These dynamics can benefit populist leaders, who often rely on images, emotional appeal, and anti-establishment rhetoric. Langer (2007) speculates that they may increase politicians' vulnerability to shifts in public sentiment and media framing. Gendered forms of personalization may further reinforce stereotypes and undermine women's political authority (Magin et al., 2024).

Other scholars, by contrast, highlight potential democratic benefits of personalization. Presenting complex issues through politicians' personalities can simplify them and increase comprehensibility, showing that personalization and substantive communication are not inherently contradictory: Citizens' political evaluations often combine judgments of personal traits with assessments of policy positions, suggesting that

personalization and issue engagement can be mutually reinforcing. In this perspective, privatization is viewed more negatively than individualization because it shifts attention from political issues to politicians as private individuals (Adam & Maier, 2010). In a context of declining institutional trust, personalized communication may also narrow the gap between elites and citizens by leveraging the interactive affordances of digital media (Pedersen & Rahat, 2021). From this angle, personalization has the potential to enhance political interest and knowledge among less engaged citizens and stimulate participation in distrustful environments (Papacharissi, 2014).

Legacy media has long contributed to political personalization by highlighting politicians' private lives (Van Zoonen, 2005), but social media is widely seen as intensifying this trend (Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Metz et al., 2020; Peeters et al., 2023; Vučković, 2023). These platforms enable politicians to foster closeness with voters through personal, unscripted images (McGregor, 2018), which tend to be well received by followers (Farkas & Bene, 2021). The platforms focus strongly on visuals: Images are often better recognized and remembered than verbal content and convey nuanced social cues relevant for political decision making (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). To gain visibility on social media, politicians must meet algorithmic selection criteria, which has made visual personalization central in election campaigns. Much of this visual personalization stems from so-called self-personalization (McGregor, 2018)—strategic displays of personal or family life to align with media logics favoring individual personalities over institutions (Strömbäck, 2008). Sharing elements of politicians' lifestyles can foster intimacy and political identification by reflecting voters' values and everyday experiences (Mazzoni & Mincigrucci, 2022).

While research on social media campaigning has grown rapidly, it still relies heavily on single-country studies or comparisons of only a few countries (Boulianne & Larsson, 2024). This narrow focus limits understanding of how campaign strategies, while shaped by similar platform logics, remain embedded in national political contexts (Haßler et al., 2021). Reflecting this gap, scholars have repeatedly called for more cross-national research on social media campaigning (e.g., Bene et al., 2024; Boulianne & Larsson, 2024), including in visual political communication (de-Lima-Santos et al., 2024) and candidates' visual self-presentation (Steffan, 2020). Comparative research is needed to reveal how structural factors systematically shape the content of social media campaigns.

This study responds to this call by providing the first large-scale, cross-national comparison on how party- and country-level factors systematically affect visual personalization. This is measured through a content analysis of individualization and privatization captured via the public-facing Facebook campaigns of 138 parties and party coalitions across 23 EU member states. As Facebook remains one of the most widely used campaign platforms (Darius et al., 2024; Dommert et al., 2024), it provides a valuable and substantively important setting for examining how structural factors shape visual communication. We investigate how party-level (populist vs. non-populist; government vs. opposition) and country-level factors (electoral system; degree of authoritarianism)—the latter not previously studied in relation to visual personalization—affected campaign strategies in the 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections. The near-simultaneous EP elections across diverse political and media contexts create a unique opportunity to assess how these structural factors influence visual campaign practices. Most previous personalization research has focused on candidates (e.g., McGregor, 2018; Metz et al., 2020), yet parties are the central actors in most European political systems and in EP elections. Because European candidates' campaigns are typically closely coordinated with party strategies, a party-focused approach offers broader insights into campaign dynamics.

Our findings challenge widespread assumptions about populist and authoritarian communication styles and reveal that different dimensions of visual personalization respond differently to party- and country-level structures. This demonstrates the need for a more explicitly multidimensional approach to personalization, and for theories that account for the contextual drivers of each dimension.

## 2. Visual Personalization

Personalization of politics refers to a contemporary state of affairs, but is also a concept that has been used to discern a long-term globalized trend toward increasing personal focus (Adam & Maier, 2010). Our cross-sectional design captures personalization as a state, though we assume social media has contributed to its rise over time. Scholars differ on whether personalization is episodic and shaped by leadership styles and political contexts (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007) or a lasting feature of modern politics influencing electoral communication and leadership over recent decades (e.g., Grbeša, 2008; Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014). Although widely regarded as multidimensional, the concept has been operationalized in various ways, contributing to mixed empirical findings. Some authors distinguish professional, emotional, and private personalization (Metz et al., 2020; Russmann et al., 2024; Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010), while others focus on individualization and privatization (Van Aelst et al., 2012). We adopt this latter, well-established, clear-cut two-dimensional model, which is better suited for cross-country comparisons and applies to both textual and visual content, the latter being our focus.

### 2.1. Key Dimensions of (Visual) Personalization

Van Aelst et al. (2012) define *individualization* as a shift in focus from parties or institutions to individual politicians, with two dimensions: general visibility (emphasis on individuals over groups) and concentrated visibility (focus on leaders; see also Haßler et al., 2024). The latter aligns with the concept of a presidentialization of non-presidential political systems, whereby party leaders or top candidates increasingly dominate political communication. Individualization as a rhetorical strategy highlights politicians' competencies and proposals, typically through formal, professional portrayals (Farkas & Bene, 2021; Pedersen & Rahat, 2021).

Van Aelst et al. (2012) define *privatization* as emphasizing politicians' private lives. It involves politicizing the personal self (Langer, 2007) and intimizing political communication by bringing personal values, relationships, and experiences into the public sphere (Staney, 2013; Van Zoonen, 2005). Privatization aims to show the "human face" of politicians (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007) by highlighting personal characteristics and private lives (Haßler et al., 2024), often through informal settings such as casual clothing or spontaneous moments (Farkas & Bene, 2021). Holtz-Bacha (2004) argues that privatization can serve various functions such as humanization, simplification—including oversimplifying or diverting attention from substantive issues—emotionalization, and the pursuit of celebrity status (Street, 2004).

### 2.2. (Visual) Personalization on Social Media

Research on political personalization on social media has focused mainly on either political actors' communication strategies or users' reactions. Regarding the latter, numerous studies show that personalized—especially privatized—content increases user engagement: Visual self-personalization (Metz

et al., 2020; Russmann et al., 2024), references to politicians' private lives (Metz et al., 2020; Peeters et al., 2023), emotionally charged posts (Bene, 2017), and emotional or visual appeals in politicians' messaging (Jost, 2023) all enhance online engagement.

Regarding the strategic use of personalization we investigate here, it has been shown that politicians, including members of the EP, are active on social media (e.g., Daniel & Obholzer, 2025), suggesting at least some degree of individualization. However, research also shows that many remain hesitant to adopt highly intimate visual strategies (Filimonov et al., 2016; Haßler et al., 2024; Hrbková & Macková, 2021; Russmann et al., 2024), despite the engagement potential of personalized content. Even Barack Obama's social media presence used personal cues only sparsely (Haßler et al., 2024; Vučković, 2023). By contrast, about one-third of posts during the 2016 Swedish election were classified as "everyday private" (Ekman & Widholm, 2017). Such mixed findings may stem from different operationalizations but also align with Rahat and Kenig's (2018) observation that personalization varies across national contexts. With data from 23 countries and consistent measurement instruments, the present study allows us to assess how personalization depends on party and country contexts.

### ***2.3. Structural Factors Influencing Parties' Strategic Use of Visual Personalization***

What parties publish on social media is part of their broader strategic campaigning. Research on strategic party behavior (e.g., Müller & Strøm, 1999) shows that parties for example emphasize issues depending on whether they are vote-, office-, or policy-seeking (Strøm, 1990). We view visual personalization as a strategic campaigning tool. While we cannot infer parties' motivations directly from social media content, we can examine how structural contexts shape their likelihood of using visual personalization, offering insights into factors influencing strategic decisions.

As this indicates, election campaigning does not take place in a vacuum. Parties make strategic decisions within opportunity structures at both the meso level (party characteristics) and macro level (country contexts; Esser & Strömbäck, 2012), which can encourage or discourage individualized or privatized visuals. While many contextual factors could influence the strategic use of visual personalization, we focus on four variables—two party-level and two country-level—that are either grounded in prior research or derive from clear conceptual expectations about how opportunity structures shape campaign strategies. At the party level, we examine populist orientation and government status, as these shape parties' strategic incentives and align with our party-centered perspective, which treats visual personalization on party pages as coordinated organizational choices rather than individual candidates' self-presentation. At the country level, we assess the electoral system and degree of authoritarianism, two structural factors that predate the campaign, shape the broader incentive environment in which parties operate, and vary significantly across EU member states.

All four factors lie outside campaign communication itself, helping us avoid circular explanations driven by campaign-specific dynamics. Moreover, their cross-national data availability makes them well-suited for a comparative design, enabling us to examine how broader institutional contexts influence parties' incentives to use visual personalization.

### 2.3.1. Party-Level Factors

#### 2.3.1.1. Populist Parties

Research on personalization has focused heavily on right-wing populists (e.g., Bast, 2024; González-Aguilar et al., 2023), but populism extends beyond the political right (de Vreese et al., 2018). Mudde (2004, p. 543) defines populism as “a thin ideology” dividing society into two homogeneous, antagonistic groups—“the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”—which “argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* of the people.” The definitions of both groups vary according to the broader ideology (e.g., liberalism, nationalism) to which populism is linked (Bast, 2024; de Vreese et al., 2018). We follow this understanding and include the full range of populist parties in our analysis of visual personalization. The past decade has seen growing success for populist parties in Europe and beyond, with the rise of social media being considered a key factor (Gerbaudo, 2018).

A defining feature of many populist parties is their reliance on a strong, charismatic leader whose personal appeal is central to the party’s success (Pappas, 2016). This tendency aligns closely with personalization (Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007; Van Aelst et al., 2012). Populist leaders often construct a persona embodying the “common man,” presenting themselves as “just like the people” (Bast, 2024). Social media posts showing leaders with ordinary citizens or engaging in everyday activities can reinforce this relatable image (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). This makes visual personalization a strategic tool through which populist parties can seek legitimacy, combining an authentic-seeming connection with an unfiltered projection of power. By using positive, highly personalized content, populist leaders can strategically manufacture legitimacy, normalize their authority, and secure public support (Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022). Thus, we hypothesize:

H1: The visual elements in the Facebook campaigns of populist parties are more likely to show individualization (H1a) and privatization (H1b) than those of non-populist parties.

#### 2.3.1.2. Governing vs. Opposition Parties

In party-centered systems, such as in most European countries, personalization tends to take a professionalized form, emphasizing leadership visibility and credibility rather than intimacy or emotional self-disclosure (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). Moreover, EP elections are typically seen as second-order contests in which voters express dissatisfaction with national governments rather than decide on EU issues (Ehin & Talving, 2021). Research suggests that domestic dynamics continue to shape the behavior of parties, media, and voters in EP campaigns (van der Brug et al., 2021; van der Brug & de Vreese, 2016). As a result, EP elections are often framed as referenda on national government performance (Maier et al., 2024), placing incumbents in a vulnerable position and giving challengers incentives to target the government. On social media, governing and opposition parties therefore face distinct communicative challenges, which we assume lead to different visual personalization strategies.

Incumbents must sustain attention and trust in competitive, fast-moving environments (van der Brug & de Vreese, 2016). Individualization can serve as a tool of strategic control: By highlighting well-known office holders through professionalized, leader-centered imagery, they give institutions a human face while keeping communication firmly under organizational authority. Such individualized visuals help reinforce

leadership recognition, continuity, and competence (Hopmann et al., 2011). Unlike these incentives for individualization, however, incumbents have weaker motivations to share privatized or informal imagery that might blur the boundary between personal and institutional roles.

Opposition parties, by contrast, lack an incumbent bonus and often have less well-known leaders, giving them fewer incentives than governing parties to use individualized visuals. For them, however, privatization can be a useful strategy to gain attention in the continuous flow of social media content and to differentiate themselves from governing actors. As Kollberg (2024) shows, challenger parties in EP elections compensate for their weaker institutional position through communicative differentiation, emotional and symbolic appeals, and greater willingness to experiment. With fewer reputational constraints on communication strategy, opposition parties may also use personalization more opportunistically to attract attention, signal authenticity, and mobilize emotion. These conditions favor more expressive and affective campaign styles, in which privatized visuals function particularly well as an attention-maximizing strategy on social media. We therefore hypothesize:

H2a: Government parties are more likely to use individualized visuals in their Facebook campaigns than opposition parties.

