

Dramatization in the social media election campaign

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Abstract

In modern democracies, elections are always special events, as they structure the political debate, allow voters to choose their representatives, distribute political power and thus influence future policy. It is precisely the new media that enable parties to bypass the gatekeeper function of the classical mass media and set the agenda themselves. This paper examines - using the example of the Austrian National Council election campaign 2019 - how "dramatizing" parties design postings and whether there is a difference in topic setting between left-wing and right-wing parties.

Keywords: Dramatization, National Council Election, Election Campaign, Social Media Nationalratswahl, Österreich, FPÖ, Wahlkampf, Dramatisierung

Introduction

In modern democracies, elections are always special events, structuring the political debate, allowing voters to choose their representatives, distributing political power, and thus influencing future policies. Democratic elections serve various purposes, such as selecting representatives, influencing public policy, giving a mandate to incumbents, and legitimising the political and administrative system. [1]. Sartori [2] believes that elections are the moment when voters actually govern. Elections are thus capable of shaping the political history of a country. This is especially true for elections at the national level, such as the National Council elections in Austria. Election advertising on social media sites is not only a special form of communication, but the parties' postings are also relevant actors in the media and information society and in the prevailing competition for communication and attention. The linking of media (photo, video,...) and the postings during the election campaign also make the latter an influencing factor for public communication [3]. If one follows Sarcinelli [4] This competition for attention is becoming more and more independent of political decision-making, with political communication mutating into "a central strategic game". [5] and thus demands active persuasion work from the parties participating in the elections. This persuasion work - if one follows Praprotnik [6] - is increasingly being shifted to social media: in their essay "Social Media Sites as a Political Information

Channel", Praprotnik et al. have shown that it is precisely the users of political information in social networks who tend to have little trust in traditional media. [6] If one follows Fuchs [7] then Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Weibo, Wikipedia, Pinterest, etc. have not revolutionised the internet - compared to pre-Web 2.0 platforms - but have been able to increase popularity with the integration of social aspects (such as creating and sharing information, communication, and collaboration).

The claim that contemporary politics is increasingly subject to the influence of and mediated by the media is provocative and controversial, but undoubtedly popular. If one follows Hepp et al. [8] then mediatisation is praised for its explanatory inclusiveness because, unlike narrowly focused media effects research, it focuses on the broader institutional processes of communication [8, 9]. It is also seen as a necessary update and complement to "neutral" mediation theory, where the focus is on the role of media in communication processes in general, rather than on the pronounced changes the latter have undergone in the last few decades as a result of the unprecedented development and expansion of media technologies and institutions or the media [10, 11].

If one follows Fornäs [12] then the general theory of mediatisation takes too little account of the fact that media are no longer located in a delimited area, but are fully integrated into the lives of

recipients. Corner [13] in his essay "Mediatization: Media theory's word of the decade" concludes that the recipients live "in" the media instead of living "with" them. [13]. In this sense, the mediatization of politics goes hand in hand with the mediatization of other social spheres - it is one of overlapping mediated spheres. [14]. When examining the mediatization of politics, it is also necessary to examine the "personalisation", "conversationalisation" and "dramatization" dimensions of politics. [15-18]. These point not so much to specific media-induced changes in the political (or any other) process, but to broad and interrelated media and communicative practices through which social reality is constructed [10, 19].

Castells [20] has found in his work "Communication, power and counter-power in the network society" that the *personalisation of politics* is perhaps the most popular trend in contemporary political communication because candidates have the opportunity to create trust and authenticity with voters through personalisation. [21-23]. Following Fairclough [24] *Conversationalisation* is the construction of politics as something "everyday"; politics is part of the "lifestyle". [25-27]. Finally, *dramatization* is the practice of theatricalization, exaggeration, sensationalisation, which promote an understanding of politics as a ritual and a matter of belonging. [18, 28-30]. While plays and productions have long been studied by literary scholars with an eye to the political meanings they contain, political theorists are now also turning to this art form to examine its impact in the political sphere: For example, the ways in which civic life is enacted as part of the theatrical experience [31-34]. Deleuze [35] has noted that dramatization is a method that aims to determine the dynamic nature of political concepts by "bringing them to life", just as dramatic performances can bring the characters and themes of a play to life. The idea that drama can serve as a medium for the expression of political ideas and debate is virtually congruent with the history of drama itself: From the early Greek plays to the recent theatrical, because of public, questioning, in parliamentary committees of enquiry. Political communication has long involved the public display of emotion and dramatization [36] and social media sites, in particular, invite an emotional, dramatizing style of communication, because there are no professional gatekeepers - compared to traditional media - prescribing a more professional language. On the contrary, posts and tweets are expected to be written quickly and to use authentic and informal language. [37]. Although users look for information on social networks, emotional motives also play a major role. [37]. Accordingly, previous research has indicated that emotional messages are more likely to go viral. [38]. If one follows these findings, then the

- 1) **Hypothesis: Compared to left-wing parties, the postings of right-wing parties are much more dramatising**

And the

- 2) **Hypothesis: Dramatising postings receive more approval through "likes" than those postings that were not marked as dramatising.**

