

Popularity on Facebook During Election Campaigns: An Analysis of Issues and Emotions in Parties' Online Communication

SINA BLASSNIG
LINARDS UDRIS
ANNA STAENDER
DANIEL VOGLER

University of Zurich, Switzerland

Successful communication strategies on social media are of great concern for parties' election campaigns. Research increasingly focuses on identifying which factors promote popularity cues (e.g., Likes or Shares) as indicators of success. However, existing studies have neglected the role of issues in multiparty environments. Furthermore, it is still unclear whether positive or negative emotions are the stronger drivers of user engagement. We investigate parties' emphasis on political issues and emotions as success factors in their election campaign communication on Facebook. We analyze the Facebook pages of the 6 largest parties in Germany and Austria before the respective national elections in 2017. We find that parties' top issues, identity issues, and positive and negative emotions increase popularity cues. Yet these factors trigger different types of reactions: Whereas Shares are triggered by the use of top issues and positive emotions, Comments are evoked by identity issues and predominantly by negative emotions.

Keywords: social media, political communication, popularity cues, political parties, elections

Social media play an increasingly important role in political communication. Political actors can benefit from using social media communication and, for instance, attract new party members (e.g., Gibson, Greffet, & Cantijoch, 2017), positively impact voting behavior (e.g., Kovic, Rauchfleisch, Metag, Caspar, & Szenogrady, 2017), or help set the agenda of traditional mass media and improve parties' visibility therein (e.g., Parmelee, 2014). A common indicator used to analyze parties' success on social media is the user response via Likes, Shares, or Comments, which are often summarized under the term "popularity cues" (Porten-Cheé, Haßler, Jost, Eilders, & Maurer, 2018). On the one hand, such reactions indicate the reach of content and the attention it receives within social media platforms. On the other hand, high social media popularity may render political actors and their messages more newsworthy (Fürst & Oehmer, 2018) and give them increased attention in traditional media (Chadwick, 2017). Consequently, politicians are

Sina Blassnig: s.blassnig@ikmz.uzh.ch

Linards Udris: l.udris@ikmz.uzh.ch

Anna Staender: a.staender@ikmz.uzh.ch

Daniel Vogler: daniel.vogler@foeg.uzh.ch

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compelled to circulate social media messages that are expected to have a high “spreadability” (Mills, 2012, p. 166) or “shareworthiness” (Trilling, Tolochko, & Burscher, 2016, p. 38).

Despite increasing research on how factors on the profile-level and post-level affect user engagement on parties’ Facebook pages, issue characteristics have been rather neglected (for exceptions, see Eberl, Tolochko, Jost, Heidenreich, & Boomgaarden, 2020; Heiss, Schmuck, & Matthes, 2019). This is a shortcoming because issues are highly important means for parties to highlight which political problems are worth solving and what parties stand for. Especially in multiparty systems where different parties have ownership of different issues such as state budget or immigration and thus strive to bring their issues to the forefront, the question is which issues and which issue characteristics affect user engagement.

Parties do not only differ in *what* they choose to communicate about on social media but also in *how* they present the content. Consequently, research shows that the political issue itself as well as the form of presentation drive user engagement. Especially emotions have been shown to be drivers of user engagement with messages of political parties or politicians (Bene, 2017; Eberl et al., 2020; Heiss et al., 2019). Most studies capture emotions by measuring sentiment or tone in social media posts with manual (e.g., Bene, 2017) or automated content analysis (e.g., Eberl et al., 2020). Studies that investigate the effects of discrete emotions like hope, fear, or anger on popularity cues are rare (for an exception, see Heiss et al., 2019). Therefore, the current literature might miss more subtle effects of the spectrum of human emotions on popularity cues.

There are also open questions about the concept of user engagement itself because it can take different forms, often depending on the technical affordances provided by the platforms. Many studies have either focused on total numbers of social media reactions (e.g., Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018a, 2018b; Staender, Ernst, & Steppat, 2019) or specific types of reactions—for example, the newer emotional Facebook Reactions (e.g., Eberl et al., 2020). From a strategic communication perspective, it seems fruitful to differentiate between Shares, Likes, and Comments as these types of popularity cues fulfill different functions on Facebook. Shares, for instance, increase the reach of a post, whereas Comments can serve as an indicator for more immediate engagement with the content. Investigating the effects of variables on different types of popularity cues on the aggregate-level, thus, misses an opportunity for more in-depth insights on logics of political communication on Facebook.

In this study, we build on and extend existing research by investigating the effects of issues and emotions in parties’ Facebook communication on user engagement in the form of Likes, Reactions, Shares, and Comments. We use the case of parties’ Facebook communication during the election campaigns 2017 in Germany and Austria, two Western European countries with similar multiparty systems. We analyze 1,268 Facebook posts of 13 political parties, linking parties’ activities with user engagement in a detailed way. Investigating the effects of both issue characteristics and discrete emotions on various types of audience reactions, our study contributes to a nuanced understanding of political campaign effects in a widespread social network.