H2b: Opposition parties are more likely to use privatized visuals in their Facebook campaigns than government parties.

### 2.3.2. Country-Level Factors

#### 2.3.2.1. Electoral System

Visual personalization is most effective when it features candidates familiar to voters. In EP elections, however, candidates are often not well-known in their home countries (Gattermann, 2022). Electoral systems that allow voters to vote for individual candidates create incentives for parties and candidates to actively build candidate visibility, making visual personalization more beneficial. We therefore expect parties to use visual personalization strategically, particularly when voters can cast votes for individual candidates. Such opportunities depend on a country's electoral system.

Although EP elections follow uniform procedures and proportional representation, national electoral systems vary in how candidate-centered or party-centered they are (Høyland et al., 2019). Candidate-centered systems encourage personalized campaigning (Bowler & Farrell, 2011) because they incentivize the personal vote (Carey & Shugart, 1995), leading individual candidates to compete directly with one another, including within the same party. This is typical of systems with open ballots. These systems also tend to have smaller electoral districts—i.e., fewer seats per district (Walter & Emmenegger, 2023)—which further encourages personalized campaigning since it is easier for candidates to reach voters personally and build individual visibility.

In party-centered systems, by contrast, voters either cannot vote for individual candidates when parties determine electoral lists (closed ballots) or are constrained by the pre-determined order of the party lists (ordered ballots). Electoral districts are usually larger, and constituencies may even be absent, as in the

Netherlands. As a result, parties have weaker incentives to highlight individual politicians and, if anything, campaign more with lead candidates than with ordinary ones. We therefore hypothesize:

H3: In party-centered electoral systems, political parties are less likely to campaign with Facebook posts that contain individualized (H3a) or privatized (H3b) visual elements than in candidate-centered electoral systems.

### 2.3.2.2. Degree of Authoritarianism

Over the past decade, scholars have highlighted authoritarian and illiberal tendencies in several EU member states (Bakke & Sitter, 2022; Štětka & Mihelj, 2024), noting democratic regression (Markowski & Kotnarowski, 2025) and political actors adopting strategies that undermine liberal institutions, political norms, and the principles of pluralism and accountability (Enyedi, 2024). These developments are often associated with authoritarian figures in power and manifest in institutional and normative erosion (Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022), normalizing previously radical ideas and moving them into the political mainstream (Berman, 2017).

To our knowledge, authoritarianism and visual personalization have not yet been directly linked in the literature. Logically, if authoritarian actors employ communication strategies similar to those of populist parties (see above), they are likewise incentivized to use visual personalization. The number of such actors in a country—and whether they are part of government—is therefore likely to influence the overall use of visual personalization, as other parties may react and (partially) adjust to these patterns. We thus expect the degree of authoritarianism in a country to shape how strongly political communication generally focuses on individual politicians and hypothesize:

H4: The higher the degree of authoritarianism in a country, the more likely parties' Facebook posts are to contain individualized (H4a) and privatized (H4b) visual elements.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Sample and Data Collection

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a manual standardized content analysis of posts published on the official Facebook pages of national parties during the 2024 EP election campaign across 23 of the 27 EU member states: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden. Our aim was to include all 27 countries, but because the coding required knowledge of both national language and political context, we could only include countries where we could recruit collaborators with this expertise. For Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, and Luxembourg, this proved not to be feasible. Despite this limitation, we contend that our sample provides sufficient variation and coverage to draw generalizable conclusions about parties' Facebook campaigning in the 2024 EP elections. It covers 97.5% of the EU population (439 million inhabitants; Eurostat, 2025) and spans diverse party systems, media systems, and electoral systems. This breadth enables a meaningful comparison of structural drivers of visual personalization across different political contexts.

Our sample includes posts from the official Facebook pages of all political parties that won at least one seat in the newly constituted EP and received at least 5% of the national vote, except for Ethnikó Laikó Métopo (Cyprus), Kommounistikó Kómma Elládas (Greece), and TISZA (Hungary), which surpassed 5% but did not maintain official Facebook accounts throughout the entire study period. In the case of coalitions, we included at least one party in the coalition and/or the coalition itself. In total, the sample comprises 149 parties and coalitions (referred to hereafter as parties; see Table A1 in the Supplementary File).

Although Facebook use is declining, it remained the most widely used social media platform in most EU countries in 2024—except Austria, Germany, and Spain (Newman et al., 2024; no data for Cyprus, Latvia, Malta, and Slovenia)—and continues to be one of the most important campaign platforms (Darius et al., 2024; Dommett et al., 2024).

We analyzed posts from official party pages rather than candidate pages to complement previous research which has largely focused on individual candidates (e.g., McGregor, 2018; Metz et al., 2020). This approach also reflects the fact that individual candidates in Europe generally operate within party-defined frameworks, which is particularly relevant in the party-centered EP elections. Crucially, analyzing party pages enables cross-country comparability: The presence and visibility of individual EP candidates vary widely across member states, while party pages exist in all countries and mirror the legally party-centered nature of EP elections, in which voters choose parties rather than individual candidates.

We used CrowdTangle to collect all posts published during the four-week “hot phase,” ending one day after election day in each country. For countries where voting took place over several days, we used the last voting day. Due to differing election days, the investigation period differs slightly across countries (Netherlands: June 6; Ireland: June 7; Czech Republic, Latvia, Malta, Slovakia: June 8; all others: June 9). Full samples were coded for most countries. Due to research constraints, however, in Belgium, Finland, and Hungary we coded random samples of 50% of each party’s posts, with a minimum of 50 posts per party unless a party had published fewer. This yielded different country-level sample shares (Belgium 63%, Finland 59%, Hungary 50%). In total, the dataset includes 15,447 coded posts (from 16,961 collected) from 149 parties. Because our focus is on visual communication, only posts containing images and/or videos were analyzed.

## 3.2. Measurements

### 3.2.1. Dependent Variables

Since we focus on visual personalization, we coded only images and videos contained in Facebook posts, but not the accompanying text. We coded the first image and the first video (up to one minute), reflecting the fleeting way many users consume social media content. For testing hypotheses H1–H4, we used the two dimensions of visual personalization—private personalization and individualization—as dependent variables, measured as follows (for examples of posts coded as individualized or privatized, see the Supplementary File).

#### 3.2.1.1. Individualization

We measured individualization by combining two indicators: (a) the number of people visible in an image/video, and (b) the type of actors shown (e.g., politicians, ordinary citizens). Based on these measures,

we created a dummy variable coded as individualized (= 1) when a post displayed one or two individuals and at the same time included at least one politician from the posting party (national politicians or European top candidates). Posts showing no people, more than two people, and/or no politician from the posting party were coded as not individualized (= 0). We focus on settings with one or two persons because we assume that individualization requires a limited number of visible individuals; in larger groups, the focal figure is typically unclear. While many national-level studies operationalize individualization via concentrated visibility (i.e., highlighting party leaders), this approach is difficult to apply consistently across EU member states, since the prominence of national and European lead candidates varies substantially. We therefore rely on the general visibility of party politicians as a more comparable cross-national indicator of individualization.

### 3.2.1.2. Privatization

We coded a binary variable indicating whether an image/video contained a private background story (= 1) or not (= 0), defined as showing politicians in a private context (e.g., with partners/family), presenting their interests or hobbies, or depicting their childhood or personal development through “throwback” images. Following Van Aelst et al.’s (2012) conceptualization of privatization—which distinguishes between personal characteristics and the presentation of private life—our indicator captures the latter sub-dimension. In the limited research on visual personalization on social media, privatization is commonly operationalized through such background stories (e.g., Farkas & Bene, 2021; Haßler et al., 2024).

## 3.2.2. Independent Variables

### 3.2.2.1. Populist vs. Non-Populist Parties (H1)

We created a dummy variable for populist parties using the 2024 European edition of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES; Rovny et al., 2025). We identified populist parties through the variable “anti\_elite\_salience,” which measures the extent to which a party employed anti-elite, anti-establishment rhetoric in 2024 (0 = *not salient*; 10 = *extremely salient*), which is a central element of populist political communication (de Vreese et al., 2018). Parties scoring above 6.67—the top third of the distribution—were classified as populist. Parties not matched to CHES were left uncategorized. Parties with separate Facebook accounts but forming a joint electoral alliance in CHES (e.g., Fidesz and KDNP in Hungary) were matched to their alliance. Electoral coalitions in our dataset were matched to the CHES party that won the most EP seats. Accordingly, the French coalition *Besoin d’Europe* was matched to *Renaissance*; the Czech coalition *Spolu21* to *Občanská demokratická strana*; the Czech coalition *Stačilo!* to *Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy*; and the Portuguese *Aliança Democrática* to the *Partido Social Democrata*. The Dutch coalition *GroenLinks/Partij van de Arbeid* was not assigned because both parties won an equal number of EP seats and could not be matched unambiguously. Eleven parties in our sample were excluded from analyses because they could not be matched to any party in the 2024 CHES dataset. This procedure resulted in 36 populist parties, 102 non-populist parties, and 11 uncategorized cases. The final dataset for analysis therefore included 14,553 posts from the 138 categorized parties (see Tables A1 and A2 in the Supplementary File for the distribution across countries and parties).

### 3.2.2.2. Government vs. Opposition Parties (H2)

We coded whether parties were members of the domestic government or the opposition at the time of the election. Since the Portuguese sample did not include a government party, we excluded Portugal from testing H2.

### 3.2.2.3. Electoral System (H3)

We included a dummy variable indicating whether the electoral system is candidate-centered or not, following the classification of Høyland et al. (2019) and adaptations by Gattermann (2022).

### 3.2.2.4. Authoritarianism (H4)

We accessed the V-Dem dataset (Coppedge et al., 2025) via <https://demscore.se> for the Liberal Democracy Index (Coppedge et al., 2015, 2025). The index ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values representing stronger liberal democracy. To align with our theoretical expectations, we reversed the scale so that higher values indicate higher levels of authoritarianism.

## 3.2.3. Controls

### 3.2.3.1. Political Ideology

We control for party ideology with a variable from CHES which measures general political ideology on the left-right scale and ranges from 0 (*extreme left*) to 10 (*extreme right*). We include this variable because progressive parties are often more decentralized in their organization than conservative parties, which may influence the extent to which they employ visual personalization strategies.

### 3.2.3.2. District Size

In addition to the candidate-centered electoral system measure, we control for the average district size used in the 2024 EP elections. In most countries, this equals the size of the national delegation, as the entire country serves as a single constituency. For Ireland, Italy, and Poland, we calculated district size by dividing the number of elected MEPs by the number of constituencies. For Belgium, we distinguished between Flanders (13 seats) and Wallonia (8 seats), excluding parties from the German-speaking electoral college.

### 3.2.3.3. Education Level

We control for the share of people with lower educational attainment in each country in 2024, defined by Eurostat as those with less than primary, primary, or lower-secondary education. This ranges from 11.8% (Poland) to 38.7% (Portugal). Education is linked to media literacy and political engagement, which may shape how advantageous visually personalized content is for parties.

### 3.3. Reliability

A total of 64 trained coders—each familiar with the language and political context of the country they coded—coded the Facebook posts using a joint English-language codebook developed by the international research network Digital Election Campaigning Worldwide (DigiWorld). To ensure reliability, two tests were conducted per country. In the intra-country test, coders coded about 100 posts from their national parties in their native language. In the inter-country test, coders in all countries coded 94 English-language posts from European political parties such as the European People's Party or the Party of European Socialists (six of the intended 100 had been deleted on Facebook), which required no specialized national political knowledge.

We used Brennan and Prediger's Kappa (B&P Kappa), a robust chance-corrected coefficient suitable for binary, often zero-inflated data like ours, and additionally report Holsti's composite reliability (CR). The results indicate a consistent understanding of the categories (individualization: B&P Kappa = .65, CR = .94; privatization: B&P Kappa = .83, CR = .98). Table A3 in the Supplementary File reports reliability scores per country.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

We employed multilevel logistic regression models with binomial outcomes to test our hypotheses, as both dependent variables—individualization and privatization—are binary. We estimated two sets of five models: one using individualization, the other privatization as the dependent variable. For each hypothesis, we ran a separate model to isolate the effect of the corresponding independent variable while controlling for the same set of potential confounding factors. We then estimated a full model including all independent variables to assess the robustness of the results. Lastly, we included country-level random intercepts to account for baseline differences in individualized and privatized posts across countries. We did not include random slopes, assuming that the effects of the independent variables are consistent across countries.

