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To cite this article: Melanie Magin, Nicole Podschuweit, Jörg Haßler & Uta Russmann (2017) Campaigning in the fourth age of political communication. A multi-method study on the use of Facebook by German and Austrian parties in the 2013 national election campaigns, *Information, Communication & Society*, 20:11, 1698-1719, DOI: [10.1080/1369118X.2016.1254269](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1254269)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1254269>



Published online: 14 Nov 2016.



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## Campaigning in the fourth age of political communication. A multi-method study on the use of Facebook by German and Austrian parties in the 2013 national election campaigns

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### ABSTRACT

Starting from the contribution to the discussion on a fourth age of political communication, here we argue that, as a consequence of how the Web 2.0 has changed political campaigns, the theoretical time-bound three-phase models of political campaigning must be reconsidered. We propose four ideal campaign types based on their ideal-typical target audience: partisan-, mass-, target group- and individual-centered campaigns. In reality, each campaign combines elements of all types. To examine this mixture empirically, we apply a most similar systems design and investigate five German and six Austrian parties' use of Facebook in the 2013 national election campaigns. On the basis of face-to-face interviews with the campaign managers and a quantitative content analysis of the respective parties' Facebook pages, we analyze how parties used Facebook as a campaigning tool to inform, interact with, and mobilize voters, as well as which target audiences they addressed. We find that, although the campaign managers declare Facebook their most important Web 2.0 campaigning tool, the German and Austrian parties did not make use of Facebook's interactive and mobilizing potential, rather relying on mass-centered information, possibly due to the framework conditions in both countries. Based on our findings, we conclude that the role of context for election campaigning should be discussed more carefully.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 6 May 2016  
Accepted 25 October 2016

### KEYWORDS

Comparative research;  
content analysis; election  
campaigning; expert  
interviews; Facebook; types  
of election campaigns

Facing an ongoing decline in party identification (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002), political parties must find new ways to gain voters' attention. Beyond the traditional mass media that are still important campaign instruments (Lilleker, Tenscher, & Štětka, 2015), the Internet, especially the so-called Web 2.0, including social networking services (SNS), now provides various additional campaigning tools. They can help campaigners to inform, interact with, and mobilize voters more comprehensively, and more targeted than with earlier instruments (Christenson, Smidt, & Panagopoulos, 2014). Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns were the first to truly harness the power of the Web 2.0 and set a pattern for parties around the world. However, empirical studies indicate

that they remain exceptional cases, not yet approximated by campaigns in other countries, partly due to different structural conditions (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011; Tenscher, Mykkänen, & Moring, 2012).

Since elections are ‘times when innovations are considered and strategists actively weigh up their options’ (Lilleker et al., 2015, p. 750), they are well-suited to investigate innovations in political campaigning. However, cross-national comparisons that systematically identify structural influences on political campaigning are scarce (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2014). Moreover, most studies have focused either on parties’ strategies (Lilleker et al., 2015; Tenscher et al., 2015) or on content aspects of the campaigns (e.g., Lilleker & Jackson, 2011), but neglected that these factors complement each other. Joining both approaches would seem necessary for comprehensively understanding political campaigning. To contribute to the current state of research theoretically and empirically, our study addresses two research questions:

RQ1: How can current combinations of established and new tools in political parties’ campaigns be explained theoretically?

To answer this question, we redefine the existing three-phase models of changing campaign practices (e.g., Norris, 2003; Plasser & Plasser, 2002) and introduce four less time-bound types of political campaigning: partisan-, mass-, target group- and individual-centered campaigns. Each type can fulfill three pivotal functions: information, interaction, and mobilization. These theoretical considerations lead to our second research question:

RQ2: Which strategies did German and Austrian parties choose to inform, interact with, and mobilize voters on Facebook in the 2013 national elections?

To answer this question, we empirically compare the strategies of five German and six Austrian parties and their actual activities on Facebook (the most popular SNS in these countries). Applying a multi-method approach in a most similar systems design, we combine expert interviews with the parties’ campaign managers and a quantitative content analysis of their Facebook pages. According to our results, the parties’ strategies are better explained by party than by country characteristics.

## Conceptual framework

### *Four ages of political communication*

There is broad consensus in the literature that long-term changes of campaign practices have been driven by and can be seen as an indicator of far-reaching societal changes, such as decreasing party affiliations, an increasing number of swing voters, and increasing party competition (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002). This is also true for political communication in general, which Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) point out in three ideal-typical ages of political communication, each also driven by particular technological developments (Table 1): in the *first age* (about 1850–1960), parties could rely on many traditional voters that they mainly reached by the printed (partisan) press and face-to-face interactions between politicians and party members (Gibson & Römmele, 2001). The *second age* evolved ‘in the 1960s when limited-channel television became the dominant medium of political communication, while the grip of party loyalty on voters was loosening’ (Blumler

**Table 1.** Four types of political campaigning.

	Partisan-centered campaigns	Mass-centered campaigns	Target group-centered campaigns	Individual-centered campaigns
First possible in the	First age (~1850 to 1960)	Second age (~1960 to 1990)	Third age (~1990 to 2008)	Fourth age (since 2008)
Prime communication channel	Printed press, face-to-face interactions	Limited-channel television	Multi-channel television and Internet	Multi-channel television, Internet (particularly Web 2.0)
Key target audience	Partisans, party members	Masses	Target groups	Individuals
Newly added campaigning tools	Print media, rallies, meetings, foot soldiers	Broadcast television news, polls, news advertisements	Internet, direct mail	Web 2.0 platforms

Sources: Blumler (2013), Blumler and Kavanagh (1999), Gibson and Römmele (2001, p. 34), Strömbäck and Kiousis (2014, p. 177), edited by authors.