Conceptual Framework

Political Actors on Social Media

Since the rise of social media platforms, political actors have used them to distribute their messages and make their positions visible to their followers and the public. Parties use Facebook, the largest social media platform in Western countries, for various purposes; they can inform a broader electorate, interact with citizens, or mobilize their core base (Magin, Podschuweit, Haßler, & Russmann, 2016). These three functions may overlap, and parties may place different emphases on them.

To attain a wide diffusion, attention, and visibility, political actors must adapt their communication to the platforms, which are shaped by a *network media logic* (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Whereas the traditional mass media logic implies a rather passive audience compared with active professional gatekeepers (media) or active communicators (parties), the network media logic evolves from interest-bound and like-minded peer networks that take an active part in the articulation and circulation of politically relevant content (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). In this sense, political actors not only reach "primary audiences" with their messages; they also reach a "secondary audience" when followers recirculate this information within their own networks (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015, p. 1026).

The algorithms of social networking sites determine the reach of content, depending on its potential relevance for users, such as visibility via an interaction rate (Bucher, 2012). To be successful, parties must adapt to this logic and are compelled to communicate primarily those messages that users like, comment on, promote, and share within their networks (Bene, 2017; Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018b). Thus, followers' reactions, such as Likes, Shares, or Comments, are often labeled the "currency" of social media (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Based on such popularity cues, which can be understood as an umbrella term for user reactions (Porten-Cheé et al., 2018), the success of parties' social media posts can be judged.

Obviously, the question now is: Which messages and characteristics trigger how many and which kind of popularity cues? Previous research has examined predictors for user engagement on the actor or profile level (e.g., characteristics of parties or individual politicians; Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018a; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015) and on the post level with regard to the format (e.g., pictures or videos; Staender et al., 2019) and the content and style characteristics (e.g., Heiss et al., 2019; Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018b). In this study, we focus on parties' use of issues and emotions on Facebook and investigate to what degree these content and style elements trigger different types of popularity cues (Likes, Reactions, Shares, Comments).

The Role of Issues

Research so far has paid only little attention to the actual issues parties talk about in their messages on social media. Issues are important because they structure public communication and journalistic routines (Brosius & Eps, 1995), indicate conflict constellations within political systems through their relation to political cleavages (e.g., Kriesi et al., 2008), shape policy and public agendas (Boydston & Russell, 2016), and shape voting behavior (e.g., Thesen, Green-Pedersen, & Mortensen, 2017). Furthermore, issues are also important cornerstones of parties' political identities and appeal to social groups (Kreiss, Lawrence, & McGregor, 2020).

The literature on issue ownership has repeatedly shown that parties tend to focus on “their” issues in their communication (Walgrave, Tresch, & Lefevere, 2015)—that is, on those issues where they have a “reputation for policy and program interest” (Petrocik, 1996, p. 826). Although vote-seeking parties or parties with large resources might also “ride the wave” with nonowned issues high on the public (or media) agenda, parties usually emphasize owned issues (Wagner & Meyer, 2014, p. 1019), highlighting their competence, sincerity, and commitment to doing something (allegedly) important.

Especially in multiparty systems where different parties have ownership of different issues such as state budget or immigration, the question is which issues and which issue characteristics become salient. Research on these questions addresses different angles and mostly comes from research on traditional media. Agenda-setting theory and news value theory, for instance, suggest that concrete issues lead to more media attention (Kriesi et al., 2008) and more pronounced media effects (Kioussis, 2015) than abstract issues. Thus, some issues stand better chances to find attention. Based on an analysis of news media coverage, research on political cleavages shows that issues belonging to the second, cultural axis of political conflict have gained in importance in Western European party systems (Kriesi et al., 2008). It is exactly through the emphasis of these issues in the field of identity politics, including immigration, gender, and religion, that right-wing populists have managed to acquire a distinct profile and shape the transformation of party systems (Kriesi et al., 2008).

One would expect this to hold true also on social media platforms, not least because the network media logic includes the viral distribution to like-minded others (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). In this sense, issues addressing social groups with strong social identities arguably resonate particularly well. One indication comes from Staender and associates (2019), who found that Swiss parties received more popularity cues on Facebook in the election campaign of 2015 when they focused on owned issues. Overall, however, there is not enough empirical evidence to determine whether and why issues affect user engagement. Eberl and colleagues (2020), who provide a sophisticated differentiation of user reactions, distinguish issues based on how relevant and salient issues are for users but not based on issue characteristics. Heiss and cohorts (2019) use a very broad distinction of issues such as domestic and foreign policy issues (see also Bene, 2017) and do not include issues in their conceptual model on explanatory factors, which makes it difficult to relate issues to parties’ actual profile and identity.