See Table A4 in the Supplementary File for descriptive statistics of all coded variables and Table A5 for the scores on all independent variables and controls at the country-level.

## 4. Findings

As shown by the descriptive statistics (Figures A1–A3 in the Supplementary File), individualization was by far more commonly used than privatization. Below, we test H1–H4 on how structural factors affected visual personalization on parties' Facebook pages during the 2024 EP elections. Tables 1 and 2 report odds ratios (OR) and standard errors from logistic regressions for individualization and privatization, where OR = 1 represents no change in odds, OR > 1 indicates higher odds, and OR < 1 lower odds of individualization/privatization. For instance, an OR of 1.50 reflects a 50% increase in odds, whereas an OR of 0.50 reflects a 50% decrease.

Table 1 reports how party- and country-level factors relate to the odds of parties using individualized posts. In the full Model 5, populist parties have 39.5% higher odds of using individualized posts (OR = 1.395,  $p < .001$ ) than non-populist parties, confirming H1a, and governing parties have 45.2% higher odds (OR = 1.452,  $p < .001$ ) than opposition parties, confirming H2a. Our other independent variables—candidate-centered systems and degree of authoritarianism—are not significantly associated with individualization, falsifying H3a and H4a. Regarding controls, a one-unit increase in right-wing positioning

raises the odds by 1.9% (OR = 1.019,  $p < .05$ ), while lower levels of education reduce the odds by 2.3% (OR = 0.977,  $p < .05$ ). It is clear that district size does not affect individualization in these models.

**Table 1.** Individualization: Multilevel logistic regression (country random effects with standard error).

	Model 1 Populist Party	Model 2 Party in Government (Without Portugal)	Model 3 Candidate-Centered Electoral System	Model 4 Authoritarianism	Model 5 All Variables (With Portugal)
Populist Party	1.147** (0.050)				1.395*** (0.068)
Party in Government		1.277*** (0.047)			1.452*** (0.061)
Candidate-Centered Electoral System			1.192 (0.196)		
Authoritarianism				0.707 (0.417)	0.760 (0.424)
District Size	0.998 (0.003)	0.999 (0.003)	0.999 (0.004)	0.998 (0.003)	0.999 (0.003)
Education	0.977* (0.010)	0.979 <sup>+</sup> (0.011)	0.976* (0.010)	0.977* (0.011)	0.977* (0.010)
Political Ideology	1.035*** (0.008)	1.043*** (0.007)	1.045*** (0.007)	1.045*** (0.007)	1.019* (0.008)
Intercept	0.854 (0.201)	0.701 (0.171)	0.776 (0.185)	0.934 (0.300)	0.781 (0.240)
Num. Obs.	14,553	14,553	14,553	14,553	14,553
R <sup>2</sup> Marg.	0.014	0.017	0.013	0.014	0.022
R <sup>2</sup> Cond.	0.049	0.054	0.047	0.050	0.055

Note: <sup>+</sup>  $p < 0.1$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Regarding privatization (Table 2), Model 5 finds that being a populist party reduces the probability of using privatized posts by 50.2% in the odds (OR = 0.498,  $p < .001$ ), falsifying H1b. In contrast to individualization, government or opposition status does not significantly affect privatization, falsifying H2b. While candidate-centered systems do not significantly affect privatization, falsifying H3b, we find that a one-unit increase in authoritarianism reduces the odds of using private personalization by 98.3% (OR = 0.017,  $p < .01$ ), falsifying H4b. Regarding controls, lower levels of education decrease the odds of privatization (OR = 0.933,  $p < .01$ ), while stronger right-wing ideology increases them (OR = 1.075,  $p < .01$ ). Again, we show that district size does not influence the use of privatized posts.

**Table 2.** Privatization: Multilevel logistic regression (country random effects with standard error).

	Model 1 Populist Party	Model 2 Party in Government (Without Portugal)	Model 3 Candidate-Centered Electoral System	Model 4 Authoritarianism	Model 5 All Variables (With Portugal)
Populist Party	0.547*** (0.080)				0.498*** (0.085)
Party in Government		1.191 (0.139)			0.866 (0.120)
Candidate-Centered Electoral System			1.140 (0.497)		0.805 (0.316)
Authoritarianism				0.022* (0.033)	0.017** (0.024)
District Size	1.003 (0.008)	1.003 (0.009)	1.003 (0.009)	0.998 (0.008)	0.997 (0.008)
Education	0.937* (0.027)	0.933* (0.027)	0.931* (0.027)	0.926** (0.024)	0.933** (0.024)
Political Ideology	1.075** (0.029)	1.057* (0.026)	1.054* (0.026)	1.054* (0.026)	1.075** (0.029)
Intercept	0.040*** (0.025)	0.037*** (0.024)	0.041*** (0.027)	0.169* (0.130)	0.207* (0.159)
Num. Obs.	14,553	14,553	14,553	14,553	14,553
R <sup>2</sup> Marg.	0.087	0.073	0.070	0.126	0.149
R <sup>2</sup> Cond.	0.246	0.240	0.237	0.252	0.261

Note: <sup>+</sup>  $p < 0.1$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

## 5. Conclusion

This study investigated how political parties across 23 EU countries strategically employed two dimensions of visual personalization—individualization and privatization—on Facebook during the 2024 EP election campaign. It explored how this strategic use was shaped by four structural factors: populist vs. non-populist orientation, government vs. opposition status at the party level, as well as electoral systems, and the degree of authoritarianism at the country level.

Individualization emerged as the dominant form of visual personalization, whereas privatization remained comparatively rare. This is in line with previous research on European parties' use of personalization strategies (e.g., Haßler et al., 2024; Magin et al., 2024) and might be explained by the party-centered nature of political systems across Europe. The predominance of individualization further suggests that parties leveraged social media's visual affordances to humanize political actors and establish personal connections with voters, yet they maintained professional boundaries by avoiding excessive private disclosure. This strategic choice aligns with theoretical expectations that parties balance the need for authenticity and relatability with concerns about maintaining credibility and avoiding the risks associated with overly intimate political communication (Stanyer, 2013).

Starting with the party-level factors we investigated, we found differential effects of being a populist party on the use of visual personalization: Populist parties were more likely to use individualization, but less likely to use privatization than non-populist parties. These findings challenge simplistic assumptions about populist communication styles and refine our theoretical understanding of how populist actors navigate social media platforms. The emphasis on individualization without corresponding privatization suggests that populist parties strategically deploy leader visibility to reinforce their anti-establishment narrative and cultivate direct connections with citizens, yet they avoid personal vulnerability that might undermine their projected strength and decisiveness (Gerbaudo, 2018). This pattern reflects a calculated communication strategy wherein populist parties harness the visual potential of social media to amplify individual political leaders while maintaining a carefully curated public persona. The finding extends previous research on populist visual communication (Farkas et al., 2022) by revealing that populism shapes not only the extent, but also the specific dimensions of personalization, highlighting the need to conceptualize personalization as a multidimensional phenomenon rather than a unitary construct (Van Aelst et al., 2012).

Regarding the second party-level factor, we found that governing parties were more likely than opposition parties to use individualized visuals. This pattern indicates both a professionalized form of personalization designed to manage visibility and reinforce leadership recognition (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013) and a strategic use of individualization as message control in environments where political actors directly curate their own visibility (van der Brug & de Vreese, 2016). At the same time, government or opposition status did not affect the use of privatized visuals. Regarding governing parties, this supports the view that institutional responsibility constrains informal, emotional self-presentation (Hopmann et al., 2011). Interestingly, opposition parties were not shown to have made greater use of privatization than governing parties, even though they face fewer reputational risks and can thus afford to experiment with expressive or affective content, which opens up the use of personalization as a differentiation strategy to attract attention (Kollberg, 2024). These findings may simply indicate that privatization does not really fit in with European party systems and EP elections, both of which focus strongly on parties rather than individual politicians. Given the concerns that excessive privatization of politics could undermine the substance of political discourse and thus democracy (Adam & Maier, 2010), this result can be viewed as positive.

The country-level factors we investigated had overall a smaller effect on visual personalization strategies than the party-level factors, which suggests that parties' strategic decisions are more strongly influenced by party structures than by the surrounding conditions of the respective country, in line with Gibson and Römmele (2001). Whether an electoral system is candidate- or party-centered did not at all affect the use of individualized or privatized visuals, suggesting that the closeness of the candidates to their electorates was less influential than expected. Contrary to our expectations, we found that more liberal (rather than more authoritarian) national contexts promote greater privatization in parties' visual communication, while individualization appeared unaffected by this factor. This resonates with Grbeša (2008), who raised questions regarding the relevance of the political history of the country regarding both personalization and privatization of party communication, especially in post-socialist countries (several of which are represented in our sample) with strong resentment towards strong leadership and developing democratic experience. Our study thus underlines the need for a deeper, more complex understanding of national and historical factors affecting the use of parties' visual personalization strategies.

As with any research, our study has several limitations. While the four structural factors we examined offer new insights into how contextual conditions influence visual personalization in social media campaigning, future studies should complement them by additional characteristics—such as political culture, party-system polarization, or levels of social media use—to further clarify when political actors consider visual personalization a strategically advantageous approach. While our focus on party-level communication extends previous candidate-focused research on personalization on social media (e.g., McGregor, 2018; Metz et al., 2020), our operationalization does not allow for measuring presidentialization since it does not distinguish whether individualization reflects general visibility of politicians or concentrated visibility focused on leading figures. Future research should systematically compare the social media accounts of parties, political leaders, and other politicians (where all exist) to assess whether the structural factors identified here also shape candidates' visual personalization.

Our study covers only a single election period in a specific electoral setting (EP elections), which limits the generalizability of the findings. Nonetheless, because parties remain the central actors in European democracies and EP elections continue to function as second-order contests (Ehin & Talving, 2021) strongly shaped by national contexts (Haßler et al., 2021), our results should remain relevant for party-centered environments beyond this particular election, at least to a certain extent.

Since platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have distinct visual conventions and user demographics that likely shape parties' visual personalization strategies, future studies should compare our Facebook-based results with comparable data from other platforms. Finally, longitudinal analyses covering both election and non-election periods would clarify whether the patterns identified here reflect only strategic campaign choices or rather more stable communication styles.

Summing up, our findings indicate that visual personalization in parties' Facebook communication reflects a strategic adaptation to platform logics shaped by party characteristics and national contexts. The dominance of individualization over privatization indicates that parties have adapted long-standing personalization strategies to social media's visual affordances rather than fundamentally transforming their communication approach. Political actors have long highlighted individual politicians to humanize and simplify their messages and establish voter connections; social media simply offers new channels for these established strategies. However, the empirical variation we document shows that this adaptation is neither uniform nor automatic. The differing use of individualization and privatization by populist vs. non-populist parties and by government vs. opposition actors indicates that institutional and ideological factors mediate how parties translate traditional communication strategies into digital contexts.

What appears new, therefore, is not visual personalization itself but the systematic, strategic calibration of its dimensions in response to platform affordances, competitive pressures, and institutional constraints. Our contribution lies in providing the first large-scale, cross-national evidence of how parties strategically navigate this adaptation, both revealing and contradicting patterns previously assumed but not empirically demonstrated. As platforms continue to evolve and political actors refine their digital strategies, sustained investigation of the multidimensional nature of visual personalization and its contextual determinants remains essential for understanding contemporary political communication in (European) democracies.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests. In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Viorela Dan (University of Vienna), Philipp Müller (University of Mannheim), and Anne Schulz (University of Zurich).

## Data Availability

Interested researchers are encouraged to contact the authors to request access to the data, which will be provided whenever feasible. For copyright and privacy reasons, the data cannot be published freely.

## LLMs Disclosure

Several co-authors used LLM-based tools when working on this article. ChatGPT and DeepL were used for translating self-written text. ChatGPT, Claude, and Copilot were used to shorten self-written text. ChatGPT, Claude, Copilot, DeepL, Grammarly, Instatext.io, and Perplexity were used for language editing of self-written text. ChatGPT was used during the analyses to help debug code when it was not running correctly. The initial texts and code were always written by the authors. All results were carefully reviewed and edited. The following author states not to have used LLMs when working on the article: Katjana Gattermann.