& Kavanagh, 1999, p. 212). In the *third age*, beginning in the 1990s, party competition had further intensified through a growing number of nonvoters, swing voters, and new parties. While the now multi-channel television was still the dominant medium, the Internet increasingly gained importance as a new communication channel (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999).

Against this background, Blumler (2013, but see also Block, 2013; Lilleker et al., 2015; Mazzoleni, 2016; Vergeer, Hermans, & Sams, 2013) has recently proposed to add a *fourth age* of political communication, in that some features of the third age have further evolved and differentiated: today, the audience has become disperse, the number of nonvoters and swing voters is extremely high, and communication abundance has exponentially increased (Blumler, 2013). The newly emerged Web 2.0 offers manifold new communication channels, including SNS, microblogging services, and video platforms (Howard, 2006).

### Four campaign types

Despite their wide popularity (e.g., Gibson & Römmele, 2001; Norris, 2003; Plasser & Plasser, 2002; Strömbäck, 2007), we argue that phase models of political campaigning must be considered in several aspects. First, most phase models do not, or rather cannot, consider the Web 2.0 as a campaigning channel, since the Web 2.0 simply did not exist when they were developed (for an exception, see Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2014).

Second, phase models implicitly or explicitly take campaigning in US presidential elections as a starting point (Chen, 2010; Kalnes, 2009; Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2014). Based on this, campaigns in other countries necessarily lag far behind the US due to structural reasons, e.g., legal restrictions on political advertising on television. Therefore, the influence of structural contexts for campaigning must be discussed more carefully (Lilleker et al., 2015; Tenscher et al., 2012, 2015).

Third, the models describe long-term developments of campaigning in the form of temporal phases and assign certain campaign techniques to certain timeframes. As a result, phase models somewhat marginalize that new campaigning practices supplement rather than replace established ones. Furthermore, each temporal phase encompasses several decades, during which technological possibilities can change significantly (e.g., from

1960 to 1990). Therefore, the assumption of a ‘typical campaign’ for each phase seems inappropriate. In line with Strömbäck and Kiouisis (2014), we suggest to avoid time-referenced labels and to focus on ideal campaign types instead. Each type undoubtedly emerged within a certain timeframe, when the essential technological possibilities became available, but these can be applied at any given moment henceforth. In our opinion, the ideal campaign types can be best differentiated by four specific target audiences.

*Partisan-centered campaigns* are addressed to the hard core party members and partisans. Pivotal campaigning tools are voters’ face-to-face interactions with politicians (e.g., rallies, door-to-door canvassing), partisan press, newspaper ads, radio broadcasts, and posters.

*Mass-centered campaigns* emerged when nonpartisan media and limited-channel television provided the opportunity to address disperse masses by unidirectional messages. TV news, newspaper ads, and direct postal mailing supplemented the partisan-centered campaigning tools.

*Target group-centered campaigns* developed when parties addressed the increasingly fluid electorate more purposefully, by addressing voter segments with similar interests (e.g., women, blue-collars) via multi-channel television and, later, the Internet. They are characterized by top-down, centralized communication (Lilleker et al., 2015) and supplement the previous campaigning tools with party and candidate websites, banner ads, and direct mailing by e-mail (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; Gibson & Römmele, 2001).

The Web 2.0 allows for refining the target group orientation to *individual-centered campaigns*: based on personalized data offered by commercial enterprises or collected during former campaigns, political parties can tailor campaign messages to single voters (micro-targeting). For this purpose, the manifold Web 2.0 communication channels provide ideal conditions and allow parties to reach voters who would not visit party websites. Rather, messages are algorithmically distributed and filtered in the social networks that both parties and voters are a part of. To some degree, the Internet (particularly the Web 2.0) allows parties to bypass the mass media and address the voters directly.

Real campaigns, however, will hardly ever meet these ideal types. Rather, each campaign is an amalgamation of all campaign practices available at that time. The exact mixture of approaches will depend on what a campaign targets, who it addresses, and the relative importance it attaches to certain functions.

### **Functions of election campaigns**

Based on the vast literature on election campaigns’ functions (Foot & Schneider, 2006; Koc-Michalska, Lilleker, Smith, & Weissmann, 2016; Lilleker et al., 2011) and bearing in mind that every party aims to win as many votes as possible, three functions are particularly important from the parties’ perspective: (1) *information* aims at disseminating partisan messages and the parties’ positions on important issues (Craig, Kane, & Gainous, 2005), a one-way communication route to persuasion. (2) *Interaction* describes the direct contact between political actors and voters, a more dialogical route to persuasion. (3) *Mobilization* means to integrate voters into the campaign, so that they persuade other voters to vote for the respective party on Election Day (Klinger, 2013; Russmann, 2012a).

Gibson and Römmele (2001) stress that campaigners typically focused on one function in each temporal phase. Instead, we argue that all three functions are interrelated and have

thus been crucial for campaigning at every time: information is a prerequisite to persuade voters in interactions and to mobilize them. Interaction enables the dissemination of information, which persuades voters by overcoming their concerns, thereby contributing to mobilization. Mobilization, finally, can be seen as a subordinate aim of campaigning: information and interaction together convince voters to take part in the campaign and vote for the respective party.

### **Facebook – a hybrid campaigning tool**

The utilization of instruments for attaining these functions differs between campaign types and depends on the tools' availability. Moreover, every tool can be applied differently. Take Facebook as an example: as the most widespread Web 2.0 service (Lilleker et al., 2015), its infrastructure, multifaceted features, and capabilities seem well-suited to individual-centered campaigning. However, upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that Facebook can also be used for partisan-, mass-, and target group-centered campaigns. Thus, Facebook is a hybrid campaigning tool, suitable to all three functions of election campaigns and related to all four addressed audiences.