The Role of Emotions

More attention in research on popularity cues has been given to style characteristics. Previous studies suggest that style characteristics such as emotionality, negativity, personalization, or surprise—which also figure prominently as news values—increase the shareworthiness of political messages (Staender et al., 2019). Especially emotionality has been identified as a strong predictor of high numbers of popularity cues (Bene, 2017; Heiss et al., 2019; Staender et al., 2019). Moreover, recent studies indicate that populist communication—which often features emotional language (e.g., Ernst, Blassnig, Engesser, Büchel, & Esser, 2019) and also elicits emotional responses by recipients (Wirz, 2018)—positively affects user reactions on Facebook (Blassnig, Ernst, Engesser, & Esser, 2020; Bobba, 2018; Jost, Maurer, & Haßler, 2020; Muraoka, Montgomery, Lucas, & Tavits, 2021).

These findings all seem to illustrate the emotional logic of social media communication. First, the business model of social networks awards emotional reactions (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). Second, on social media, like-minded individuals (groups or communities) are addressed and interact with each other. Communities—in contrast to abstract societies—are held together through the reproduction of emotional bonds, in- and outgroup distinctions, and group norms (Imhof, 2015). This resonates with the argument that social media are constituted by “affective publics” (Papacharissi, 2016) as well as findings showing that the level of deliberativeness on Facebook is rather low (Elter, 2013). During election campaigns, politicians and users only rarely substantiate their arguments in their posts and comments, and they often do not express respect for political opponents (Russmann, 2015). Hence, social media logic favors those parties that place strong emphasis on emotions and address (their) communities, preferably in a highly emotional style with clear in- and outgroup distinctions.

Although several existing studies identify emotionality as a success factor on Facebook, it is still unclear whether both positive and negative emotions have an effect on popularity cues, and which is the stronger predictor. Whereas some studies find that positive tonality or emotionality mainly has a positive effect (Sampson, 2012; Trilling et al., 2016), other results find similar or stronger effects for negative or conflict-oriented Facebook posts (Bene, 2017; Berger & Milkman, 2012; García-Perdomo, Salaverría, Kilgo, & Harlow, 2018; Tsugawa & Ohsaki, 2017). These differing results may be explained with different measures of emotionality applied, ranging from positive or negative tone (e.g., Bene, 2017) to sentiment (Eberl et al., 2020). Only rarely do studies measure emotionality based on discrete emotions (see, e.g., Heiss et al., 2019).

Hypotheses and Research Question

The aim of this study is to examine factors that might explain successful social media communication, i.e., higher user engagement, of political parties on Facebook. We focus on different types of issues and emotionality as content factors and investigate their effects on the different types of popularity cues of parties’ Facebook posts.

First, we investigate parties’ focus on issues. As discussed above, parties may strategically emphasize different issues. Consequently, which issues a party talks about on social media is not coincidental, but planned. Parties may focus on issues that voters identify them with, thus, for which voters consider the party to be credible, reliable, and more competent than other parties (e.g., Petrocik, 1996). Particularly in election campaigns, parties are well advised to advertise issues they own to help them win votes (Walgrave & de Swert, 2004; Walgrave, Lefevere, & Nuytemans, 2009). We therefore argue that in an election campaign, parties will emphasize a few strategic top issues in their social media communication. Social media are organized around communities of mostly like-minded people and most users who will react to a party’s posts will be fans or supporters of this party. Therefore, we expect parties to target mainly their close community and this community to react mainly to what the party emphasizes the most (i.e., their top issues). Thus, we expect users to like, react, share, and comment more to those issues that parties most heavily emphasize. Hence, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H1: Posts on top issues receive more popularity cues than posts on other issues.

Second, out of all policy issues, issues in the second dimension of political conflicts (i.e., the “cultural dimension” or the field of “identity politics”) are more likely to generate user engagement, no matter which party is the sender. On the one hand, issues such as migration or gender equality are part of the cultural dimension of societal conflicts, which has come to dominate Western European party systems such as Austria and Germany (Kriesi et al., 2008). On the other hand, as argued above, social media platforms target communities, which are held together mainly by emotional bonds and by clear in- and outgroup distinctions. Thus, communities on social media are more prone to respond to issues of cultural and political identity. We therefore postulate the following:

H2: Posts on identity politics receive more popularity cues than posts on other issues.

Third, we examine how the content is presented on Facebook and focus on emotionalization as communication style element. Emotionalization is a highly relevant communication style and empirical studies have shown that posts with an emotional tone receive more popularity cues (Bene, 2017; Heiss et al., 2019; Muraoka et al., 2021; Staender et al., 2019). Hence, we want to replicate this finding for the German and Austrian case and test the following hypothesis:

H3: Emotional posts receive more popularity cues than nonemotional posts.

Results overall are inconclusive as to whether positive (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Sampson, 2012; Trilling et al., 2016) or negative Facebook posts (Bene, 2017; García-Perdomo et al., 2018; Porten-Cheé et al., 2018; Tsugawa & Ohsaki, 2017) receive more popularity cues. Therefore, in this study we additionally examine positive and negative emotions separately.

H3a: Positive emotions lead to more popularity cues.

H3b: Negative emotions lead to more popularity cues.