## Supplementary Material

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

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# Party Equalization or Normalization Through Visual Generative AI in the 2025 German Federal Election

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## Abstract

This study examines whether visual generative artificial intelligence (VGenAI) serves as an equalizing force for minor parties or reinforces existing power asymmetries in political communication. Drawing on equalization and normalization theory, we investigate party differences in VGenAI adoption, content strategies, and user engagement during the 2025 German federal election. Using a semi-automated AI detection method combining automated classification with manual validation, we analyzed Facebook and Instagram posts from 37 German parties, identifying nearly 1,000 VGenAI images and videos published by approximately 400 party accounts during the four weeks preceding election day. Findings reveal evidence for both theoretical perspectives—equalization and normalization—across analyzed dimensions. Regarding adoption, minor parties used VGenAI at higher rates than major parties, supporting the equalization hypothesis, which states that low-cost technologies enable resource-constrained actors to produce professional campaign visuals. Content strategy analysis reveals a transparency divide, with mainstream major parties disclosing AI origins more frequently than minor parties or the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD). The AfD distinguished itself as the only major party to make extensive use of photorealistic imagery, citizen depictions, criminal portrayals, and negative tone, consistent with populist communication strategies. However, engagement analysis supports normalization: While VGenAI content is associated with higher user engagement than non-AI posts, this advantage accrues equally to major and minor parties rather than providing resource-constrained actors with competitive benefits. VGenAI thus appears to be associated with broader access to professional visual production while leaving engagement asymmetries intact. These findings advance understanding of how emerging communication technologies interact with party system structures and have implications for regulatory approaches to synthetic political content.

## Keywords

artificial intelligence; election campaigns; equalization; German 2025 federal election; normalization; party competition; social media; user engagement; visual communication

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## 1. Introduction

The 2025 German federal election has been characterized as the country's first “AI election,” with observers noting how political actors increasingly deploy visual generative artificial intelligence (VGenAI) to create campaign images and videos (Muñoz & Laumann, 2024; Simon & Altay, 2025). This designation reflects a shift in the technological infrastructure of campaigning, where the diffusion of generative AI has moved from theoretical possibility to operational reality. VGenAI models such as DALL-E, Midjourney, or Grok have the potential of transforming strategic campaign communication by enabling the automated production of professional visuals in large quantities with minimal human, monetary, and time resources (Battista, 2024; Kruschinski, Jost, et al., 2025). Social networking platforms serve as distribution channels, allowing the dissemination of VGenAI content to potential voters through both organic posts and paid advertising (Bossetta, 2018; Kruschinski & Bene, 2022).

The 2025 election takes place against the backdrop of a “snap election” scenario, a context defined by compressed timelines, urgent mobilization requirements, and significant resource constraints. These structural conditions create fertile ground for VGenAI adoption, as the technology promises to decouple high-quality visual production from the traditional exigencies of time, money, and human labor. The potential of VGenAI to revolutionize strategic communication is widely acknowledged, offering the ability to mass-produce professional-grade visuals tailored to specific demographic segments with precision (Darius & Römmele, 2023; Hackenburg & Margetts, 2024).

The rapid diffusion of VGenAI in political contexts has triggered public discussions about its risks and opportunities. While proponents emphasize its potential for efficiency, personalization, and democratization between well-funded and resource-limited political actors, critics warn of deception, manipulation, and erosion of trust in democratic processes (Dan, 2025; Jungherr, 2024). These discussions have spurred regulatory initiatives, most notably the EU's AI Act, which introduces the first comprehensive legal framework for the supply and use of AI based on risk levels, with AI used to influence electoral behavior classified as high-risk (European Parliament, 2024; Jungherr, 2024).

Yet, while the normative and regulatory discourse around VGenAI has accelerated, empirical knowledge about its use in election campaigns remains scarce. Much of the existing literature addresses public attitudes towards VGenAI, analyzes perception and effects, or discusses the hypothetical risks of synthetic content through case studies (Dan, 2025; Kruschinski, Jost, et al., 2025; Simon & Altay, 2025). There is little empirical evidence of whether, how, and to what extent VGenAI technologies are being used for campaign communication on social media by political campaigns and whether such use provides electoral advantages to different types of parties. Recent content-analytic case studies (e.g., Geise et al., 2025) on Instagram usage by major German parties provide valuable first insights but do not systematically compare major and minor parties or examine engagement outcomes and reach for VGenAI campaign messages.

This study addresses these gaps by examining VGenAI use through the theoretical lens of the equalization and normalization debate, which has long characterized scholarship on digital political communication (Fischer & Gilardi, 2023; Gibson & McAllister, 2015). We investigate whether VGenAI serves as an equalizing technology that enables resource-constrained minor parties to compete against established parties, or whether traditional power asymmetries persist in the digital sphere. Specifically, we examine: How does the use of VGenAI differ by major and minor parties with regard to its prevalence (RQ1) and the content strategies (RQ2)? And does the use of VGenAI lead to more engagement for major or minor parties (RQ3)?

To answer these questions, we conducted a content analysis of nearly 1,000 VGenAI images and videos which were posted on Facebook and Instagram by almost 400 political party accounts, including candidates, and federal and local party branches, during the four weeks leading up to election day of the 2025 German federal election. We identified VGenAI images and videos using a semi-automatic detection approach where an initial automated classification was followed by manual validation by trained coders who annotated the content for communication strategies. We employ multilevel regression models to examine how party-level characteristics shape VGenAI adoption and its relationship to user engagement and visibility metrics.

This study makes three contributions. First, it provides empirical evidence on VGenAI adoption patterns across the spectrum of German parties, extending beyond the major party focus of prior work. Second, it offers one of the first analyses of whether VGenAI content generates differential engagement and visibility for different party types. Third, it advances theoretical understanding of how emerging communication technologies interact with party system structures and resource inequalities.

## 2. The Challenges and Potentials of VGenAI for Election Campaign Communication

Visual generative AI (VGenAI) refers to a type of generative AI capable of creating new images or videos from different inputs, mostly text prompts but also existing images, audio, or code (Sanseviero et al., 2025). Unlike traditional computer graphics or photo editing software, VGenAI models “imagine” new content by learning the latent statistical patterns and structural relationships within training datasets encompassing billions of images. These models learn the patterns and structures of their training imagery and use this knowledge to produce new visuals that are coherent, stylistically appropriate, and often indistinguishable from human-produced material. This is achieved through advanced machine learning architectures such as generative adversarial networks (GANs) and diffusion models, combined with transformer architectures for text-to-image and text-to-video generation (Sanseviero et al., 2025).

Examples of VGenAI models at the moment of writing include GPT Image, Midjourney, Nano Banana, and Grok Imagine, each offering different capabilities (Mollick, 2025). GPT Image, integrated into the ChatGPT ecosystem, facilitates autoregressive reasoning-based image generation with safety guardrails designed to prevent deepfakes of public figures. Midjourney is known for its artistic style and high configurability, enabling campaigns to maintain visual brand identity across multiple assets and styles (Phoenix & Taylor, 2024). Nano Banana, Google’s Gemini-based image model, is known for maintaining character consistency across edits and for targeted image editing through natural-language prompts while preventing the realistic generation of public figures. Grok Imagine, integrated directly into the X platform, offers real-time generation with fewer content restrictions, making it a potent tool for rapid-response visual commentary but also for non-consensual and politically charged synthetic imagery (Mollick, 2025). Video generation

models such as Google Veo/Omni, Higgsfield, or Kling AI extend generative capabilities to the creation of video clips.

The integration of VGenAI into political campaigning offers advantages for strategic visual campaign communication, particularly on social networking platforms as visual-dominant environments (Bossetta, 2018; Farkas, 2023). The benefit is the reduction in resources required to produce high-quality visual content. Traditional campaign imagery requires photographers, graphic designers, location scouting, and post-production time. VGenAI collapses this workflow into minutes or seconds, enabling campaigns to operate at the speed of the news cycle (Kruschinski, Jost, et al., 2025). This efficiency allows even smaller or less well-funded actors to participate competitively in digital campaigning.

Additionally, VGenAI supports visual personalization, enabling campaigns to tailor imagery to the characteristics, preferences, or emotions of specific voter segments (Darius & Römmele, 2023; Geise, 2025). Through prompt engineering, campaigns can generate variations of a core message with different settings to appeal to audiences. By adjusting style, symbolism, and narrative cues, campaigns can create visuals that maximize resonance and relevance for different demographics (Hackenburg & Margetts, 2024). The democratization potential is significant: By lowering technical and financial barriers to entry, the technology theoretically allows resource-constrained actors to compete visually with well-funded incumbents.

Despite these advantages, VGenAI also presents risks to political communication and democratic trust. Foremost is the threat of disinformation and manipulation: Photorealistic VGenAI content can create the impression of showing real objects, people, or events, enabling campaigns to enhance “visual evidence” or spread falsehoods (Battista, 2024; Dan, 2025; Kruschinski, Jost, et al., 2025). These visuals are often indistinguishable from authentic content, making it difficult for voters to detect manipulation or falsification (Kruschinski, Jost, et al., 2025; Lu & Yuan, 2024). This capability can be weaponized to fabricate evidence of scandals, illicit meetings, or embarrassing behavior. Even if debunked, such images can leave lasting impressions due to cognitive biases (Dan, 2025).

The proliferation of high-quality synthetic media creates an effect known as the “liar’s dividend” (Chesney & Citron, 2019). As the public becomes aware that any image could be fake, political actors can deny the authenticity of genuine evidence, dismissing real photos or videos as AI-generated. This skepticism erodes the epistemological foundation of public debate. There is also the risk of reinforcing stereotypes and biases because VGenAI models draw on prejudiced training data (Gillespie, 2024). Additionally, the mass production of emotionally charged, targeted visuals may fuel polarization and fragment the public sphere (Dobber et al., 2021; Jungherr, 2024). If authenticity in visual political communication is lost, trust in political actors and institutions may erode, threatening democratic legitimacy (Battista, 2024; Geise, 2025; Jungherr, 2024).

### 3. Equalization or Normalization Through VGenAI

The debate over whether digital technologies equalize or normalize political competition has been central to scholarship on political communication for over two decades (Fischer & Gilardi, 2023; Gibson & McAllister, 2015). According to the equalization hypothesis, new media levels the electoral playing field by providing smaller political parties with tools to compete more equally with established parties. The lower costs of online communication, the ability to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, and the potential for viral

content distribution are argued to reduce the resource advantages of major parties (Ward et al., 2003). The normalization hypothesis, however, suggests the opposite: Major parties continue to dominate the online space, just as they do offline, by transferring their existing resource advantages, professional expertise, and organizational capacities to new platforms (Fischer & Gilardi, 2023).

VGenAI represents an important case for examining this tension. On the one hand, VGenAI tools are accessible and user-friendly, potentially democratizing the production of professional campaign visuals. Platforms like ChatGPT or Google Gemini, which integrate these VGenAI models, allow the generation of campaign content, often rivaling the output of professional agencies (Kruschinski, Jost, et al., 2025). The marginal cost of generating a high-quality image is almost zero, offering minor parties a “leapfrog” capability. On the other hand, well-resourced parties may still maintain advantages through their ability to invest in more sophisticated tools, specialized staff, prompt engineering training, legal compliance reviews, and strategic integration of VGenAI into broader campaign infrastructures (Dommett et al., 2023). The following sections derive research questions by examining theoretical expectations and existing empirical evidence for party differences in VGenAI adoption and its effects on engagement and visibility.

### **3.1. Party Differences in VGenAI Adoption**

From a rational choice perspective, political organizations select from available communication instruments that promise the greatest benefit under election-specific conditions while weighing associated costs (Krewel, 2017). For VGenAI, this cost-benefit calculation is shaped by several party-level factors. First, financial and personnel resources remain pivotal in shaping campaigns’ adoption of new technologies (Dommett et al., 2023). Well-resourced parties such as the Christian Democratic Union (CDU/CSU), the Social Democrats (SPD), or The Greens can invest in infrastructure, specialized staff, or external expertise, allowing them to embed VGenAI into broader campaign strategies. However, VGenAI may lower barriers for less-resourced parties by enabling professional visual content production without requiring expensive agencies or specialized personnel.