#### **Information**

Via Facebook, parties can address their members one-to-one in *partisan-centered* campaigns, but also the general public via one-to-many messages in *mass-centered* campaigns. Because of the large pool of personalized data collected and offered by Facebook, messages can be tailored not only to voter segments in *target group-centered* campaigns, but even to single voters in *individual-centered* campaigns. Moreover, Facebook enables the combination of direct and indirect communication: parties can address journalists via Facebook to get their messages across to even larger audiences, but also bypass the media by addressing their messages directly to the electorate (Bimber & Davis, 2003), a strategy particularly important for small parties (Larsson, 2016).

#### **Interaction**

Unlike communication via mass media, Facebook provides a feedback channel, thereby enabling parties to engage in discussions with voters, which might provide valuable information for modifying their campaign strategies. The computer-mediated reciprocal communication on Facebook can be regarded as functionally equivalent to face-to-face communication with all conceivable target audiences – *partisans*, *masses*, *target groups*, and *individuals*.

#### **Mobilization**

The function of general election appeals on Facebook is comparable to that of election posters in *partisan-centered* campaigns and TV commercials in *mass-centered* campaigns. Appeals addressing specific groups are a phenomenon of *target group-centered* campaigning, and a feature of *individual-centered* campaigning if they address individuals. Facebook provides tools for target-audience-specific mobilization (e.g., photos and videos that are well-suited to being shared). Sharing is a common, low-threshold but potentially very effective *mass-centered* form of mobilization (Wallsten, 2010). Mobilization in *individual-centered* campaigns necessitates enormous manpower due to the vast interactions

with individual voters, e.g., by answering voters' comments and individual messages via Facebook.

In summary, Facebook enables to compare how election campaigns of different parties in different countries combine elements of different campaign types. Particularly interesting is the parties' implementation of individual-centered Facebook campaigns, as the existence of new opportunities does not necessarily mean that they will be exploited.

### **Structural influences on campaigning**

Current research from many countries indicates that most parties use Facebook primarily as a top-down information channel (Klinger, 2013; Nielsen, 2011; Ross, Fountaine, & Comrie, 2015). Possible reasons for this difference to the US are structural differences (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). Thus, to explain why campaign practices are used as they are, structural influences, context factors on the macro-level (countries) and meso-level (parties), respectively, need to be considered (Strömbäck, 2007).

#### **Macro-level**

Germany and Austria are both consensus democracies (Lijphart, 1999), having multi-party systems (Magin, 2012) and democratic corporatist media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) with high Internet penetration (Germany 88%, Austria 83% in 2015) and similarly high social media penetrations. Facebook is the most widely used SNS (Germany 36%, Austria 41% subscribers in 2015) (Internet World Stats, 2015). SNS are a relatively new tool in national election campaigns in both countries (Russmann, 2012b) like in other European countries where SNS are predominantly used as *top-down information channel* (Kalnes, 2009; Klinger, 2013; Larsson, 2016; Nielsen, 2011). Since Germany and Austria are structurally much more similar to these countries than to the US, our first hypothesis is:

H1: At present, German and Austrian parties predominantly use Facebook to inform instead of interacting with and mobilizing the voters.

The implementation of SNS as a campaigning tool is subject to one important restriction, particularly: in stark contrast to the US, where campaign databases contain highly personal and sensitive data on the individual, in Germany and Austria, the *privacy of user data* is a major issue of public concern: sending direct marketing e-mail messages without the prior consent of recipients is against the law (DLP Piper, 2014). Since this restriction limits particularly the possibilities of individual-centered campaigns, we hypothesize:

H2: At present, German and Austrian parties will rarely use Facebook as an individual-centered campaigning tool.

Despite the large cross-country similarities, both countries differ in one respect that might influence the use of Facebook as a campaigning tool: the *linkages between parties and voters* are much deeper in Austria where the parties traditionally are much more deeply ingrained in the society. Even though these linkages have weakened during the last decades, the number of affiliates is still much higher than in Germany (Magin, 2012). Furthermore, the *number of eligible voters* was about 10 times higher in Germany (61.8 million; Der Bundeswahlleiter, 2015) than in Austria (6.38 million; Bundesministerium für Inneres, 2013), which makes it easier to stay in touch with a higher percentage of



the electorate. Both differences make a direct communication with voters – and with it an interaction on Facebook – likelier in Austria. Thus, we hypothesize:

H3: Austrian parties make more use of Facebook's interaction function than German parties.

### **Meso-level**

Germany and Austria are well-suited to analyze inter-party differences (Table 2): both party systems are overall similarly structured with one conservative (CDU; ÖVP) and one social democratic (SPD; SPÖ) major party each, flanked by several ideologically different minor parties (Magin, 2012). However, the minor parties show some interesting differences: both Green parties were established in the 1980s, but the Liberals in Germany (FDP) are much richer in tradition than the newly established Austrian Liberals (NEOS). In contrast, the right-wing populist Austrian FPÖ is much more established than the currently most successful right-wing populist. Alternative for Germany that was founded not before 2013 and was still marginal in the 2013 national election campaign. Besides, there is a significant Left Party only in Germany and, interesting with respect to Facebook campaigns, one newly founded Pirate Party each.

Table 2, again, illustrates that the parties particularly differ in two respects relevant for Facebook campaigning: concerning the parties' *size and*, by association, *resources*, there are two opposing assumptions in the literature: the innovation thesis respectively equalization thesis argues that small parties try to compensate their structural disadvantages (lack of resources, manpower, and traditional mass media's attention) by attracting the voters' attention through direct channels (bypassing strategy) (Larsson, 2016). Contrarily, the normalization thesis assumes that campaigns of large parties with greater financial and personal resources 'are better able to generate effective communication and to mobilize online than small and marginal parties' (Klinger, 2013, p. 1) with fewer resources (Gibson & McAllister, 2011). Since current research more strongly supports the normalization thesis (Chen, 2010; Klinger, 2013; Lilleker & Jackson, 2011; Tenscher et al., 2012), we hypothesize:

H4: Large parties with greater resources more extensively campaign on Facebook than small parties with fewer resources.