Finally, we analyze whether the postulated effects of parties’ top issues, identity issues, and emotionality vary for the different types of user reactions on Facebook. A Like represents a minimally active form of participation and more of a neutral recognition of a Facebook post (Sumner, Ruge-Jones, & Alcorn, 2018). The new Reactions (Love, Haha, Wow, Sad, Angry) are technologically an extension to the Like button but seem to represent a slightly more effortful act of communication (see e.g., Jost et al., 2020). Via Shares, users aim to spread certain messages in their network to inform or mobilize other users. Through Comments, users have the possibility to express themselves more directly (i.e., state a political opinion; Alhabash, Almutairi, Lou, & Kim, 2019; Elter, 2013; C. Kim & Yang, 2017). Likes, Reactions, Shares, and Comments differ regarding the users’ degree of activation and intentions. Thus, we may expect that different characteristics of Facebook posts also affect these types of reactions differently. Therefore, we formulate an open research question:

RQ1: Do these effects differ for Likes, Reactions, Shares, and Comments?

Methods

We conducted a quantitative content analysis of parties' Facebook posts during a two-month period before the last German and Austrian national elections in 2017. In total, we coded and analyzed 1,268 Facebook posts by 12 political parties from a broad political spectrum (from left- to right-wing).

Sample

We looked at national elections because they are prototypical events for political communication, have significant political implications, and fulfill the requirements of functional equivalence (Esser & Strömbäck, 2012). We selected two national elections in two German-speaking democracies—Germany (September 24, 2017) and Austria (October 15, 2017)—as they both took place in the fall of 2017 and enabled us to capture the phenomenon more broadly and go beyond a case study observation. We focused on the social network Facebook, which is widespread in both countries. In a survey by the Reuters Institute Digital News Report fielded a few months after the elections in 2017, 52% of people in Germany and 63% of people in Austria said they use Facebook regularly. Facebook, thus, was (and still is) by far the most widespread social network in these countries, clearly surpassing Instagram or Twitter (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2018). Facebook has also been considered as the most important Web 2.0 campaigning tool by campaign managers of political parties in Austria and in Germany (Haßler & Kruschinski, 2019; Magin et al., 2016).

For Germany we selected the seven and for Austria the six largest parties that were competing in the elections 2017 and represented in the parliament thereafter. In the order from left to right according to the Chapel Hill expert survey (code: LRGEM; Polk et al., 2017) and our own assessment, these parties are: Die Linke, Die Grünen, SPD, CDU, FDP, CSU, and AfD in Germany, and Die Grünen, Liste Peter Pilz, SPÖ, NEOS, ÖVP, and FPÖ in Austria. Most of these parties belong to traditional and more recent party families which are typical in many countries in Western Europe (Kriesi et al., 2008). In both countries, for decades either (center-)left-wing social democratic parties (SPD and SPÖ) or (center-)right-wing Christian-Democratic parties (CDU with its sister party CSU from Bavaria in Germany, ÖVP in Austria) have traditionally been the largest and main government party. The 2017 elections saw a government change from Social Democrats to Christian Democrats in Austria, but no change in Germany, where the Christian Democrats (both CDU and CSU) stayed in power with Angela Merkel as chancellor and the Social Democrats as junior partners. On the left, both countries have Green parties, which originated in the environment movement in the 1970s and 1980s. The German party "Die Grünen" was already junior partner of a coalition government in the late 1990s, whereas the Austrian party "Die Grünen" became junior partner only in 2020. On the left, Germany's party system also includes the radical left-wing party "Die Linke," formed by a merger of a split-off of the Social Democrats and the successor of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), the Marxist-Leninist ruling party of the former East German Republic (GDR); "Die Linke" has never been part of the government. On the right (as regards economic conflicts), both countries also include representatives of the liberal party family: FDP in Germany, a party founded in 1948 and junior partner of coalition governments a few times, and NEOS in Austria, a fusion of a new party with the "Liberales Forum," a rather small party which had existed since the early 1990s. Populist right-wing parties exist in both countries, and they were among the parties with the largest increase in vote shares in 2017; but the history of these

parties largely differs. The FPÖ in Austria, founded in the 1950s and transformed into a populist right-wing party in the 1980s, has managed to become junior partner of a coalition government a few times, most recently in 2017. In Germany, the AfD was founded only in 2013 and has so far not been considered as a legitimate coalition partner. Finally, a special case exists in Austria: perhaps best considered as a “flash party,” the “Liste Peter Pilz” existed only for a short time. Founded in 2017 as a slightly populist split-off from the Green Party, it entered parliament in 2017 (mainly at the expense of “Die Grünen”) but did not manage to win any seats in another election in 2019; the party was dissolved in 2020 (see also Bodlos & Plescia, 2018; Eberl et al., 2020).

For all these parties, we downloaded all Facebook posts of the official party sites for an eight-week period before the respective elections using the R-package Rfacebook (Barbera, 2017). This resulted in a total of $N = 2,534$ posts, of which we randomly selected 100 posts per party.¹ We analyzed all written and oral communication included in the Facebook posts (text, picture, as well as video²). Posts without any text, events, live videos, or explicit calls by the party to vote via Facebook emotions (*love*, *sad*, or *angry* reactions) were discarded before coding. This resulted in a final sample of $N = 1,268$ Facebook posts.