Second, party institutionalization shapes VGenAI adoption, too (Darius & Römmele, 2023; Dommett et al., 2023). Established parties like CDU/CSU or SPD are often bound by centralized procedures and risk-averse cultures that create path dependencies constraining innovation (Krewel, 2017). The decision to adopt VGenAI is demanding due to its capacity to generate masses of personalized “visual evidence” which carries reputational risks if misuse is detected, potentially undermining trust and authenticity (Dan, 2025; Kruschinski, Jost, et al., 2025). In contrast, less institutionalized parties, particularly those founded during the rise of social media, have organizational flexibility and fewer traditional constraints, allowing decentralized experimentation with new technologies to establish visibility and compete for attention.

Third, self-regulation mechanisms, such as voluntary election codices or fairness agreements, set normative boundaries for campaign technology use (Kruschinski, Jost, et al., 2025; “Parteien beschließen Fairnessabkommen,” 2024). In the 2025 German federal election, several institutionalized parties signed an AI fairness agreement and publicly committed to labeling VGenAI content and avoiding synthetic impersonations (“Parteien beschließen Fairnessabkommen,” 2024). These commitments may limit the options available to signatory parties, while non-signatory parties face fewer reputational or normative constraints in using VGenAI.

Empirical evidence on VGenAI adoption in election campaigns remains limited. Geise et al. (2025) analyzed Instagram posts from major German parties during the 2025 campaign and found that the Alternative for Germany (AfD) used synthetic visuals significantly more than other parties, with VGenAI prevalence at approximately 3.8% of posts. Further, their findings suggest that VGenAI adoption may follow an equalization pattern, with minor parties more willing to experiment with the technology. However, systematic comparison across the full party spectrum remains lacking. We therefore ask:

RQ1: How does the use of VGenAI differ by major and minor parties with regard to its prevalence?

Beyond adoption rates, major and minor parties may also differ in how they deploy VGenAI content strategically. The outlined theoretical considerations suggest that party characteristics shape not only whether parties use VGenAI but also how they use it. Regarding transparency, major parties bound by self-regulatory commitments such as the AI fairness agreement may be more inclined to label VGenAI content to maintain credibility and avoid reputational damage (Kruschinski, Jost, et al., 2025; "Parteien beschließen Fairnessabkommen," 2024), while minor and non-signatory parties face fewer normative constraints to disclose synthetic origins and may therefore omit labeling to maximize persuasive impact. Concerning format, although images deliver campaign messages instantly and are shareable for rapid dissemination and strategic functions such as framing or priming (Farkas, 2023; Schill, 2012), videos offer greater narrative depth and emotional immersion through motion and sound (Haßler et al., 2023, 2024). With respect to visual realism, VGenAI offers campaigns a spectrum of styles from photorealistic depictions to illustrations, or comic-like montages (Phoenix & Taylor, 2024). Minor parties operating outside mainstream media attention may deploy photorealistic VGenAI to produce "visual evidence" for their claims about social conditions, outgroups, or political opponents, exploiting the credibility and evidentiary weight of realistic imagery without risking detection or accountability (Geise, 2025; Kruschinski, Jost, et al., 2025). Major parties face heightened scrutiny from journalists, fact-checkers, and political opponents, making deceptive photorealism a reputational liability; they may favor non-realistic styles such as cartoons or illustrations that signal creative intent rather than documentary truth, allowing them to communicate symbolism, satire, or critique while reducing the likelihood of misinformation accusations (de-Lima-Santos et al., 2024).

Personalization may also diverge between party types. VGenAI enables campaigns to create visuals of political actors, including politicians, citizens, minorities, or adversarial figures, humanizing candidates through relatable scenarios while also supporting the visualization of "idealized" citizens or social groups to signal inclusivity or solidarity (Farkas & Bene, 2021; Geise, 2025). However, the same technology can be misused for exclusionary, dog-whistle, or stereotypical depictions (Battista, 2024; Dan, 2025). In migration reporting, actors are often framed either as minorities in need of assistance or as criminals posing a threat to public safety (Bleich et al., 2015), and far-right visual communication strategies construct boundaries between a trusted in-group and threatening "others" (Awad et al., 2022; Mudde, 2007). VGenAI amplifies this capacity by enabling photorealistic depictions of criminal or stigmatized actors. While major parties may balance candidate-centered imagery with policy communication, research indicates that populist and challenger parties demonstrate a higher propensity to concentrate on leader imagery and to depict idealized or stigmatized social groups (Bast, 2024; Farkas et al., 2022). Minor parties, particularly those with populist orientations, may therefore use VGenAI to generate both personalized leader content and synthetic depictions of outgroups without the ethical constraints that bind major parties.

Finally, regarding the tonality of content, VGenAI enables campaigns to evoke enthusiasm, hope, fear, or anger through manipulation of facial expression, lighting, color, and composition (Hackenburg & Margetts, 2024). In negative campaigning, VGenAI enables the production of attack visuals that depict opponents in unflattering ways or associate rivals with stigmatized figures, amplifying distrust and provoking outrage (Kruschinski, Jost, et al., 2025). While parties generally rely more on positive than negative social media posts (Baranowski et al., 2023; Kruschinski, Haßler, et al., 2025), empirical results suggest that challenger, populist, or extreme parties are more likely to deploy negative messaging than incumbents (Baranowski et al., 2023; Farkas, 2023; Nai, 2020). Minor parties, positioned outside government and seeking to mobilize discontent, may therefore deploy VGenAI more frequently for attack content, whereas major parties with reputational concerns may maintain a predominantly positive tone.

These considerations lead to a second research question concerning content strategy differences in VGenAI deployment:

RQ2: How do major and minor parties differ in their VGenAI content strategies regarding (a) labeling and transparency, (b) realistic versus non-realistic visual styles, (c) personalization versus issue orientation, and (d) positive versus negative tonality?

### 3.2. VGenAI and User Engagement

User engagement on social media platforms represents an important metric for campaign success, as engagement signals both audience reception and algorithmic amplification potential (Bene et al., 2022). Engagement encompasses different forms of user interaction, including reactions, comments, and shares, each reflecting different levels of cognitive and behavioral investment with content (Jost et al., 2020). The question of whether VGenAI content is associated with differential engagement patterns is central to understanding its strategic value for different types of parties.

From an equalization perspective, VGenAI may enable minor parties to produce content that is associated with engagement comparable to or exceeding that of major parties. Visual content is processed more rapidly by recipients and may elicit attention and emotions more effectively than text (Geise, 2025), suggesting that high-quality VGenAI visuals could help minor parties capture audience attention regardless of their resource constraints. However, following the normalization perspective, major parties' advantages in follower bases, brand recognition, and algorithmic visibility might persist even when using VGenAI. Prior research finds that party size and incumbency status are good predictors of social media engagement (Haßler et al., 2023). Major parties benefit from larger and more active follower networks that generate baseline engagement regardless of content characteristics. Platform algorithms may favor established accounts with histories of high engagement, creating cumulative advantages that new technology adoption cannot easily overcome. Conversely, there is risk of backlash if users penalize content perceived as "fake" or "inauthentic," or if distrust is elicited by the "uncanny valley" effect, that is, the discomfort triggered when synthetic figures appear almost but not quite human (Kruschinski, Jost, et al., 2025). We therefore ask:

RQ3: Does the use of VGenAI lead to more engagement for major or minor parties?

The AfD warrants special analytical attention as a distinct category within the German party system (Heinze, 2023). It occupies a unique structural position as a populist radical-right party that holds formal major party status through substantial parliamentary representation but remains institutionally isolated through a “cordon sanitaire” applied by all established parties (Heinze, 2021, 2023). Its communication strategies differ from other major parties, including high social media engagement and populist visual framing patterns (Geise et al., 2025; Haßler et al., 2023; Jost et al., 2020). Treating the AfD as a separate analytical category in our research design prevents masking theoretically meaningful variation that would be obscured by grouping it with other major parties or by undifferentiated minor party classifications.

## 4. Data Collection and Methods

### 4.1. Data Collection

Data collection was conducted across Facebook and Instagram, which are the two most used social media platforms in Germany (Behre et al., 2025). Drawing on the application programming interface (API) of Bright Data (<https://brightdata.com>), we compiled a dataset covering all organic posts ( $N = 68,994$ ; see Supplementary File Section A.1 for breakdown per party) published from more than 5,000 political party accounts in the four weeks leading up to election Sunday (24.01.2025–23.02.2025). Bright Data’s API delivers structured JSON access to publicly available content while complying with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR); we validated reliability against the Meta Content Library API on five accounts and found no differences in post counts or content (see Supplementary File Sections A.2–A.5 for full details of the validation and data collection infrastructure). The dataset included the official social media pages of national and local party branches, individual candidates, and affiliated actors such as youth organizations or regional representations. Our analysis includes 37 German parties spanning the full spectrum of the party system, from eight major established parties to 29 minor parties (see Supplementary File Section A.1 for detailed information on party characteristics). We define major parties as those represented by at least five members in the Bundestag or a state parliament, comprising the SPD, The Greens, The Liberals (FDP), CDU/CSU, The Left, AfD, the left-wing nationalistic Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht, and center-right Freie Wähler. These hold between 2,600 and 495,000 members, received between 4.3% and 22.6% of the 2025 second vote, and reported campaign budgets between €6m and €28m. All other parties are understood as minor parties that contested the election, ranging ideologically from far-left to far-right, holding between 56 and 54,292 members, and each receiving under 1.5% of the 2025 second vote.

### 4.2. Semi-Automated VGenAI Detection

To identify VGenAI content, we developed a two-step semi-automated detection process. In the first step, all images and video stills from the collected posts were automatically classified using the commercial AI image detection model provided by Sightengine (<https://sightengine.com>). This model ranks the probability of an input image to be AI-generated based on the analyses of visual content, i.e., pixel-level information such as texture anomalies, color patterns, and compositional logic, rather than relying on metadata (Li et al., 2024). Thus, it does not condition on party identity, visual content categories, or political content but bases decisions instead on technical image properties (e.g., post-processing, compression, specific generator types). Sightengine is trained on real images and AI-generated outputs from VGenAI models including Midjourney, Stable Diffusion, DALL-E, Adobe Firefly, Grok, and others. For each image, the Sightengine API returns a

probability score between 0 and 1 indicating the likelihood of AI generation (see Supplementary File Section B for the technical description of the architecture, API parameters, and preprocessing).

The Sightengine model's performance reveals both strengths and limitations. On the one hand, the model's reliability has been validated in a benchmarking study of over 40 VGenAI image detection tools (Li et al., 2024). It ranked among the most accurate commercial solutions across several detection tasks, with up to 98% of random positive-negative pairs (ROC-AUC 98%), assigning a higher score to the positive case than to the negative, which indicates very strong rank-ordering. Sightengine showed high generalization capacity across different image types and stylistic variations. On the other hand, we evaluated Sightengine's performance on a held-out validation set of 2,115 images (563 AI-generated, 27% base rate), showing adequate performance: At our chosen threshold (0.5), about two flagged images had to be reviewed for every true VGenAI image recovered, and roughly 30% of true cases went undetected. A more permissive threshold (0.1) lowered the miss rate to about 18% but nearly doubled the review burden. We kept the permissive threshold because manual coding was still tractable (see Supplementary File Section B.5 for full performance metrics and threshold comparisons). In sum, the model prioritizes precision over recall, meaning it rarely labels real images as VGenAI but misses some, introducing a risk of undercounting VGenAI use in our dataset and potentially biasing findings toward more conservative estimates of adoption rates. This discrepancy may reflect differences in test datasets and the specific detection challenges posed by real political campaign visuals. These often include slogans, logos, or other elements in the foreground of the VGenAI content, possibly influencing the Sightengine model's performance. However, for our research purposes of analyzing a large-scale dataset where manual coding of all posts would be prohibitively resource-intensive, the Sightengine detection model functions as a first-stage filter that minimizes false positives while enabling human verification of flagged content. Thus, our findings should be interpreted as lower-bound estimates rather than definitive measurements of VGenAI prevalence.