Concerning the parties' *year of foundation*, current studies show that newer parties rate the importance of social media higher than established ones (Lilleker et al., 2015). Possible reasons include their less hierarchical structure, their younger members, and their greater openness to new opportunities of communication, particularly direct voter communication which might induce a particular high interest in the interaction with and the mobilization of voters. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H5: New parties make more use of Facebook's interaction and mobilization function than established parties.

If we realize that some of the parties structurally strongly differ both within and between the two countries, it seems plausible that differences in campaigning between the parties should be larger than between the two overall very similar countries. This assumption is in line with current research (Lilleker et al., 2015; Tenscher et al., 2015), so we hypothesize:



**Table 2.** Characteristics of German and Austrian parties.

	CDU	SPD	FDP	Greens (G)	Pirate party (G)	Germany	ÖVP	SPÖ	FPÖ	Greens (A)	NEOS	Pirate party (A)	Austria
Size (seats in national parliament before election, %)	31	23	15	11	–	100	28	31	19	11	–	–	100
Resources (election campaign budget, 1000€)	20,000	23,000	4000	5500	400	52,900	5000	7100	3500	2900	942	15	19,457
Resources (election campaign budget per eligible voter, €)	0.32	0.37	0.06	0.09	0.01	0.86	0.78	1.11	0.55	0.45	0.15	0.00	3.05
Year of formation	1945	1875	1948	1980	2006	–	1945	1874	1956	1987	2012	2006	–

Sources: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (2015), Der Bundeswahlleiter (2015, 2016), Kucera (2009), Spiegel Online (2013), Vienna.at (2013a, 2013b) and Wien konkret (2008).

H6: Differences between German and Austrian parties' Facebook campaigns rather depend on party characteristics (meso-level) than on country characteristics (macro-level).

## Method

The current study compares German and Austrian parties' campaign strategies with their actual use of Facebook as a campaigning tool in the national election campaigns in 2013 (Election Days: September 22 in Germany, September 29 in Austria). To this end, it combines face-to-face expert interviews with the campaign managers of five German and six Austrian parties with a quantitative content analysis of these parties' Facebook pages. The study includes four parties, each represented in the national parliaments, the German Bundestag and the Austrian Nationalrat (Table 2): both conservative (CDU, ÖVP) and social democratic (SPD, SPÖ) major parties, and two smaller ideologically different parties (the liberal FDP in Germany, the right-wing populist FPÖ in Austria, the Greens in both countries). Moreover, both countries' Pirate Parties and the liberal NEOS in Austria are considered. These emerging parties were not in parliament, but are interesting to study when addressing Facebook campaigns since they are very Internet-oriented and strongly focus on intraparty participation and democracy. The NEOS were actually successful in entering the Austrian Nationalrat in 2013.

## Expert interviews

Concerning the expert interviews, the study takes a qualitative, inductive approach common in this field (Jungherr, 2016; Nielsen, 2011). In Germany, the Secretary-Generals of the national parties were asked to name their respective experts for the upcoming online campaigns. Based on their specifications, six experts were identified and interviewed. In Austria, the heads of communication or the web strategists of the parties were interviewed.

The semi-structured interview guide was based on previous studies (Nielsen, 2011; Podschuweit & Haßler, 2015) and is theoretically related to the four types and three functions of campaigns described above. It addressed the parties' motives and strategies concerning information (e.g., importance of Facebook as an information channel, kinds of disseminated information), interaction (e.g., interest in discussions with voters), and mobilization (e.g., use of Facebook for endorsements) via Facebook.

Interviews were held from 10 July to 12 July 2013 in Germany and from 9 October to 28 October 2013 in Austria. In Germany, interviews (60–90 min) were conducted by undergraduate students who developed the routing questions with us in class. In Austria, interviews (30–60 min) were conducted by one of the authors. Following each interview session, the recorded interviews were transcribed, analyzed, and the answers were systemized based on the three functions and the hypotheses. Although not all experts fully addressed all questions and three functions, the results were sufficient to check our hypotheses.

## Content analysis

The content analysis includes all posts (by parties) and comments (by parties and users) on the parties' Facebook pages during the last four weeks before Election Day and focuses on the three functions of campaigns.

*Information* is measured (1) by the number of parties' posts on their Facebook pages during the sample period (a) in absolute numbers, (b) per 1,000,000 eligible voters, and (c) per 1000 Euro election campaign budget. (2) The share of posts with (a) photos and (b) videos indicating the use of Facebook's multifacetedness.

*Interaction* is measured (1) by the number of parties' comments, (2) the number of users' comments per 1,000,000 eligible voters, and (3) the share of posts in which the parties encourage the voters to discuss politics on the parties' Facebook page (reciprocity).

To measure *mobilization*, (1) each post is coded according to the types of mobilization appeals (multiple answers, binary coding: 0 = non-existent, 1 = existent) it contains. We distinguish eight types: (a) receive information elsewhere in the media (e.g., newspapers, TV, party website, other websites), (b) share the posted information, (c) interact with the party on other channels than Facebook (e.g., party website, Twitter), (d) participate in events (e.g., pre-election parties), (e) become a campaign worker, (f) donate for the party, (g) vote (in general or for the party), or (h) support the party in another way (e.g., take part in television voting, equip their own Facebook profile picture with the party's logo). To determine the average number of mobilization requests per post, an additive index from 0 'not mobilizing at all' to 8 'maximum mobilizing' is calculated. (2) Indicators for the success of mobilization are (a) the absolute number of shares of the parties' posts and (b) the number of shares per 1,000,000 eligible voters.