Operationalization

Political Issue

We assigned each Facebook post to a main topic, distinguishing among politics, polity, or policy. Politics included posts on the election as such or on party strategies such as information on when or where to vote and general mobilization appeals. Polity included posts on political institutions or justice. If the topic was a policy issue, one of 10 issue fields was coded: welfare, economy, budget, cultural liberalism, education and culture, foreign policy and Europe, migration, security, ecology, or infrastructure. For each political party, we identified the most salient policy issue in their Facebook communication (i.e., their *top issues*) and transferred it into a dummy variable. Finally, we coded a dummy for all issues identified as *identity issues*. Following Bornschier (2010) and Kriesi and colleagues (2008), we defined statements on cultural liberalism and migration as identity issues.

Emotionality

Facebook posts were coded as emotional if the post explicitly mentioned at least one of eleven families of emotions (anger, uneasiness, happiness, contentment, fear, contempt, sadness, affection, surprise, hope, or pride). An emotion in a text was indicated by (1) introductory statements such as “I feel . . . ,” “I am . . . ,” or “This makes me . . . ,” and (2) the emotions mentioned, such as “angry,” “happy,” “sad” with the corresponding synonyms (example for fear: panic, concern, worry, sorrow). Based on these discrete emotions,

¹ Except for two German parties: LINKE ($n = 79$) and the Greens ($n = 89$)

² For reasons of comparison, we only coded the first two minutes of the posted videos.

we calculated two maximum indices (dummy variables): *Positive emotions* comprise happiness, affection, hope, pride, and surprise.³ *Negative emotions* comprise anger, uneasiness, fear, contempt, and sadness.

Popularity Cues

We used the number of Likes, emotional Reactions, Shares, and Comments separately as dependent variables. Thereby, Reactions is a combined variable summing up the different emotional reactions Love, Haha, Wow, Sad, Angry.

We also controlled for the presence of audiovisual elements and links in each Facebook post. A team of intensively trained student coders reached good levels of reliability across all coding categories. The average Brennan and Prediger's kappa was $K = .94$.

Findings

We start by providing some descriptive insights into the overall Facebook communication of the 13 analyzed parties ($N = 1,268$ posts) and their use of the analyzed issues and emotions in their communication. In the eight weeks before the national elections, parties tended to post mostly about politics (50%; $n = 633$ posts) by focusing on the election as such or on political strategies. Forty-eight percent addressed policy issues ($n = 598$ posts), whereas polity issues were rarely addressed on social media (2%; $n = 31$ posts). Among policy issues, the economy (17%; $n = 102$ posts), welfare (16%; $n = 92$ posts), and migration (16%; $n = 97$ posts) were the three issues that dominated in both countries. Parties' top issues (i.e., each party's one most salient issue during the campaign) made up 35% of all policy posts ($n = 207$ posts). Furthermore, identity issues (i.e., migration and cultural liberalism) were relatively prevalent, accounting for 19% ($n = 111$ posts) of all posts addressing a policy issue. Table 1 provides more details on how often each party addressed the individual policy issues.

³ Surprise is not necessarily defined as a positive emotion in the literature. We decided to include surprise in the index for positive emotions, as it correlates significantly with the positive and not with the negative emotions in our sample.

Table 1. Overview of Policy Issues by Party.

Party	Parties' emphasis on policy issues in percentages													
	N	Wel	Eco	Bud	Lib	Edu	For	Mig	Sec	Env	Infr	Pty	Ptcs	
Germany	LINKE	79	19	9	10	3	0	0	1	6	1	1	0	50
	Greens	89	5	2	0	2	1	1	2	5	34	6	2	40
	SPD	100	16	15	2	0	23	4	4	2	0	2	1	41
	CDU	100	11	10	1	1	7	3	1	5	0	2	1	57
	FDP	100	3	11	7	3	10	6	3	6	2	6	2	41
	CSU	100	0	5	0	0	2	3	23	16	2	4	3	42
	AfD	100	2	3	3	0	1	3	29	8	0	3	5	42
Austria	Greens	100	10	13	3	1	2	1	2	3	15	3	3	43
	PILZ	100	7	8	1	0	4	1	10	3	0	0	2	57
	SPÖ	100	16	12	7	1	11	1	4	5	0	1	2	39
	NEOS	100	4	12	5	3	5	4	3	1	0	0	6	56
	ÖVP	100	3	2	6	0	4	2	1	3	0	2	3	74
	FPÖ	100	6	2	2	1	1	1	14	4	0	1	1	67

Note. Policy issues from left to right: welfare (Wel), economy (Eco), budget (Bud), cultural liberalism (Lib), education and culture (Edu), foreign policy and Europe (For), migration (Mig), security (Sec), environment (Env), infrastructure (Infr), polity (Pty), politics (Ptcs).