In a second step, visuals that received an AI probability score of 0.1 or higher from the Sightengine model were passed on to trained human coders. They confirmed or rejected the model's classification by coding whether the visual content was clearly AI-generated, likely AI-generated, or human-made. For the coding decisions, contextual information could be considered, including accompanying text, user comments, platform-provided labels, or Google image searches (see Supplementary File Section C.2 for coding instructions of manual AI detection). All 945 confirmed AI-generated posts were further coded for transparency, and communication strategies along the following five dimensions with binary coding as present (1) or absent (0), with multiple codings permitted per post (see Supplementary File Section C.1 for detailed coding instructions): First, VGenAI content was reviewed for transparency indicators, including the presence of disclaimers within the image/video (e.g., notes, model disclaimers, or Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity [C2PA] labels), in the accompanying post text (e.g., "This image was created with Midjourney"; "AI was used"), or platform-added disclaimers (e.g., "AI Info"; "Made with AI"; "Synthetic content"). Second, coders identified the visual styles, distinguishing between realistic depictions that give the impression of showing real objects, people, or events (photorealistic or real-seeming content) versus non-realistic styles such as comics, drawings, cartoons, illustrations, or graphics that clearly do not attempt to simulate reality (see Figure 1 for examples). Third, for personalization we coded all actors shown in the visuals, distinguishing between national or international party elites, generic citizens representing the broader electorate, minority groups, actors framed as illegals/criminals, and other political or non-political public figures. Coding decisions for non-political actors accounted for how the sender frames each actor; for

example, migrants may be framed as “minorities who need help” or as “criminals who need to be deported” (see Figure 1, both rows, second last image). The criminal versus minority framing reflects established categories in migration reporting (Bleich et al., 2015) and far-right visual othering strategies that construct boundaries between in-groups and threatening “others” (Awad et al., 2022; Mudde, 2007). Fourth, positive and negative tonality was coded based on the impression conveyed by all post elements (texts, images, and videos) as perceived by an average reader, capturing whether the post expressed positive or negative statements, emotions, or visual framings about problems, topics, or political actors (see Figure 1 for examples). Finally, topics were coded to capture the substantive focus of VGenAI content. The central theme of each post was determined based on the primary subject matter, which could include specific policy issues or political or social debates. Topic categories included economy and finance (e.g., taxes, inflation, trade policy, agricultural policy), labor and social issues (e.g., healthcare, family policy, employment), domestic policy and security, immigration, environmental and energy policy, and European Union affairs, among others.

All coding was conducted by four coders trained on the coding scheme and training protocol, where stepwise coder testing allowed to resolve questions and discrepancies through discussion and, where necessary, adjudicated by a supervising researcher. Inter-coder reliability was assessed on a random subsample of 52 posts, confirming consistent application of the coding scheme across the coder team (Holsti’s CR  $\geq 0.88$ ; Krippendorff’s  $\alpha \geq 0.67$  across all categories; see Supplementary File Section C.1 for category-level reliability values). Especially important was the high agreement for the detection of VGenAI content (Holsti’s CR = 0.98; Krippendorff’s  $\alpha = 0.97$ ) so that the “human-in-the-loop” detection approach ensured a high degree of transparency and reliability while maintaining scalability for large-scale monitoring.



Figure 1. Examples of content categories in VGenAI posts.

### 4.3. Measures

#### 4.3.1. Party Classification

To examine differences in VGenAI adoption and engagement between major and minor parties (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3), we classify parties based on parliamentary representation. Major party status is a binary indicator coded 1 for parties represented by at least five members in the Bundestag or a state parliament and 0 otherwise (see Supplementary File Section A.1). This threshold corresponds to the minimum size for formal recognition as a parliamentary group (*Fraktion*) in most German state parliaments, conferring procedural rights, staff resources, and speaking time (Ismayr, 2012). *Ideology* is operationalized as a categorical variable with six categories: far-left, left, center-left, center-right, right, and far-right. Because, to our knowledge, no comprehensive expert ratings or classifications exist for all parties in the sample, particularly for minor parties, we derived ideology scores from the descriptive labels reported in the column “Political position/ideology” in Supplementary File Section A.1. For example, parties’ political position/ideology described as “social democracy” were coded as center-left, “democratic socialism” as left, “Christian democracy, conservatism” as center-right, and “völkisch nationalism, right-wing populism” as far-right.

#### 4.3.2. Content Strategy Variables

To analyze content strategy differences (RQ2), we constructed five variables from the coded content categories:

1. *Transparency* is a binary variable indicating whether any labeling was present across the three coded disclosure locations; posts with at least one disclosure indicator in the image/video, post text, or platform label were coded as labeled (1), all others as unlabeled (0).
2. *Format* distinguishes static images from video content (image = 0, video = 1).
3. *Visual realism* indicates whether the visual content gives the impression of showing real objects, people, or events (realistic = 1) or clearly does not attempt to simulate reality, such as graphics, drawings, cartoons, or illustrations (non-realistic = 0).
4. *Personalization* is coded as present (1) when any person was depicted in the visual, concentrating on national politicians, generic citizens, and actors framed as illegals/criminals. Further, posts depicting any of the issues available to code were classified as issue-oriented.
5. *Tonality* was derived from the separate positive and negative tendency codings.

#### 4.3.3. User Engagement

To examine user engagement, we measure the total number of user interactions with a post (RQ3). We operationalize user engagement as total interactions (likes, reactions, comments, and shares on Facebook; likes and comments on Instagram). This aggregated measure is standard in comparative political social media research (Bene et al., 2022; Kruschinski & Bene, 2022). We adopt this approach because the equalization-normalization framework concerns overall visibility rather than specific interaction types. Disaggregating by interaction type would reduce statistical power given the limited number of VGenAI posts for most parties and raise multiple testing concerns. We acknowledge that comments may capture qualitatively different dimensions of political deliberation and note this as a direction for future research.

#### 4.3.4. Days to Election

*Days to election* is a continuous variable that captures the temporal distance between the posting date and election day.

#### 4.4. Analytical Strategy

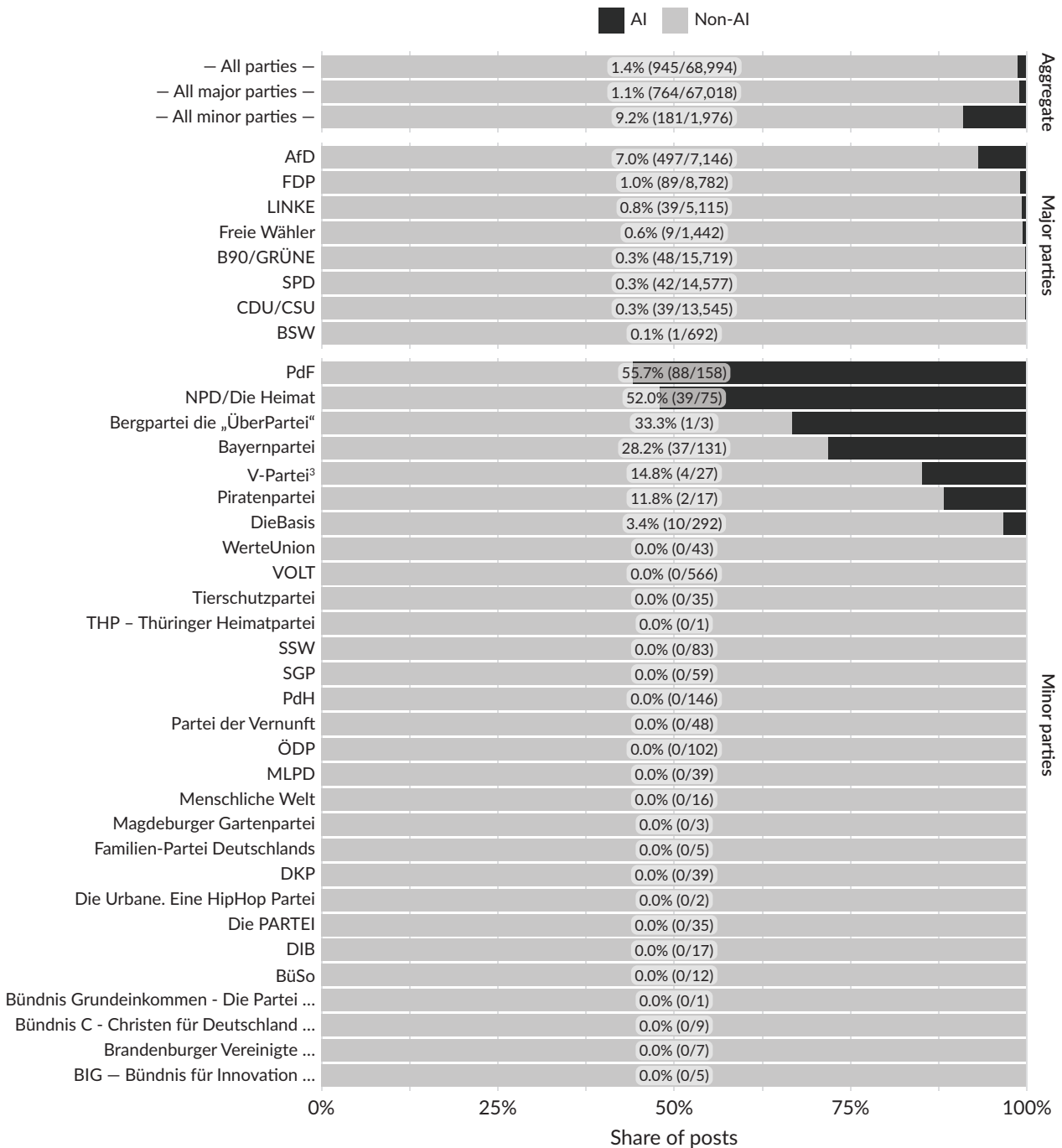
We employ multilevel regression models to account for the nested structure of posts within parties. For RQ1, we use descriptive analysis and logistic regression to examine party-level predictors of VGenAI adoption. For RQ2 and RQ3, we estimate multilevel models with random intercepts for parties, predicting engagement and views from VGenAI status, party characteristics, and their interactions. To test whether the effects of VGenAI differ by party type, we include an interaction term between AI-generated content and minor party status.

### 5. Results

Before addressing the research questions, we provide descriptive results about the share of VGenAI posts among the total number of posts (see Figure 2). Only about 1.4% of all organic posts contained AI-generated visuals ( $\approx 945$  of 68,994). Among the major parties, the figure was comparatively lower, at 1.1% ( $\approx 764$  of 67,018), whereas minor parties used VGenAI far more frequently, reaching around 9.2% ( $\approx 181$  of 1,976). Within the group of established parties, the AfD stands out as the only significant adopter, with around 7% of its social media posts featuring VGenAI images and videos. By contrast, FDP used VGenAI in only about 1% of its posts, The Left in less than 1%, and CDU/CSU, The Greens, and SPD each in only about 0.3%. Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht's use was essentially negligible, with a single post including VGenAI. This means that, with the sole exception of the AfD, the major parties treated VGenAI as a marginal or experimental addition to their visual social media communication.

Smaller parties, however, displayed a markedly different pattern. The Partei des Fortschritts (PdF) integrated VGenAI in more than half of its posts, at about 56%. National Democratic Party of Germany/The Homeland (NPD/Die Heimat) followed closely with around 52%. Other small actors also relied heavily on AI-generated visuals: Bergpartei posted them in about a third of its output, Bayernpartei in nearly 28%, V-Partei<sup>3</sup> in roughly 15%, and the Piratenpartei in around 12%. For these actors, VGenAI was not a rare experiment but a central stylistic resource. Most other smaller parties however did not utilize VGenAI content at all.

Of the 945 VGenAI posts, only 11.2% included an AI disclaimer in the image/video, and 1.9% in the post text. Regarding visual style, 70.4% depicted photorealistic content, 22.8% were clearly non-realistic (graphics, drawings, cartoons, or illustrations), and 6.9% combined both. The most frequent topics were immigration/migration (34.1%), voting appeals (23.5%), economy/finance (21.7%), labor/social policy (19.3%), and environment/energy (19.0%). Persons appeared in 80.2% of posts, with citizens as the most depicted actor (57.0%), followed by minorities (7.5%), Friedrich Merz (6.2%), and actors framed as criminals (4.1%). A majority of posts contained positive tonality (71.4%), primarily praising the publishing party itself, while 58.1% contained negative tonality, with attacks targeting CDU/CSU (17.6%), the federal government (14.0%), and Grüne (9.6%). Posts frequently combined positive and negative elements.



