

Instagram and Political Campaigning in the 2017 German Federal Election. A Quantitative Content Analysis of German Top Politicians' and Parliamentary Parties' Posts

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This article compares the communication strategies of party and candidate accounts on Instagram during the 2017 German federal election. Building upon previous research, we conceptualize how the digital architecture of the platform determines its communication norms and how the actual communication practices implemented by parties and candidates follow or violate these norms. Therefore, we analyze how Instagram is used to implement different campaign strategies, focusing on (1) the use of network-related Instagram features-like Hashtags-, (2) text- integrated images, (3) dominant visual themes, (4) visual personalization, and (5) the addressing of policy issues. Since Germany's voting system rewards both candidate- and party-focused campaigning, the country is an ideal case study for an appropriate comparison of party and candidate accounts. We conducted a quantitative content analysis of all 581 posts published on party and candidate accounts during the four weeks before the election. The results suggest that parties and candidates used complementary communication strategies instead of relying on a single tactic. We are able showing that parties in parts strategically violated Instagram's communication norms to convey hard-to-visualize policy messages while candidates preferred to post professional personalized posts. The presented findings provide a starting point for future studies on the perceptions and behavioral outcomes of different campaign strategies.

Keywords: Instagram; Social Media; Political Communication; Online Campaigning; Germany;

Content analysis

Instagram and Political Campaigning in the 2017 German Federal Election. A Quantitative Content Analysis of German Top Politicians' and Parliamentary Parties' Posts

Social media have become an indispensable tool for modern election campaigns, nowadays being “as essential as the old staple of television advertising” (Kreiss et al., 2018, p. 8). While all social media platforms share common characteristics, campaigners constantly have to adapt to new tools, digital architectures, and communication norms when they want to reach (new) audiences and voters (ibid., see also Bossetta, 2018). In recent years, the photo and video-sharing platform Instagram has been added to the campaign toolkit in many democracies (e.g., Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019; Mahoney et al., 2016)—due to both its popularity among (young) online users and unique possibilities to *visually* communicate political issues. 30% of the population in the U.S. (equivalent to about 99 million people) and 25% of the population in Germany (equivalent to about 20 million people) actively use Instagram (Newman et al., 2020). Although political campaigns on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter increasingly rely on visual communication as well, Instagram’s “image first logic” (Ekman & Widholm, 2017, p. 18)—paired with the platform-specific perception to provide a more personal and intimate look at everyday political life (ibid., see also Larsson, 2019)—suggests that political communication might look differently on Instagram. Evidence for this is starting to accumulate (e.g., Muñoz & Towner, 2017; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019), but there remains a paucity of empirical research focusing on distinct political systems, the differences between communication practices of parties vs. individual candidates, and the adherence to communication norms introduced by the platforms’ digital architecture.

Addressing these research gaps, this article provides an analytical and empirical look at how top politicians and parliamentary parties have used Instagram during the German federal

election (“Bundestagswahl”) in 2017. Germany serves as an ideal case study due to its personalized proportional representation voting system that rewards both candidate- and party-focused campaigning, allowing for an appropriate comparison of both account types. Furthermore, the 2017 election was the first German federal election during which all major parties were running an Instagram account, thus providing a glimpse into the early stage of the platform’s use for campaigns.

We start our article by proposing a conceptual framework, situating Instagram in the hybrid media system and illustrating how communication practices of political parties and candidates derive both from Instagram’s digital architecture and prevalent communication norms. Using a quantitative content analysis of all Instagram posts published by German parliamentary parties and their top candidates four weeks before the election ($n = 581$), we then provide empirical insights into actual communication practices by analyzing the use of network-related Instagram features (e.g., hashtags), distinct image types, and the addressing of policy issues. Moreover, we examine parties’ and candidates’ use of visual personalization by focusing on tendencies of individualization and privatization in Instagram posts.

Political Campaigning on Instagram

In modern hybrid media systems, the number of campaign communication channels has multiplied, thus necessitating a reasoned selection of adequate tools and strategies by campaigners. One set of tools that has become central in modern election campaigns worldwide are social media such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram (e.g., Kreiss et al., 2018; Stier et al., 2018). The increasing importance of social media in election campaigns runs parallel to decisive changes in voting behavior. Classical social-psychological models of voting behavior—such as the Michigan model—conceptualize voting decisions as being influenced by both long-term

(e.g., party identification) and short-term factors (e.g., candidate preferences; issue orientation, see Campbell et al., 1960; Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018). Results of empirical studies suggest that during the last decades, the importance of long-term factors has decreased—as can be seen in declines in party memberships or the increase of late-deciding voters—while short-term factors have gained importance (Campbell, 2001; Reinemann et al., 2013). Social media tools have become especially important for parties and candidates to reach voters that rely on these short-term factors. They allow presenting their (stance on) issues directly and provide them with comprehensive possibilities for individual impression management and personalization. While researchers have mostly highlighted social media's *bypass function* (i.e., circumventing traditional gatekeepers and directly communicating with relevant target groups), the platforms can also be seen “as a new way to get into the old media” (Jacobs et al., 2020, p. 615) and thus fulfill an *entry function*. Moreover, social media enable campaigners to engage in *targeted advertising* and data-driven campaigns. Following from this, a single Facebook or Instagram post can be used to bypass traditional gatekeepers and directly address voters, be “promoted” and thus turned into an ad, and/or gain the attention of journalists who can use the post in the reporting process (e.g., as a source or idea generator) or directly embed it into their coverage (see Broersma & Graham, 2012).