Altogether, the sample comprises 1873 posts and 439,851 comments that were downloaded by the software Facepager (Keyling & Jünger, 2013) in November 2015. For the formal variables downloaded by Facepager automatically (number of posts, comments, photos, videos, shares), we have reliable data on the entire population of posts and comments during the period of study. For the content-related variables (reciprocity, types of mobilization), a stratified random sample was drawn comprising 50 posts per party (except ÖVP, whose only 32 posts in the period investigated were coded entirely).

Inter-coder reliability was calculated using Krippendorff's  $\alpha$ , based on 30 articles. The coefficients are 1.0 for reciprocity, sharing, donating, campaign worker, and events, 0.895 for other support, 0.877 for receiving information, and 0.780 for interaction. Although Krippendorff's  $\alpha$  for voting (=0.00) might seem problematic, closer inspection found that this coefficient rests on only one divergent coding, whereas 0.957% of cases were coded consistently with 0.00 (absence of voting appeals). Therefore, the variable is included in subsequent analyses (Feng, 2013).

## Findings

### Information

All interviewed parties regard information as the main purpose of integrating Facebook into their campaigns. For most parties, Facebook is a must-have: they do not view Facebook campaigns as an advantage, but fear that not utilizing Facebook in their campaigns might be a reason for losing the election – even though 'there is no apparent legacy of efficacy, nor evidence of strategic advantage associated with social media, at least when holding other factors constant' (Ross, Fountaine, & Comrie, 2015, p. 252). Parties hope to spread their information widely due to Facebook's enormous range, but the traditional mass media remain important; journalists are the second most important target group

of their Facebook campaigns. This explains why most parties focused on one-way communication – particularly the mainstream parties (CDU, SPD, ÖVP, SPÖ) who gain most media attention and obviously most strongly orient their Facebook campaigns toward the traditional mass media. Thus, the parties seem to use Facebook as a mass-centered information tool in the first instance.

Most parties, however, supplemented this mass-centered approach by a target group-centered strategy and tried ‘to pick voters up where they are’ (German Pirate Party): they addressed mainly young and first-time voters, the target group readily available on Facebook, but hard to reach via traditional mass media. Some parties tried to reach further target groups via special interest-based Facebook pages on specific issues (e.g., SPÖ-page on bank levy). The parties did not use individual-centered information (e.g., tailored, individualized messages and personalized data provided by Facebook) due to the strict national privacy laws.

Nearly all parties (except the German Greens who have reservations against Facebook due to privacy concerns) referred to Facebook as their most important Web 2.0 tool. However, according to the content analysis, the number of posts differs strongly between the parties, ranging from 32 (ÖVP) to 496 (FPÖ) (Table 3). Interestingly, the average number of posts per party hardly differs between Germany (176) and Austria (165), even though Germany is much larger and German parties’ absolute election campaign budgets are much higher. Proportional to the number of eligible voters, all Austrian parties posted more often than the German parties. Proportional to the budgets, however, there is a clear difference between large and small parties: whereas the mainstream parties obviously spend only a small fraction of their budgets on their Facebook campaigns, the right-wing populist FPÖ and the small parties (particularly the newest, both Pirate Parties and NEOS) placed relatively high value on Facebook. They obviously pursued a bypassing strategy to compensate for disadvantages in media attention and election campaign budget, bearing in mind that Facebook is cheaper than most other canvassing strategies. This strategy is explicitly pointed out by both Pirate Parties’ campaign managers in the interviews. However, a low number of posts can also be purposeful, resting on the observation that too many posts can lead many voters to opt out (German Pirate Party).

Concerning the purposeful use of Facebook’s multifacetedness (e.g., by posting photos and videos), parties did not primarily address highly politically involved voters according to the interviews. They therefore decided to communicate their messages in an emotional, ‘not too political’ way (SPD), using many pictures, few words, and without political jargon which indicates an orientation toward mass-centered campaigns. Particularly, the campaign managers deem photos extremely important, much more important than videos since they assume that photos are shared more often. The content analysis confirms this assumption: while every second post contains a photo or a video, on average, posts with photos are shared nearly five times as often as posts with videos. All parties posted more photos than videos, but the proportion of videos is highest for three mainstream parties (ÖVP, SPD, CDU). This might reflect the higher production costs of videos compared to photos, which the mainstream parties can afford, while the smaller parties cannot.

### **Interaction**

Compared to information, the parties pay less attention to Facebook’s features, allowing interaction with voters. According to the interviews, this can be accounted for by

**Table 3.** Information on German and Austrian parties' Facebook pages.

Information	<i>n</i>	CDU	SPD	FDP	Greens (G)	Pirate party (G)	Germany	ÖVP	SPÖ	FPÖ	Greens (A)	NEOS	Pirate party (A)	Austria
Number of party's posts ( <i>n</i> ) <sup>ab</sup>	1842	185	245	84	183	184	881	32	94	496	124	118	97	961
Number of party's posts per 1 million eligible voters ( <i>n</i> )	1842	3.0	4.0	1.4	3.0	3.0	14.3	5.0	14.7	77.7	19.4	18.5	15.2	150.5
Number of party's posts per 1000€ election campaign budget ( <i>n</i> )	1842	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.03	0.46	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.14	0.04	0.13	6.47	0.05
Share of posts with photos (%) <sup>cd</sup>	1842	44	42	55	56	38	46	59	72	51	73	38	43	54
Share of posts with videos (%) <sup>ef</sup>	1842	28	37	18	4	24	24	41	10	15	13	13	8	14

Differences between countries: <sup>a</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 3.474$ ;  $p = .062$ . <sup>c</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 9.276$ ;  $p = .002$ . <sup>e</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 10.174$ ;  $p = .001$ .