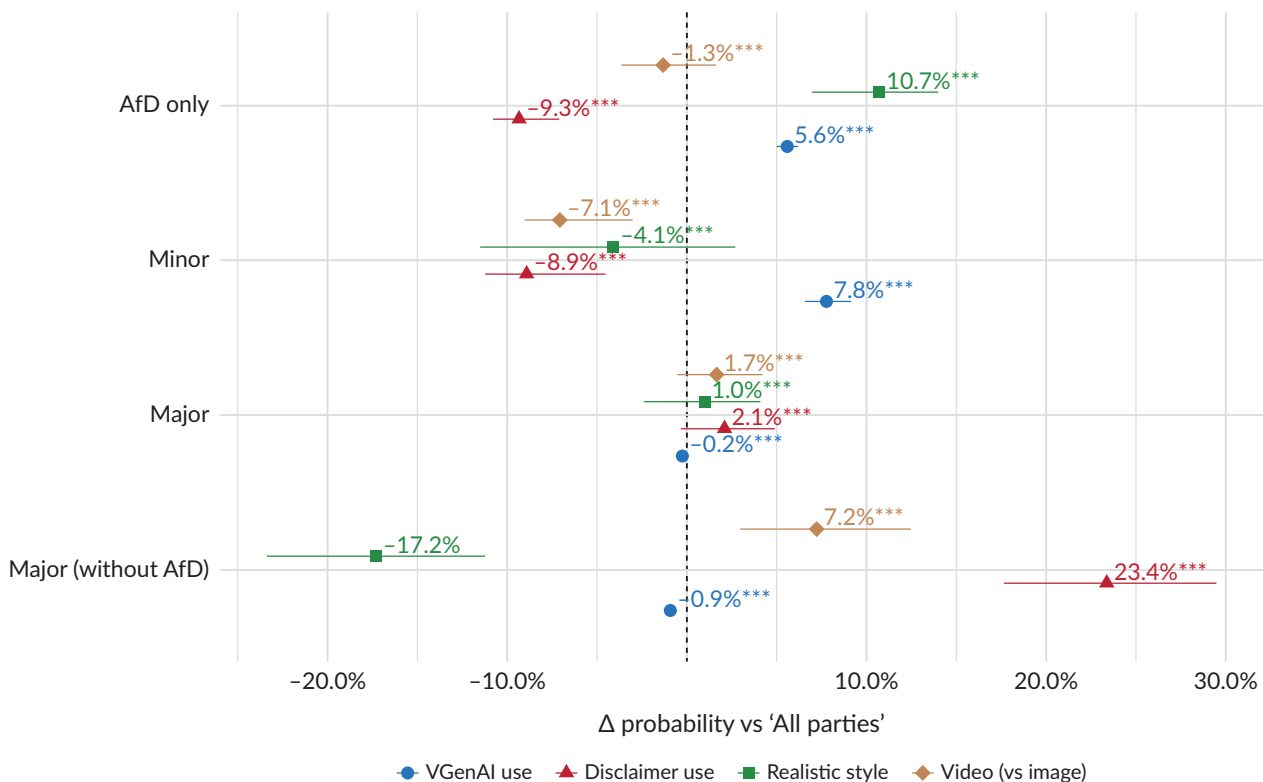
**Figure 2.** Share of VGenAI posts per party.

To address RQ1, we calculated group-level probabilities of VGenAI use by aggregating all posts of the four party groups (Major without AfD, Major, Minor, AfD only). For each group, we computed the proportion of posts containing VGenAI together with binomial confidence intervals. We then derived differences relative to the overall proportion of VGenAI posts across all parties. This procedure provides interpretable percentage-point deviations from the reference level of synthetic image and video use.

Across all posts, VGenAI use is low for the major party groups and substantially higher for minor parties and the AfD (see Figure 3, blue). Major parties excluding the AfD show the lowest probability of VGenAI use (0.4%;  $\Delta = -0.9$  percentage points vs. all parties,  $p < .001$ ). The broader major-party category reaches a slightly higher level (1.1%;  $\Delta = -0.2$  points,  $p < .001$ ), indicating only limited adoption among established actors. Minor parties show markedly higher use (9.2%;  $\Delta = +7.8$  points,  $p < .001$ ), making them the most active group in generating synthetic visuals. The AfD displays an elevated probability as well (7.0%;  $\Delta = +5.6$  points,  $p < .001$ ).

Taken together, these findings reveal a clear pattern: Minor parties and the AfD employ VGenAI substantially more frequently than major parties, with minor or challenger parties making more intensive use of AI-based visual tools, whereas major parties, particularly the mainstream non-AfD segment, use such tools only sparingly.

To address RQ2, we compared how major and minor parties differed in their content strategies when using VGenAI. For all AI-generated posts, we calculated the group-level probability that a given content feature occurred and contrasted each estimate with the overall prevalence among all parties. The resulting percentage-point deviations from the campaign-wide reference indicate whether specific party families disproportionately relied on particular stylistic, thematic, or tonal choices when deploying VGenAI images and videos (see Figure 3).



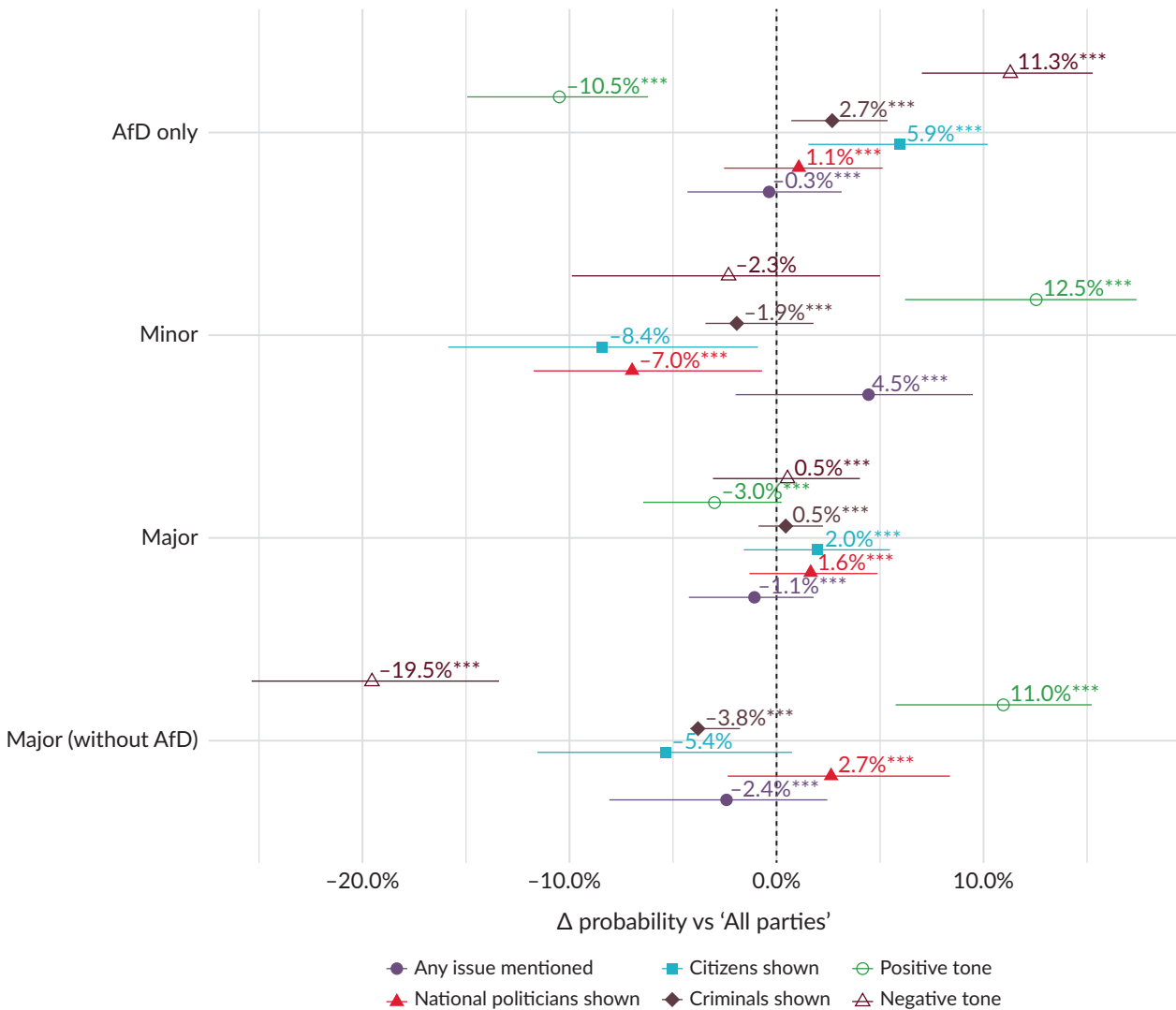
**Figure 3.** Group-level probabilities of VGenAI use in general, and disclaimer use, realistic style, and video use in VGenAI content. Notes: \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ ; markers show percentage-point deviations from the overall proportion of VGenAI use across all parties, with 95% binomial confidence intervals; deviations without an asterisk are not statistically significant.

Clear differences emerge in transparency practices (see Figure 3 red). Major parties excluding the AfD used disclaimers most frequently, with 36.7% of their AI-generated visuals carrying a transparency marker, which corresponds to a strong positive deviation from the all-party reference level ( $\Delta = +23.4$  points,  $p < .001$ ). The broader major-party category also reported slightly elevated disclosure rates (15.4%;  $\Delta = +2.1$  points,  $p < .001$ ). In contrast, minor parties (4.4%;  $\Delta = -8.9$  points,  $p < .001$ ) and the AfD (4.0%;  $\Delta = -9.3$  points,  $p < .001$ ) rarely labeled synthetic visuals. This pattern indicates a transparency divide, with established mainstream parties disclosing AI use more consistently than both challenger parties and the AfD.

Parties also differed in the visual style of their AI-generated content (see Figure 3 green). The AfD made the most extensive use of realistic imagery, with 81.1% of its synthetic visuals appearing realistic and a positive deviation from the all-party average ( $\Delta = +10.7$  points,  $p < .001$ ). Regarding format choice (see Figure 3 orange), major parties excluding the AfD used AI-generated videos more often than other groups (17.6%;  $\Delta = +7.2$  points,  $p < .001$ ), whereas minor parties relied overwhelmingly on images (3.3%;  $\Delta = -7.1$  points,  $p < .001$ ). These results suggest that the visual presentation of VGenAI is not uniform across parties: The AfD tends toward realistic renderings, whereas mainstream actors differ in their preference for formats but rely more heavily than minor parties on video-based content.

Further, issue orientation was widespread across all groups, with only minor deviations (see Figure 4 lilac). Minor parties showed the highest likelihood of mentioning policy issues in their AI posts (82.9%;  $\Delta = +4.5$  points,  $p < .001$ ), followed by the AfD with a value close to the overall reference (78.1%;  $\Delta = -0.3$  points,  $p < .001$ ). Major parties—also without the AfD—displayed slightly lower probabilities, although both deviations remained small in substantive terms. In contrast, personalization patterns were more distinctive (see Figure 4 brown). Major parties, both including and excluding the AfD, most frequently depicted national politicians in AI-generated visuals (24.1 resp. 25.1%;  $\Delta \approx +1.6$  resp.  $+2.7$  points,  $p < .001$ ), whereas minor parties used political personalization considerably less often (15.5%;  $\Delta = -7.0$  points,  $p < .001$ ). Depictions of citizens revealed another divergence with the AfD showing citizens most frequently (63.0%;  $\Delta = +5.9$  points,  $p < .001$ ), exceeding major-parties. The portrayal of criminals supplied yet another distinguishing feature. The AfD employed such depictions far more often than any other group (6.8%;  $\Delta = +2.7$  points,  $p < .001$ ), whereas major parties excluding the AfD almost never did so (0.4%;  $\Delta = -3.8$  points,  $p < .001$ ), and minor parties also fell below the system-wide average ( $\Delta = -1.9$  points,  $p < .001$ ).