An emotional, dramatizing communication style is characterised by posts and tweets that focus more on emotion and dramatization than on political issues: They are more concerned with conveying

an emotional state than the issue itself. One stylistic device of dramatization is sensationalisation, when the post predominantly gives the impression that the posting is particularly extraordinary or surprising. That is, they may contain information on political issues, such as immigration, but try to persuade citizens by focusing on the emotions associated with these issues, such as fear (e.g. by associating immigrants with crime rates or tax cuts with unemployment). This emotional framing of political issues is one reason why populist parties' messages can persuade citizens and make their parties successful [39]. If one follows these assumptions, then the

- 1) **Hypothesis: Right-wing parties are more likely to focus on populist issues such as immigration, foreigners or refugees than left-wing parties.**

Case selection

At the latest since the Austrian National Council election campaigns of 2017 (which were marked by a dirty election campaign), social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter have played an important role in Austria's domestic politics [40]. In the so-called "Silberstein Affair". [41] a foreign campaign consultant helped orchestrate negative campaigns with fake Facebook accounts. Less than two years later, on 17 May 2019, the Ibiza scandal hit Austrian politics [42, 43]. While the scandal did not have an immediate impact on the Austrian result in the European elections, the was a profound shake-up of the political landscape. The coalition government between the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ) broke up. [44]. Chancellor Sebastian Kurz lost a vote of no confidence in the National Council. [45]. Federal President Alexander Van der Bellen has called a caretaker government for the first time in Austria's history and called new elections for the parliamentary elections to be held on 29 September. [46]. If one follows Ecker [47] social networks and social media sites have been playing an increasingly important role in the election campaigns of political parties for years. Prof. Dr. Filzmaier has stated in this context (in an interview with Ecker) that millions are now spent by the parties on campaigns on Facebook and Twitter [47]. If one follows the statements of Starzer [40] and Ecker [47] then one realises that social media sites like Facebook and Twitter are causal for the success in the election campaign. If one combines these statements with the findings of Sartori [2] who believes that elections are the moment when voters actually govern, or with the statements of Jahn [48, 49] who found out that social media sites are used by parties especially in times of election campaigns, then the 2019 National Council elections are an ideal case study to examine the use of social media sites (in this essay, one refers to the platforms Facebook and Twitter) by parties.

Evaluation

For the evaluation of the above theses, all postings of the party leaders and the parties themselves, during the entire election campaign 2019, were collected and divided into categories. The parties were divided into "left" and "right" using the Gal-Tan scale. The validity of the classification of whether a posting is

"dramatising" or not was ensured using the Holsti coefficient. In the following, the theses are to be accepted or falsified:

HYPOTHESIS 1: Compared to left-wing parties, the postings of right-wing parties are much more dramatising.

H0: the posting of right-wing parties does not much more dramatising as compared to left-wing parties.

H1: the posting of right-wing parties is much more dramatising as compared to left-wing parties.

Table 1: Results of Chi-square Test and Descriptive Statistics for party align by type A

Party Alignment	Type of Posting		Total
	General (%)	Dramatising (%)	
Left Wing Parties	4121 (69)	55 (19.7)	4176 (66.8)
Right Wing Parties	1852 (31)	224 (80.3)	2076 (33.2)
Total	5973 (100)	279 (100)	6252 (100)

Note. N=6252, $\chi^2 = 0.00^*$, df = 1. Numbers in parentheses indicate column percentages. *p < .05

Above "Table 1" depicted that most of the respondents posting were "General" as compared to "Dramatising" and they belonged to left-wing parties as compared to right-wing. The posting of left-wing parties were more in "General-Topics" compared to right-wing parties (31%). On the other hand, the posting of the right-wing parties were more of Type "Dramatising" compared to left-wing (19.7%). The relationship between "Party Alignment" and "Type of Posting" variables were significant. $X^2 = (1, N=6252)$, p = .00. The alternate hypothesis accepted by these results and proved that the posting of right-wing parties are much more dramatising compared to left-wing parties. The below table (1a) of symmetric measures explained the effect of the relationship between variables whereas Phi and Cramer's values demonstrated strong effect of the relationship.

Table 1a: Symmetric Measures

Nominal by Nominal	Value	Approx. Sig.
Phi	.216	.000
Cramer's V	.216	.000
N of Valid Cases	6252	

HYPOTHESIS 2: Dramatising postings receive more approval through "likethan those postings that were not marked as dramatising

H0: Dramatising postings did not receive more approval through likes as compared to other posting.

H2: Dramatising postings receive more approval through likes as compared to other posting.