Emotionality was also a relatively common communication strategy of parties on Facebook; a third of all posts (34%; $n = 426$ posts) included an explicit emotion. Positive emotions were three times as prevalent (28%; $n = 351$ posts) as negative emotions (9%; $n = 115$ posts). The political parties most often expressed hope (12%; $n = 159$ posts), followed by affection (8%; $n = 97$ posts), contentment (6%; $n = 77$ posts), pride (5%; $n = 58$ posts), and surprise (2%; $n = 30$ posts). Regarding negative emotions, the political parties most often expressed uneasiness (4%; $n = 50$ posts) and anger (3%; $n = 40$ posts). Fear (2%; $n = 20$ mentions), sadness (1%; $n = 11$ posts), and contempt (1%; $n = 9$ posts) were less common. See Table 2 for how often the parties used the individual emotions in their Facebook posts.

Table 2. Use of Emotions in Facebook Posts by Parties.

		Parties' use of emotions in Facebook posts in percentages											
Party	N	Ang	Une	Hap	Cnt	Fear	Cpt	Sad	Aff	Sur	Hop	Prid	
Germany	LINKE	79	8	8	1	3	3	1	3	3	0	15	1
	Greens	89	3	6	1	8	1	1	3	5	1	11	3
	SPD	100	1	5	6	0	0	0	1	15	2	20	2
	CDU	100	1	0	4	7	0	0	1	18	2	14	6
	FDP	100	1	2	1	0	0	0	0	1	3	10	4
	CSU	100	1	0	3	9	0	0	0	4	0	4	9
	AfD	100	11	9	1	6	6	3	1	1	2	2	3
Austria	Greens	100	0	3	4	15	2	0	0	8	2	14	4
	PILZ	100	4	5	2	7	0	0	1	9	4	14	2
	SPÖ	100	2	3	4	9	2	0	0	8	6	24	7
	NEOS	100	0	3	4	2	0	0	0	6	4	18	5
	ÖVP	100	0	2	6	8	1	0	0	13	2	12	4
	FPÖ	100	10	7	6	5	6	4	1	8	2	5	8

Note. Emotions from left to right: anger (Ang), uneasiness (Une), contentment (Cnt), fear, contempt (Cpt), sadness (Sad), affection (Aff), surprise (Sur), hope (Hop), pride (Prid).

Table 3 further summarizes the use of negative and positive emotions per party.

Table 3. Positive and Negative Emotions in Parties' Posts.

		Parties' use of positive and negative emotions in Facebook posts		
Country	Party	N	Positive	Negative
Germany	LINKE	79	20%	20%
	Greens	89	23%	15%
	SPD	100	35%	7%
	CDU	100	38%	2%
	FDP	100	14%	3%
	CSU	100	23%	1%
	AfD	100	11%	24%
Austria	Greens	100	34%	5%
	PILZ	100	25%	9%
	SPÖ	100	39%	7%
	NEOS	100	27%	3%
	ÖVP	100	36%	3%
	FPÖ	100	19%	22%

Looking at our dependent variables, the Facebook posts received on average 1,065 Likes ($SD = 1,738$), 149 emotional Reactions ($SD = 369$), 331 Shares ($SD = 838$), and 161 Comments ($SD = 302$). Table 4 provides an overview of the mean values and standard deviations of the popularity cues for each individual party. Typical for social media reactions, the dependent variables are all count variables: They only consist of positive integers and their distribution is right-skewed (Saxton & Waters, 2014). Furthermore, the data are overdispersed (i.e., the standard deviation of the dependent variable is greater than the mean). Therefore, we conducted negative binomial regressions (Gardner, Mulvey, & Shaw, 1995).

Table 4. Overview of Popularity Cues by Party.

Party	Likes		Reactions		Shares		Comments		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Germany	LINKE	2,954.72	331.28	256.9	31.01	845.76	121.79	231.11	29.17
	Greens	1,186.96	185.9	169.67	23.24	465.82	79.14	219.83	30.39
	SPD	1,631.91	188.45	150.2	23.79	501.95	55.5	218.52	29.43
	CDU	868.84	62	130.67	12.44	141.69	11.28	230.94	15.92
	FDP	1,094.85	127.33	57.54	7.8	161.99	21.86	98.29	11.23
	CSU	1,192.78	128.56	359.54	47.22	150.5	20.94	457.38	47.21
	AfD	3,443.95	291.43	675.37	94.44	1,723.9	205.92	514.5	57.63
Austria	Greens	208.23	25.74	34.67	7.33	48.1	6.85	30.78	6.34
	PILZ	101.48	13.09	7.01	1.29	9.55	2.1	5.76	1.01
	SPÖ	732.2	69.69	50.45	5.51	140.38	18.08	41.26	5.47
	NEOS	158.53	19.08	22.42	2.73	20.22	3.58	19.68	1.9
	ÖVP	261.77	21.18	17.51	2.31	30.54	3.6	23.5	5.82
	FPÖ	413.03	29.7	28.59	3.12	180.61	36.86	25.6	2.12