Differences between large (CDU, SPD, ÖVP, SPÖ) and small parties (all other parties): <sup>b</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 6.195$ ;  $p = .013$ . <sup>d</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 0.630$ ;  $p = .427$ . <sup>f</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 7.985$ ;  $p = .005$ .

differences in resources. The well-established (particularly the mainstream) parties are interested in voters' feedback, but only as an opportunity to optimize their campaign strategies. The campaign managers of the CDU and the SPD agreed that SNS, and with it Facebook, are unsuitable for entering into dialogue due to voters' lacking interest in interaction with political actors, as well as the negative discussion culture on SNS. The SPÖ even outsourced its Web and Facebook campaign to an external agency. Under these conditions, it is not surprising that parties did not get involved in discussions with voters and their Facebook campaigns are strongly oriented toward top-down communication characteristic for mass- and target group-centered campaigns.

On the other hand, the small and young parties (particularly both Pirate Parties and NEOS) reported that they were interested in and excited by the discussion with voters. The German Pirate Party even attempted 'to create counter publics on Facebook by debating issues the mass media ignored', but insufficient resources prevented a dense interaction. While Facebook in itself is a relatively inexpensive campaigning tool, campaign managers realize that using its interactive potential purposefully requires extensive manpower that small parties cannot afford and that large parties are unwilling to send.

The content analysis confirms the underutilization of Facebook's interactive potential: Only very few comments originate from the parties themselves. The NEOS were most active (100 comments in total), followed by FPÖ (36), and FDP (16). Four parties (CDU, SPD, German Greens, ÖVP) published no comments at all (Table 4). The small parties are significantly more active than the large ones, but on a low overall level. Thus, parties' comments are significantly more common in the Austrian sample, which contains more small parties. Relative to the total number of comments, the share of parties' comments in the discussions is extremely low, which is also true for the reciprocity of the parties' posts. Thus, the parties neither discuss with the voters nor encourage them to attempt to engage in discussion, at least on their official Facebook pages.

This does, however, not inevitably mean that they do not interact with voters at all. For example, the NEOS' campaign manager reported that they answered all private messages they received via Facebook, had a vivid private Facebook group, and altogether interacted with about 30,000 people directly during the election campaign. Such publicly inaccessible forms of interaction are characteristic of a partisan-centered campaign, but do not show up in our content analysis.

The users' discussions, at least when measured by the number of comments per 1,000,000 eligible voters, were particularly vivid on the Facebook pages of the FPÖ and the German Greens. Regarding the number of user comments, we must keep in mind that party supporters are most likely to engage in discussions on parties' Facebook pages (Nielsen, 2011), and that the larger a party is, the more supporters it has. Hence, relative to the overall number of party supporters, the interactions on the small parties' Facebook pages are more vivid.

## **Mobilization**

All parties rather hesitantly make use of Facebook's various opportunities to mobilize voters. Since they know that the notion of 'messages spreading by themselves on the Internet is nothing but a fairy tale' (German Greens), they regard stimulating voters to share their messages ('going viral') – a low-threshold form of mobilization – as a main goal of

**Table 4.** Interaction on German and Austrian parties' Facebook pages.

Interaction	<i>n</i>	CDU	SPD	FDP	Greens (G)	Pirate party (G)	Germany	ÖVP	SPÖ	FPÖ	Greens (A)	NEOS	Pirate party (A)	Austria
Number of comments by party ( <i>n</i> ) <sup>ab</sup>	439,851	–	–	16	–	10	26	–	4	36	7	100	6	153
Number of comments by users per 1 million eligible voters ( <i>n</i> ) <sup>cd</sup>	439,851	374	224	197	5261	118	6173	77	802	7415	446	306	92	9137
Share of reciprocal posts (%) <sup>ef</sup>	532	–	4	–	2	2	2	–	6	–	–	–	2	1

Differences between countries: <sup>a</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 90.106$ ;  $p < .001$ . <sup>c</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 573.827$ ;  $p < .001$ . <sup>e</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 0.029$ ;  $p = .864$ .

Differences between large (CDU, SPD, ÖVP, SPÖ) and small parties (all other parties): <sup>b</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 22.154$ ;  $p < .001$ . <sup>d</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 234.066$ ;  $p < .001$ . <sup>f</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 2.888$ ;  $p = .089$ .



their Facebook campaigns. However, they refuse high-level forms of mobilization on Facebook (e.g., donating, becoming a campaign worker). Several campaign managers (CDU, SPD, German Pirate Party) fear that such appeals could scare the voters away, particularly those who are politically involved but not (yet) affiliated with the party.

The content analysis confirms this hesitancy: the average number of mobilizing appeals per post is quite low (0.61), bearing in mind that up to eight different forms of mobilization per post could be coded. Every second post did not contain a single mobilizing element. In general, the small parties put significantly more effort into mobilization, probably due to their rather low resources: mobilizing appeals via Facebook are inexpensive compared to other forms of canvassing. The least mobilizing appeals were found for the conservative mainstream parties CDU and ÖVP (Table 5).

The posts with mobilizing elements reveal the parties' clear preference for informing rather than mobilizing voters: they first of all encourage the voters to receive information related to their party websites or other sources (e.g., television). While every 10th post calls for voting in general or for a certain party, other high-level forms of mobilization are scarce (e.g., becoming a campaign worker) or even completely absent (donating). Surprisingly, the parties only rarely encouraged the users to share their posts, contrary to their professed goal.

The parties' sharing success enormously differs (Table 5): the right-wing FPÖ is by far most successful with over 32,000 shares per one million eligible voters – probably a result of its offensive mobilizing strategy, but possibly also of its polarizing campaign messages. In the second and third places are both social democratic parties, closely followed by the NEOS. ÖVP's and FDP's posts were least shared. Relative to the considerably lower number of potential voters, the smaller parties' posts were more often shared than those of the mainstream parties, which, again, indicates that the small parties are more capable of using Facebook's campaigning potential, despite their lack of financial resources.