Table 2: Group Statistics

	Type A	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Likes	General	5973	294.95	681.200	8.814
	Dramatising	279	671.70	1164.841	69.737

Table 2a: independent samples t-test

Likes	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	99.839	.000	-8.666	6250	.000	-376.752	43.473	-461.973	-291.530
Equal variances not assumed			-5.360	286.94	.000	-376.752	70.292	-515.105	-238.398

The output file of compare means depicted two tables, one is Group Statistics which explained Means and Standard Deviation of

likes on the posts of "Dramatising" and "General". Respondents who post "dramatising" have more likes compared to "general"

Postings. The mean difference value of calculated by subtracting of mean of the second group from the mean of the first group. The value of mean difference is negative (-376.75) that mean of first group “General” is significantly lower than the mean of the second group “Dramatizing”. So, we can conclude that there is difference of likes on “Dramatizing” and “General” posts. To confirm or disprove this difference, we have to look at the independent samples test table (2a). This table contained the two portions of the results table one on the left side is Levene’s Test which determined the variances’ equality and the second on the right side is the t-test which determined the means’ equality. The value showed in levene’s (left-side of the table) a very high 0.00 which is less than the 0.05 so the assumption was made that the observed groups have equal variances. As well as it also indicated which set of means’

equalities should be considered for the interpretation of analysis or testation of hypothesis. The respective p-value of the two-tailed is also 0.00, which is less than 0.05. Therefore, this proved the alternate hypothesis that dramatizing postings receive more likes as compared to general postings.

HYPOTHESIS3: Right-wing parties are more likely to focus on populist topics such as foreigners or refugees than left-wing parties.

H0: right-wing parties do not more likely to focus on populist topics as compared to left-wing parties.

H3: right-wing parties are more likely to focus on populist topics as compared to left-wing parties.

Table 3: Results of Chi-square Test and Descriptive Statistics for populist’s topic by party align

Level_1 – Main Category of Post	Party Alignment		Total (%)
	Left Wing Party (%)	Right Wing Party (%)	
Economy	356 (8.5)	38 (1.8)	394 (6.3)
Welfare State	327 (7.8)	83 (4)	410 (6.6)
Budget	163 (3.9)	37 (1.8)	200 (3.2)
Education and Culture	251 (6)	29 (1.4)	280 (4.5)
Security	33 (0.8)	104 (5)	137 (2.2)
Armed Forces	22 (0.5)	20 (1)	42 (0.7)
Foreign Policy	4 (0.1)	5 (0.2)	9 (0.1)
Europe	31 (0.7)	17 (0.8)	48 (0.8)
Infrastructure	110 (2.6)	29 (1.4)	139 (2.2)
Society	122 (2.9)	73 (3.5)	195 (3.1)
Environmental Protection	656 (15.7)	109 (5.3)	765 (12.2)
Institutional Reform	283 (6.8)	118 (5.7)	401 (6.4)
Immigration	88 (2.1)	276 (13.3)	364 (5.8)
Government formation	93 (2.2)	121 (5.8)	214 (3.4)
Ideology	34 (0.8)	26 (1.3)	60 (1)
Politics	1542 (36.9)	930 (44.8)	2472 (39.5)
Politicians in general reporting	28 (0.7)	34 (1.6)	62 (1)
not classifiable	33 (0.8)	27 (1.3)	60 (1)
Total	4176 (100)	2076 (100)	6252 (100)

Note. n=6252, $\chi^2 = 0.00^*$, df = 17. Numbers in parentheses indicate column percentages. *p < .05

Above “Table 3” demonstrated that most of the respondents focused on the topic of politics: Right-wing parties are also more focused on the topic of “Immigration” then left-wing parties. The relationship between party alignment and populist’s topic was statistically significant, $X^2 = (17, N=6252)$, p = .00. The alternate hypothesis is true that right-wing parties are more likely to focus

on populist topics compared to left-wing parties. The below table (3a) of symmetric measures explained the strong effect of the relationship between populist’s topic and party alignment by the values of Phi and Cramer’s V.

Table 3a: symmetric measures

Conclusion

Election campaigning is increasingly shifting from traditional media to social media sites like Facebook and Twitter: messages should be emotional and entertaining to convince people to share the content. Content that contains jargon or is abstract is less likely to appeal to people. It is better if the message is made tangible and emotionally comprehensible, even through humor. Every message on social media should trigger something emotionally in the viewer - be it anger or laughter [50].

How dramatising is the election campaign on the social media sites "Twitter" and "Facebook"? This paper has investigated this question and has uncovered some interesting results: We have asked ourselves whether right-wing parties - compared to left-wing parties - post more often in a "dramatising" way. It was clearly shown that right-wing parties post dramatising postings more often than left-wing parties and are usually more successful, i.e. they get more "likes" for these postings than postings that are not dramatising, i.e. "general". From this, one can conclude that it goes down well with voters if politicians pay attention to a "dramatic" agenda setting when creating postings.

Furthermore, we asked whether it is indeed the case that right-wing parties - compared to left-wing parties - focus more often on populist topics such as "immigration, foreigners & foreigner crime". Here, too, the thesis could be accepted: Even if the main topic of the parties is "Politics" (with the subcategories like e.g. election campaign, media appearances politicians (in general), voter turnout, election recommendations,.... it could be shown that the topic of "immigration" is occupied more by the right-wing parties than by the left-wing parties. Incidentally, in this study, it did not matter whether the topic of immigration was reported positively or negatively. It was only a question of whether the agenda was set for this topic.

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