Furthermore, we applied multilevel regression models, allowing varying intercepts for each party page (Hox, 2010). In this way, we accounted for the nested character of the data and statistically considered that differences in the characteristics of the parties' pages (such as their number of fans) randomly affected the volume of Likes, Reactions, Shares, and Comments (see Jost et al., 2020, for a similar approach). We ran separate models for the number of Likes, Reactions, Shares, and Comments as dependent variables. The models included top issues, identity issues, negative emotions, and positive emotions as the independent variables, as documented in Table 5. The reference category for positive and negative emotions were posts without any emotions. We further controlled for the presence of audiovisual elements (video, pictures, gifs, etc.) and links in the posts, which were shown to positively influence the number of popularity cues (e.g., Staender et al., 2019). For the interpretation of the effects, we focused on the incidence rate ratios (IRRs), which correspond to exponential B-coefficients. Values higher than 1 indicate a positive influence, whereas values below 1 indicate a negative influence. More precisely, when the independent variable increases by one unit or for dummies if they are present, the expected count of popularity cues has to be multiplied by the IRR (Trilling et al., 2016).

Table 5. Negative Binominal Regression for Facebook Popularity Cues.

	Likes		Reactions		Shares		Comments	
	IRR	CI	IRR	CI	IRR	CI	IRR	CI
(Intercept)	237.70***	[100.96, 602.37]	46.72***	[15.99, 152.99]	2.76	[0.66, 14.18]	56.49***	[19.15, 181.76]
Top issues	0.97	[0.84, 1.11]	0.95	[0.79, 1.14]	1.27*	[1.01, 1.60]	0.92	[0.78, 1.09]
Identity issues	1.29**	[1.08, 1.56]	1.58***	[1.25, 2.02]	1.14	[0.84, 1.57]	1.32*	[1.06, 1.65]
Negative emotions	1.11	[0.94, 1.31]	1.53***	[1.25, 1.89]	1.08	[0.83, 1.42]	1.36**	[1.13, 1.66]
Positive emotions	1.43***	[1.29, 1.59]	1.30***	[1.14, 1.48]	1.28**	[1.09, 1.53]	1.19**	[1.06, 1.35]
Audio-visual Elements	2.56**	[1.22, 4.71]	1.35	[0.50, 3.01]	46.54***	[10.71, 150.97]	1.31	[0.52, 2.83]
Links	1.59	[0.75, 2.95]	1.11	[0.41, 2.52]	26.66***	[6.03, 89.40]	0.96	[0.38, 2.09]
<i>N</i> Level 1	1,268		1,268		1,268		1,268	
<i>N</i> Level 2	13		13		13		13	
AIC	19,923.00		18,891.50		13,418.36		14,777.55	
Log lik.	-9,952.500		-9,436.750		-6,700.178		-7,379.776	

Notes. Negative binomial regression predicting the total amount of popularity cues ($N = 1,168$). IRR = incidence rate ratios (values <1 indicate a negative effect; values >1 indicate a positive effect). CI = confidence interval. AIC = Akaike information criterion.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

First, we hypothesized that posts that contain parties' top issues receive more popularity cues (H1) than other issues. As expected, the parties' top issues significantly increased the number of Shares. Users were 27% more likely to share parties' posts on top issues (IRR = 1.27) than posts on other issues. However, there were no significant effects for the other types of popularity cues. Thus, posts on parties' top issues did not receive more Likes, Reactions, or Comments than posts on other issues. H1 is therefore only partially supported.

Second, we expected that parties' posts on identity issues would receive more popularity cues (H2). As our results show, identity issues had a significant positive effect on the number of Likes, Reactions, and Comments, but not on the number of Shares. Thus, emphasizing identity issues seems to be a successful strategy, as posts about these issues triggered 29% more Likes (IRR = 1.29), 58% more Reactions (IRR = 1.58), and 32% more Comments in contrast to posts on other issues. Yet they were not significantly shared more often. Therefore, H2 is also only partially supported.

Our third hypothesis suggested that including explicit emotions—both positive (H3a) and negative (H3b)—in a Facebook post is an effective strategy to boost popularity cues. Our findings support H3a for all different types of popularity cues. If parties included positive emotions in their messages, the posts received 43% more Likes (IRR = 1.43), 30% more Reactions (IRR = 1.30), 28% more Shares, and 19% more Comments. In contrast, negative emotions in posts only increased the number of Reactions by 53% and Comments by 36%. Yet, negative emotions did not have any effects on the number of Likes and Shares the posts received. Thus, our findings only partially support H3b. Combined with the descriptive results on parties' communication

strategies, we show that positive emotions were more common in parties' communication and more successful regarding popularity cues than negative emotions. However, negative emotions also increased emotional Reactions and Comments.

Regarding RQ1, the results show that the effects of the analyzed indicators varied for the different types of popularity cues. For the number of Likes, identity issues and positive emotions mattered most. High numbers of Reactions were triggered by identity issues and both positive and negative emotions. Shares were increased for top issues and positive emotions. Finally, Comments were driven by identity issues, positive and negative emotions.