Despite these opportunities, it is an open question whether specific social media platforms fit into the campaign toolkit and how they are adopted and used. Considering our focus on Instagram, we now turn to the question of how the platforms' digital architecture is designed and which communication norms can be deduced from it.

Instagram's Digital Architecture and Communication Norms

The structural design of a social media platform has important implications for users' behavior and communication practices, which is true not only for 'ordinary' users but also for political parties and candidates. Following Bossetta (2018), we make use of the concept of *digital architectures*—defined as “the technical protocols that enable, constrain, and shape user behavior in a virtual space” (ibid., p. 473)—to discuss how Instagram's functionality, network structures, and algorithms mediate political communication. A platform's digital architecture not only shapes what type of communication is possible but also what ultimately turns out to be successful (see also Bucher & Helmond, 2018). Moreover, it is associated with specific *communication norms*: rules that govern posting behavior based on shared expectations and collective perceptions of what is (not) appropriate to show and share (Kalsnes, 2016; Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Taken together, digital architecture and communication norms can be conceptualized as two sides of the same coin. Addressing this interconnectedness, we adopt Bossetta's (2018) typology of digital architectures—consisting of the four aspects functionality, network structure, datafication, and algorithmic filtering—and extend it by including Instagram-specific communication norms that can be derived in the context of political campaigning.

Functionality

Functionality refers to Instagram's basic features and “governs how content is mediated, accessed, and distributed” (Bossetta, 2018, p. 476). Being a photo and video-sharing platform, Instagram inherently has a strong focus on (audio-)visual communication, which results in a communication norm of visualizability and—at least to some extent—in the aestheticization of everyday life (Kümpel & Rieger, 2020, p. 21). For campaigners, this suggests that content needs to be 'instagrammable' which entails both the fundamental possibility to visually (re)present a

topic or issue as well as the adherence to established platform aesthetics. While Instagram can be used with a desktop interface, it is optimized for use via smartphones, thus also creating a communication norm of mobile optimization (i.e., content that is easy to read and properly formatted on a mobile device). Most full-time politicians and parties on Instagram have so-called creator or business accounts which are both parts of the ‘professional account’ type and come with additional features for audience insights and account labeling (Bossetta, 2018, p. 475; Instagram Help Center, 2020a). Beyond this technical classification, a distinction can be made between (personal) candidate and party accounts that are associated with distinct communication norms. Personal accounts by individual candidates are much closer to ‘normal’ user accounts and thus have to comply with norms of personalization, authenticity, and (visual) self-presentation (e.g., Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). Party accounts, on the other hand, are much closer to typical business accounts by organizations and allow for the distribution of more issue-based content (e.g., Filimonov et al., 2016; Larsson, 2019).

Network Structure

The term *network structure* refers to all criteria that govern connections between accounts and content on social media (Bossetta, 2018, p. 479). On Instagram, content can be connected in three dimensions: (1) contextually by using hashtags, (2) account-based by using mentions, and (3) spatially by using geotags. Accordingly, campaigners can make their content (more) discoverable by associating a post with specific topics (e.g., “#climatechange”) or renowned personalities and places. Instagram’s main feed is organized in a way that users—apart from advertisements—only see content from accounts and hashtags they follow. Accordingly, it is important for politicians and parties that users *actively* decide to subscribe to their accounts. Additionally, they can work towards increasing the discoverability of their content in the so-

called “Search & Explore” section by consistently using the above-mentioned features. It follows from the above that communication norms on Instagram invite a posting behavior that makes use of popular (but relevant) hashtags, associates specific places (e.g., “Berlin”) with one’s persona and/or policies, and increases the visibility of one’s political network by mentioning colleagues or local affiliates of the party.

Datafication

Following Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier (2013), Bossetta (2018) uses the term *datafication* to refer to “the process of quantifying users’ activity for strategic electoral purposes” (p. 488). Campaigners can use available data about Instagram user behavior for matching, targeting, and analytical purposes. While often considered highly sophisticated, basic processes of datafication already start with the identification of rather general characteristics of target audiences. Compared to Facebook and Twitter, Instagram is (still) a platform of young users: In Germany, the focus of our empirical investigation, Instagram is mainly used by under-thirty-year olds (Beisch & Schäfer, 2020, p. 466)—a trend that is also evident in other countries (see Newman et al., 2020). Consequently, to address this young audience, parties and politicians need to make assumptions about Instagram users’ topical interests and adhere to the communication norm of publishing ‘young’ content that addresses political issues relevant for that target group (see also Eldin, 2016).