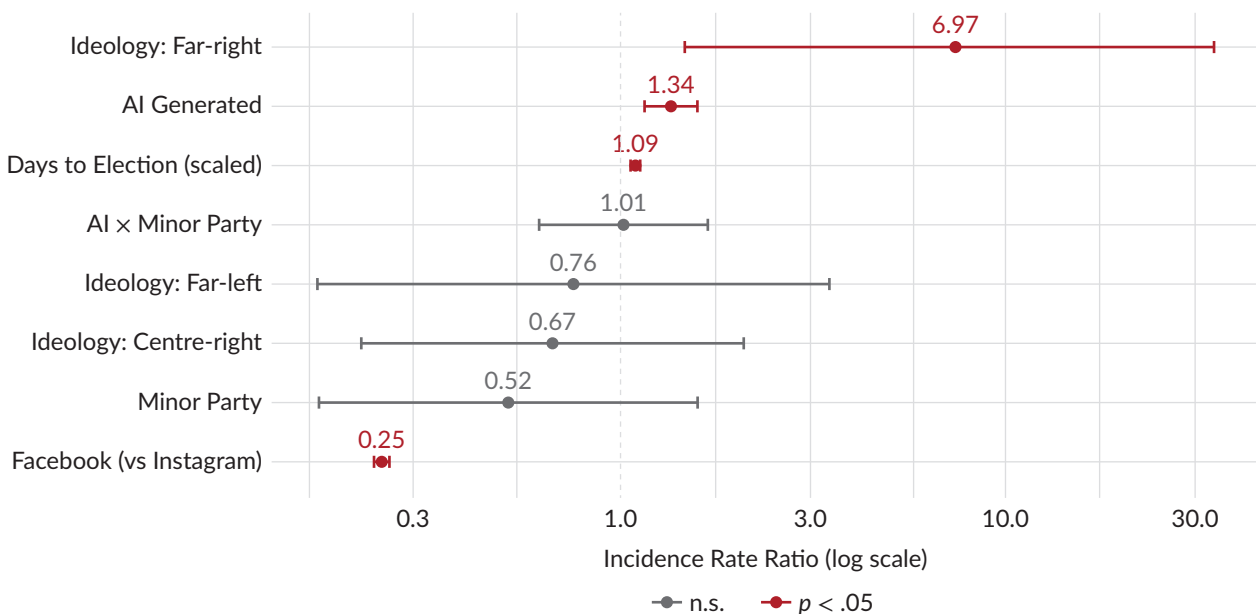
Tone further differentiated the party groups (see Figure 4 green and dark red). Major parties excluding the AfD and minor parties expressed positive tonality in their VGenAI content most frequently (82.4 resp. 84.0%;  $\Delta = +11$  resp.  $+12.5$  points,  $p < .001$ ). The AfD, by contrast, showed positive tone in only 61.0% of its AI-generated posts, falling markedly below the overall level ( $\Delta = -10.5$  points,  $p < .001$ ). Negative tone showed the reverse result. The AfD relied on negative tonal cues the most (69.4%;  $\Delta = +11.3$  points,  $p < .001$ ), while major parties excluding the AfD were the least likely to use them (38.6%;  $\Delta = -19.5$  points,  $p < .001$ ). Minor parties displayed negative tone at roughly the overall rate, producing no statistically significant deviation from the campaign average.



**Figure 4.** Group-level probabilities of issues and persons mentioned, as well as positive and negative tone used in VGenAI content. Notes: \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ ; markers show percentage-point deviations from the overall proportion across all parties, with 95% binomial confidence intervals; deviations without an asterisk are not statistically significant.

To examine whether VGenAI content is associated with differential engagement for major versus minor parties (RQ3), we estimated a multilevel negative binomial regression predicting user engagement from AI-generated content, party characteristics, and their interaction, with random intercepts for parties (see Figure 5). The model reveals several noteworthy patterns. AI-generated content is associated with significantly higher engagement than non-AI content (IRR = 1.34, 95% CI [1.15, 1.56],  $p < .001$ ), indicating that VGenAI posts receive approximately 34% more user interactions than non-AI posts. However, the interaction between AI-generated content and minor party status is not statistically significant (IRR = 1.01, 95% CI [0.62, 1.65],  $p = .96$ ), suggesting that the engagement advantage from VGenAI does not differ meaningfully between major and minor parties. Minor parties show lower engagement overall, though this effect does not reach conventional significance levels (IRR = 0.52, 95% CI [0.17, 1.56],  $p = .24$ ). Platform differences are substantial. Posts on Facebook receive markedly less engagement than those on Instagram (IRR = 0.25, 95% CI [0.24, 0.26],  $p < .001$ ), reflecting approximately 75% lower interaction rates. Temporal

dynamics also matter: Engagement increases as election day approaches (IRR = 1.09, 95% CI [1.07, 1.11],  $p < .001$ ). Ideological positioning emerges as a powerful predictor. Far-right parties generate substantially higher engagement than the center-left reference category (IRR = 6.97, 95% CI [1.45, 33.54],  $p < .05$ ), consistent with prior findings on populist parties' social media performance. Other ideological positions do not differ significantly from the reference level. Taken together, these findings provide mixed evidence for the equalization hypothesis. While VGenAI content does generate an engagement premium, this advantage accrues equally to both major and minor parties rather than providing resource-constrained actors with a distinctive competitive edge. The absence of a significant interaction effect suggests that VGenAI does not equalize competition by disproportionately benefiting minor parties. Instead, VGenAI is associated with engagement gains distributed uniformly across the party spectrum, leaving pre-existing structural advantages intact, a pattern consistent with normalization.



**Figure 5.** Multilevel negative binomial regression (IRR with 95% CI) predicting user engagement from AI-generated content, party characteristics, and their interaction. Notes: Random intercepts for party; reference categories—non-AI content, major party, Instagram, and center-left ideology.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined whether VGenAI serves as an equalizing technology for minor parties or reinforces existing power asymmetries in German electoral competition. Drawing on content analysis of Facebook and Instagram posts from 37 parties during the 2025 federal election campaign, we investigated party differences in VGenAI adoption and content strategies, as well as its effects on user engagement. Our findings yield different evidence for the equalization and normalization hypotheses across distinct dimensions of digital campaigning (Fischer & Gilardi, 2023; Gibson & McAllister, 2015; Ward et al., 2003).

Regarding VGenAI prevalence (RQ1), our findings provide support for the equalization hypothesis. Minor parties adopted VGenAI at higher rates than major parties, suggesting that VGenAI's low marginal production costs enable resource-constrained actors to generate professional campaign imagery that would otherwise require expensive agencies or specialized personnel (Darius & Römmele, 2023; Kruschinski, Jost,

et al., 2025). However, the elevated VGenAI use among the AfD—as already shown by Geise et al. (2025)—complicates a straightforward equalization interpretation. As a parliamentary party with substantial resources, the AfD’s intensive deployment of synthetic visuals also reflects a strategic choice and not only resource constraints, suggesting that party ideology and norm orientation may shape technology adoption alongside material factors (Dommett et al., 2023).

The analysis of content strategies (RQ2) reveals that major and minor parties deploy synthetic visuals in different ways. A transparency divide emerged, with major parties excluding the AfD disclosing AI origins far more frequently than minor parties or the AfD. This reflects the constraining effect of self-regulatory commitments on mainstream major parties while highlighting how minor parties exploit the absence of normative pressure to maximize impact through undisclosed synthetic content (Kruschinski, Jost, et al., 2025). Visual realism choices followed party-specific logics: The AfD made extensive use of photorealistic imagery, consistent with our theoretical argument that parties less constrained by mainstream normative and reputational pressures may deploy “visual evidence” without substantial accountability risk (Geise, 2025; Kruschinski, Jost, et al., 2025). Major parties, facing heightened scrutiny, favored non-realistic styles that signal creative intent while avoiding misinformation accusations (de-Lima-Santos et al., 2024; Phoenix & Taylor, 2024). Personalization and tonal patterns revealed further strategic differentiation. The AfD concentrated on citizen depictions, uniquely employed visuals of criminals, and relied on negative tone, aligning with populist communication strategies that emphasize people-centrism while stigmatizing outgroups (Bast, 2024; Farkas et al., 2022; Jost et al., 2020). Minor parties showed lower personalization overall, suggesting their VGenAI use serves different communicative functions focused on issue advocacy rather than affective mobilization (Farkas & Bene, 2021).

The engagement analysis (RQ3) provides a further test of whether VGenAI alters competitive dynamics between party types. Here, our findings support the normalization hypothesis. While VGenAI content is associated with significant engagement compared to non-AI posts, this advantage accrues equally to major and minor parties. The absence of a differential effect indicates that synthetic visuals do not provide resource-constrained actors with distinctive competitive advantages in audience reach. VGenAI functions as a technology that boosts engagement uniformly across the party spectrum, leaving pre-existing structural advantages largely intact (Fischer & Gilardi, 2023; Gibson & McAllister, 2015; Ward et al., 2003). Major parties continue to benefit from larger follower bases, stronger brand recognition, and algorithmic visibility that translate into superior absolute engagement regardless of content characteristics (Haßler et al., 2023). The strong association between far-right ideology and engagement aligns with prior research on populist parties’ social media performance (Bene et al., 2022; Jost et al., 2020) and suggests that ideological positioning may matter more for engagement than technology adoption.

Our findings have broader implications for understanding AI-driven disruption in electoral contexts. The equalization–normalization debate has historically been contested partly because contextual factors shape technology effects. Multi-party proportional representation systems such as Germany may amplify equalization dynamics compared to two-party systems where major parties maintain structural monopolies. The EU’s AI Act creates a regulatory context absent elsewhere, potentially limiting the international applicability of our transparency findings. Platform-specific dynamics may differ substantially for TikTok, which has distinct user demographics and algorithmic mechanisms from Facebook and Instagram. Most fundamentally, VGenAI lowers production barriers without altering structural advantages in follower bases,

brand recognition, and media attention. This suggests that concerns about AI-driven democratic disruption may be overstated relative to transparency and authenticity concerns about who uses synthetic content and how.

Regarding alignment with the EU's AI Act, Article 50 mandates labeling of AI-generated content. Our findings document a gap between regulatory aspirations and actual practice. Voluntary self-regulatory measures for the 2025 campaign, including AI transparency commitments, voluntary election codices, and fairness agreements (Kruschinski, Jost, et al., 2025; "Parteien beschließen Fairnessabkommen," 2024) appear to have had differential effects: Mainstream parties showed higher labeling rates reflecting compliance motivation, while the AfD and minor parties showed minimal compliance. This variation aligns with our theoretical expectations regarding self-regulatory constraints on mainstream parties versus absence of normative pressure on challenger and extreme parties.

Several limitations qualify our findings. First, our VGenAI detection approach, while validated, likely undercounts actual VGenAI prevalence due to the emphasis on precision over recall in the automated classification stage, meaning our estimates should be interpreted as conservative lower-bound figures. The classifier may miss outputs from newly released generators not yet represented in its training data, and heavily edited images where AI-generated elements are composited with authentic photographs or overlaid with party logos and typographic elements may evade detection because such modifications alter the pixel-level features the classifier relies upon. This is consequential for political campaign visuals, which routinely incorporate such overlays. Performance may also vary across image types, which could introduce systematic bias if certain parties disproportionately use visual styles. The proprietary nature of the model further limits full transparency regarding its architecture and training data, constraining independent replicability. However, our semi-automated approach mitigates some of these limitations by combining the automated classifier with manual validation, ensuring high precision in the final classifications. Second, focusing exclusively on institutionalized political actors overlooks potentially more extensive VGenAI usage by non-institutionalized actors, activists, and coordinated networks who may shape electoral discourse in important ways. Third, most fundamentally, the observational, cross-sectional design does not permit causal inference regarding the relationship between VGenAI use and engagement outcomes. Unobserved confounders such as campaign spending, media attention, and content quality may co-occur with both VGenAI adoption and engagement patterns. The associations reported should therefore be interpreted as descriptive rather than causal. Fourth, platform-specific constraints in API access may introduce selection biases into the dataset. Fifth, the specific context of the 2025 German snap election, with its compressed campaign timeline and particular party constellation, may limit generalizability to other settings. Sixth, the analysis does not account for content categories or thematic features of posts. Prior research shows that message characteristics such as tone, emotionality, issue focus, and negativity influence engagement and views, meaning that unobserved content factors may confound the estimated association between VGenAI use and performance metrics.

Future research should incorporate content-level classifications to disentangle the effects of VGenAI from those of message characteristics known to shape audience responses. Extending analyses to other platforms, particularly TikTok where younger demographics concentrate, would further broaden the empirical base. Work that includes non-institutionalized actors is needed to understand the full ecosystem of synthetic political content. Comparative studies across regulatory environments will help identify how legal

frameworks shape VGenAI adoption and effects. As VGenAI capabilities advance toward increasingly indistinguishable synthetic content, systematic research on its political applications remains essential for safeguarding the informational foundations of democratic decision-making. In this regard, our research informed the development of CampAlignTracker.de, a platform that makes all detected AI-generated campaign images and videos publicly accessible, thereby helping to bring transparency to digital campaigning in times of VGenAI.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Data Availability

For copyright and privacy reasons, the data cannot be published freely. Interested researchers are encouraged to contact the authors to request access to the data, which will be provided whenever feasible.

### LLMs Disclosure

LLMs (Claude; Claude Code) were used for language polishing and reference formatting. All analytical decisions, coding, and interpretations are the authors' own.

### Supplementary Material

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

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