## Discussion

Starting from Blumler's (2013) contribution to the discussion on a fourth age of political communication, the current study argued that, faced with the various changes the Web 2.0 has brought along for political campaigns, the existing time-bound three-phase models of political campaigning must be reconsidered. Instead, we propose four ideal campaign types, differing by their ideal-typical target audience: partisan-, mass-, target group-, and individual-centered campaigns. Thus, answering RQ1 (*how can current combinations of established and new tools in political parties' campaigns be explained theoretically?*), each campaign combines elements of all types that are available at that certain time. Theoretically, this can be explained by parties striving to maximize votes using all available tools for campaigning in a manner that presumably grants most success for individual parties. To examine the exact mixture addressed in RQ2 (*which strategies did German and Austrian parties choose to inform, interact with, and mobilize voters on Facebook in the 2013 national elections?*), we investigated how five German and six Austrian parties used Facebook in the 2013 national election campaigns, a hybrid campaigning tool that can be used to address all four target audiences. Based on face-to-face interviews with the campaign managers and a quantitative content analysis of the respective parties' Facebook pages,

**Table 5.** Mobilization on German and Austrian parties' Facebook pages.

Mobilization	<i>n</i>	CDU	SPD	FDP	Greens (G)	Pirate party (G)	Germany	ÖVP	SPÖ	FPÖ	Greens (A)	NEOS	Pirate party (A)	Austria
Share of posts with mobilizing appeals														
... receive information (%) <sup>ab</sup>	532	28	30	62	28	38	37	22	22	26	28	26	14	23
... share posts (%) <sup>cd</sup>	532	–	4	–	2	4	2	3	–	2	–	2	4	2
... interact on website, twitter, etc. (%) <sup>ef</sup>	532	2	10	–	12	–	5	3	8	2	4	6	–	4
... participate in events (%) <sup>gh</sup>	532	–	–	–	2	4	2	–	–	10	2	10	10	6
... become a campaign worker (%) <sup>ij</sup>	532	–	–	–	–	–	–	3	–	2	–	8	2	3
... donate for the party (%)	532	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
... vote (%) <sup>kl</sup>	532	6	4	4	30	8	10	–	26	14	10	–	8	10
... support the party in another way (%) <sup>mn</sup>	532	4	14	14	12	4	10	–	4	10	18	14	8	10
Mobilization requests per post (ø) <sup>op</sup>	532	.40	.64	.80	.86	.62	.66	.31	.60	.66	.68	.48	.58	.57
Number of shares per 1 million eligible voters (n) <sup>qr</sup>	1842	231	533	55	176	416	1411	97	567	32,105	489	506	387	34,151

Differences between countries: <sup>a</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 12.709$ ;  $p < .001$ . <sup>c</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 0.037$ ;  $p = .847$ . <sup>e</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 0.259$ ;  $p = .611$ . <sup>g</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 7.701$ ;  $p = .006$ . <sup>i</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 6.288$ ;  $p = .012$ . <sup>k</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 0.002$ ;  $p = .965$ . <sup>m</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 0.101$ ;  $p = .751$ . <sup>o</sup> $t(530) = 1.610$ ;  $p = .108$ . <sup>q</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 3902.700$ ;  $p < .001$ .

Differences between large (CDU, SPD, ÖVP, SPÖ) and small parties (all other parties): <sup>b</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 1.990$ ;  $p = .158$ . <sup>d</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 0.080$ ;  $p = .777$ . <sup>f</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 1.980$ ;  $p = .159$ . <sup>h</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 10.246$ ;  $p = .001$ . <sup>j</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 1.251$ ;  $p = .263$ . <sup>l</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 0.060$ ;  $p = .807$ . <sup>n</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 4.735$ ;  $p = .030$ . <sup>p</sup> $t(530) = -2.593$ ;  $p = .010$ . <sup>r</sup> $\chi^2(1) = 30141.938$ ;  $p < .001$ .

we analyzed how and to what extent parties used Facebook as a campaigning tool to inform, interact with, and mobilize voters and which target audiences they addressed.

Consistent with *H1 (at present, German and Austrian parties predominantly use Facebook to inform instead of interacting with and mobilizing the voters)*, all parties are by far most interested in Facebook's information function and neglect its interactive and mobilizing potential, as other authors have yielded for other countries (Klinger, 2013; Macnamara & Kenning, 2011; Nielsen, 2011; Ross et al., 2015). Light is shed on possible reasons by inter-party differences: contrary to *H4 (large parties with greater resources more extensively campaign on Facebook than small parties with fewer resources)* and corresponding to *H5 (new parties make more use of Facebook's interaction and mobilization function than established parties)*, the small and new parties that are inclined to pursue a bypassing strategy are more interested in informing, interacting with, and mobilizing voters via Facebook than the mainstream (particularly the conservative) parties, in line with Gibson and McAllister (2015) and Larsson (2016), but contrary to Lilleker et al. (2011). Nevertheless, these parties often do not realize this objective due to their insufficient resources (non-adoption due to a lack of resources; Klinger, 2013). In contrast, the large parties, despite their shrinking votes, rely on traditional forms of canvassing and mass media coverage (non-adoption due to strategic reasons; Klinger, 2013). This confirms the results of Chen (2010, p. 15) who found that 'increased resources would be disproportionately allocated towards conventional channels'. In this respect having both (too) small (leading to deficits in implementation) and (too) large resources (associated with traditional campaigning strategies) can inhibit the uptake of newly developed campaigning tools. In every case, we agree with Larsson (2016) in that parties' social media activity is complex and cannot simply be explained by their received vote share.