Discussion and Conclusion

We started from the assumption that during election campaigns, on the one hand, parties follow their own logic—for example, by emphasizing specific issues on their social media channels. On the other hand, parties must consider the specific logic of the social media platforms. Empirically, we show that parties' emphasis on their top political issues, on identity issues, as well as on positive and negative emotions typically leads to higher numbers of popularity cues. If parties' want to reach a wider audience and collect numerous popularity cues, they are well advised to consider these factors. Yet, the effects vary for the different types of popularity cues.

First, this study has shown that focusing on one top issue is a promising way to reach a wide Facebook audience as these posts are more often shared and, thus, recirculated by users. Hence, parties may be more successful if they emphasize one or few issues in their online communication. As our data shows, parties focus a relatively large part of their Facebook communication on their top issue. Most often, this is an issue for which parties traditionally hold ownership. These findings underline the role of communities on social media: Parties are responsive to their core base by emphasizing specific issues that they believe are especially relevant for their voters and their followers seem especially eager to share these posts. In our sample the top issues for the traditional left-wing parties (LINKE, SPD, SPÖ) as well as for the CDU were welfare, for the two green parties the environment, for the liberal-right parties (FPD, NEOS, ÖVP) the economy or finance, and for the two right-wing populist parties (AfD, FPÖ) immigration. Only in a few cases a party's top issues were not owned issues but rather issues owned by other parties or highly debated issues connected to current developments or situations. For example, CDU's sister party CSU posted most often on the topic of immigration, which may be interpreted as strategic "riding the wave" to avoid losing voters to the right-wing populist AfD.

Second, our findings indicate that emphasizing identity issues like migration or gender equality helped parties gain popularity cues on Facebook, at least in the current political context. Identity issues have not only become more salient in Western European politics in the last few decades, our study shows that posts on identity issues also seem to resonate particularly well on Facebook. Our findings support the theoretical notion that identity issues cater to the social media logic due to their saliency and their often controversial and emotional nature. Whereas the saliency may explain the high number of Likes, the emotionality of identity issues is underscored by the fact that these issues are the strongest predictor in our sample of users' emotional Reactions. Furthermore, the often-controversial nature of identity issues may explain why users are more likely to comment

on these posts, as they may trigger both affirmative comments from party supporters as well as hostile comments from their opponents (see also J. W. Kim, Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2020).

Third, we find that both positive and negative emotions increase popularity cues to some extent even though positive emotions seem to be the stronger predictor. We further find notable differences for the different types of popularity cues. On the one hand, this confirms earlier findings that positive content spreads better on social media than negative content (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Sampson, 2012; Trilling et al., 2016). Tarullo (2020) has recently found similar results in the case of Argentinian political leaders. On the other hand, our findings show that it is important to differentiate between different types of popularity cues. Users seem more eager to Like and Share positive content. This may be explained by the fact that Likes and Shares are mostly associated with positive feedback (Porten-Cheé et al., 2018). In contrast, negative emotions that are often associated with controversy or conflict trigger emotional Reactions and Comments by users. In general, emotional language conforms to the network media logic, especially on social media platforms such as Facebook. The fact that all parties include emotions in their communication to a relatively high degree indicates that political parties are also aware of this aspect and may deliberately communicate in a more emotional tone. From a normative point of view, the prevalence of emotions can pose a challenge for the rationality of public debate, especially if that debate increasingly takes place in social networks.

Our study has some limitations. First, the focus on two Western European countries, Germany, and Austria, limits the generalizability of our findings beyond this context. Second, analyses of social media data generally face the limitation that Facebook users are not representative of a country's population. Therefore, we cannot make any inferences on effects of political communication on citizens in general. A third limitation is our focus on election campaigns. Although campaign periods are often prototypical for party communication, studying routine periods and parties' day-to-day communication would be an interesting addition. Fourth, analyzing a single platform (Facebook) limits the study's reach and informative value. The focus on Facebook profiles of national parties, which meant omitting regional parties or individual politicians, such as top candidates, is a further limitation of our study. To address these limitations, future studies should strive to sample both routine periods and election campaigns, include a broader sample of countries (beyond Western or European democracies) and include different social media channels (not only Facebook or Twitter) to investigate and compare political communication on social media. In addition, survey and experimental approaches may shed more light on the users' intentions and motives behind Liking, Sharing, Reacting To, and Commenting parties' Facebook posts and how individual characteristics may additionally help explain this behavior.

In conclusion, our study contributes to the growing body of research on political social media communication and popularity cues. We identify parties' top issues, identity issues, and emotionality—especially positive emotions—as factors that help parties generate user reactions and reach a wider audience on Facebook. In an era of increasingly digital politics, these success factors might be especially important in election campaigns when parties are fighting for voters' scarce attention. Yet, our study further demonstrates that the effects of these factors vary for different types of popularity cues. Thus, from the perspective of strategic communication, parties should not only consider popularity cues in general but also reflect the different logics at work when they plan and evaluate their social media communication strategies.

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