Confirming *H2 (at present, German and Austrian parties will rarely use Facebook as an individual-centered campaigning tool)*, the parties focus on top-down communication (see also Ross et al., 2015), such as in mass- and target group-centered campaigns, instead of tailoring messages individually to single voters. This reluctance might be attributable to strict data protection laws in both countries for the most part (DLP Piper, 2014). But in light of their neglect of the new interactive and mobilizing opportunities Facebook provides, it is debatable if the parties would really put new micro-targeting practices to use even if they were allowed.

Consistent with *H3 (Austrian parties make more use of Facebook's interaction function than German parties)*, the Austrian parties are somewhat more oriented toward information of, mobilization of, and particularly interaction with voters via Facebook than the German parties. This difference, however, may reflect that the Austrian sample is composed of more small parties which are often more interested in the dialogue with the voters (Gibson & McAllister, 2015; Larsson, 2016). In the same vein, differences between parties are more pronounced than between countries in line with *H6 (differences between German and Austrian parties' Facebook campaigns rather depend on party characteristics (meso-level) than on country characteristics (macro-level))* and previous research (Lilleker et al., 2015; Tenscher et al., 2015).

Interestingly, the results of the content analysis for the German Greens and the FPÖ point to a possible correlation between the parties' ideological positions and voters' activity on Facebook – even though we hardly found any differences in the respective parties' strategies in the interviews: concerning the German Greens, our results yielded extraordinary

voter activity on Facebook in line with several studies from other countries (e.g., Gibson & McAllister, 2015; Klinger, 2013; Larsson, 2016). Possible reasons are the Greens' participatory culture and their relatively high popularity among younger voters with higher affinity to Facebook. However, on the Facebook page of the Austrian Greens, the voters are much less active, and there are also international counterexamples (e.g., Larsson, 2016).

Even more outstanding is the voters' activity on the FPÖ's Facebook page – just as the number of parties' posts, probably since 'social media provide the populists with a much more direct linkage' (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2016, p. 5) to the electorate than the mass media which often evaluate populist parties negatively (bypassing strategy). Through social media, they are closely connected with their voters and can spread their ideology directly. Thus, our results can contribute to the only just initiated discussion on the relationship between populism and social media (Bartlett, 2014; Groshek & Engelbert, 2012).

Altogether, our results show that German and Austrian parties do not yet come close to the extensive use of Facebook by Obama's campaigns, but rather rely on mass-centered (and mainly not even target group-centered) Facebook campaigns, even though the campaign managers declare Facebook their most important Web 2.0 campaigning tool. Our results are in line with previous studies (Tenscher et al., 2012, 2015), showing that parties will adopt new strategies once they deem them useful enough to spend the money they consume. No campaign type is per se superior to the others.

Our findings, moreover, yield that parties cannot adopt all tools and strategies they may want to; they will rather adopt certain new strategies if the framework conditions are favorable (Chen, 2010; Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2014). Some campaign practices common in the US (e.g., micro-targeting) are simply impossible in Germany and Austria. Thus, research on political campaigning should focus less on how far a country has moved toward the US model of campaigning, but rather ask why parties combine elements of the four campaign types as they do, dependent on the framework conditions in certain countries at that time. These country-specific contexts have often been neglected by research on political campaigning (Chen, 2010; Kalnes, 2009; Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2014).

Presumably, similar contexts induce similar combinations of campaign practices, which may explain the outweighing cross-national similarities in our study. Thus, it seems likely that, similar to Hallin and Mancini (2004), regional clusters of countries with similar framework conditions may have induced regional models of campaigning. These models may show characteristic combinations of the four types of campaigns (e.g., the North American, the Western European, the East Asian, and the North African campaign models). In one of the few existing cross-national comparisons of election campaigning, Lilleker et al. (2015, p. 747) point to this direction when identifying systematic differences 'in the perceptions of particular types of social media [...] in new and old EU member states'. Moreover, the role of structural triggers (e.g., introduction of commercial television and the Internet) must be discussed more comprehensively: similar structural developments may induce similar changes over time, characteristic for each model. Future research ought to investigate if such models in fact exist and how they have developed over recent decades. To answer these questions, more systematic cross-national and longitudinal comparisons are needed, particularly including more different countries than Germany and Austria.

As any investigation, our study is not without limitation. Although campaigning probably changes continually, our study is cross-sectional. However, since European parties have only just started to make use of the new opportunities of the Web 2.0 (e.g., Lilleker

& Jackson, 2011), it can function as a first measuring point of future longitudinal studies. Since we focused on Facebook, our results cannot be generalized to other Web 2.0 tools or (online) campaigns in general. Future studies should broaden the scope to other online tools and their interaction with offline tools. Besides, the interviews were conducted at different points in time: in Germany during the election campaign and in Austria shortly after the election. However, we can assume that the comparability of results is only marginally impaired due to temporal proximity.

Furthermore, the delayed download of the Facebook data two years after the elections may bias the number and content of posts, comments, and shares. However, this limitation similarly affects all parties, and the fast-paced nature of Facebook should have led to almost immediate discontinuation of posting, commenting, and sharing of campaign messages once the election was over; thus, any resulting biases should be weak. Moreover, the content of photos and videos integrated in the posts is neglected in the content analysis, since it was impossible to download it automatically. Although this could have resulted in some mobilizing elements being overlooked, we assume that this would not have biased the results strongly, due to the campaign managers' answers in the interviews and since other studies also indicate a non-mobilizing nature of Facebook campaigns (e.g., Klinger, 2013; Ross et al., 2015).

The current combination of surveying the parties' perspective in the interviews and examining their actual activities on Facebook in the content analysis has proved fruitful. This underlines the importance of using multi-method studies when addressing political campaigning. Beyond, future studies should more comprehensively investigate the effects of Web 2.0 campaigns on the voters and the Web 2.0 campaign's interrelation with journalists and traditional mass media.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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