Algorithmic Filtering

Although parties and politicians are largely free to decide which content they share on Instagram, *algorithmic filtering* greatly influences which (and how many) users are reached by the posts (Bossetta, 2018, p. 477; Stier et al., 2018, p. 54). Even if a given user follows the account of a political party or persona, the Instagram feed is configured in a way that “photos

and videos we think you care about most will appear towards the top of your feed” (Instagram Help Center, 2020b). This suggests that posts might easily ‘get lost’ if the user rarely engages with the posting account (Kümpel & Rieger, 2020, p. 23). However, although the natural reach of posts might be limited, Instagram enables campaigners to override algorithmic filtering and increase a post’s impact by creating so-called ‘promotions’ that can target users with specific sociodemographic or behavioral characteristics (Bossetta, 2018, p. 477).

Instagram Use During Election Campaigns: Communication Practices

At first sight, it might seem trivial that communication norms on Instagram can ultimately be characterized as posting content that is (highly) visualizable, aesthetic, personalized, adequately tagged, optimized for mobile devices, and aimed at young audiences. However, by allowing campaigners to freely design their posts and ‘crosspost’ (i.e., share the same content) to Facebook or Twitter, parties’ and politicians’ *communication practices* could violate these norms. Indeed, content can be edited to include longer texts (as in image quotes or political memes) or complex information (as in infographics). Thus, if we describe Instagram’s digital architecture and communication norms as two sides of the same coin, parties’ and politicians’ communication practices are the coin’s value as they capture what the platform is actually used for.

The current evidence suggests that the overarching communication practice on Instagram is best described as *visual personalization* (Maurer & Engelmann, 2014). This concept builds upon the work of van Aelst et al. (2012), who divide personalization into (1) individualization (focusing on politicians instead of parties) and (2) privatization (focusing on politicians as private persons instead of role occupants). Individualization can be further separated into (1a) general attention towards individual politicians and (1b) presidentialization that is characterized

by a strong focus on leading top candidates. Privatization can be divided into (2a) the focus on personal characteristics instead of political traits and (2b) the focus on politicians' personal life instead of their professional one. The concept of visual personalization—analogue to the operationalization for text-based messages—thus asks how individual politicians are pictured in terms of individualization and privatization. Since complex political issues are hard to visualize, political campaigners tend to make use of visual personalization, presenting individual politicians instead of policy issues or portraying politicians as 'visual ambassadors' for certain policies. Ekman and Widholm (2017, p. 26), for example, show that Swedish politicians used Instagram mainly to show their "everyday professional" life (36%), to send a "political message" (35%), and to present their "everyday private" life (33%), but also to refer to the media (20%). Referring to the Swedish electoral context as well, Filimonov and colleagues (2016, p. 6-7) demonstrate that party posts on Instagram during the 2014 Swedish General election were rather personalized. More than two-thirds of the analyzed posts displayed individual persons and in more than a half of these posts party leaders were visible. But as analyses of the 2014 (Filimonov et al., 2016, p. 7) and the 2018 (Grusell & Nord, 2020, p. 11) Swedish election campaigns suggest, privatization can only rarely be found in Instagram posts of top politicians. Furthermore, a comprehensive study of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's use of Instagram shows that he uses Instagram primarily to "showcase ... expertise, skills, accomplishments, and talent" but also "seriousness and rigorousness," presenting himself together with various stakeholders of his policies (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019, p. 909). Altogether, previous studies show that the presentation of individual politicians—especially of party or government leaders—is not only a communication practice used for impression management but also for conveying general political or issue-specific messages in a personalized form.

While the digital architecture and communication norms on Instagram would suggest a goal-directed use of hashtags, mentions, and geotags to make content more visible, previous studies show that these features often remain underused. For example, Lalancette and Raynauld (2019, p. 906) found that less than half of the posts in Justin Trudeau's Instagram account used hashtags, and less than one-third used mentions. In terms of targeting, there is some evidence that politicians indeed follow the communication norm and try to communicate about "young" issues on Instagram (e.g., Eckerl & Hahn, 2018; Kreiss et al., 2018). However, policy issues are often hard to visualize, which is why campaigners have found ways to circumvent the 'image first' rationale when trying to convey complex information: They make use of image quotes, politicized memes, quote cards, or other text-integrated images. Thereby, they include text elements such as quotes or policy statements directly into the images (see Figure 1 for examples; Pfurtscheller, 2020). Following the logic of visual personalization, these image quotes often portray individual politicians together with a short statement, thus connecting party policies with memorable faces. During the 2016 U.S. presidential primaries, Instagram posts by the seven leading candidates included text in more than one-third of all posts. There was, however, wide variation among candidates in their use of text in images (Muñoz & Towner, 2017, p. 303).

To analyze how the 'image-first' rationale of Instagram is implemented in election campaigns, Liebhart and Bernhardt (2017) added an insightful layer to research by adapting the method of *image type analysis* as developed by Grittmann and Ammann (2009) to a campaign context during the 2016 Austrian Federal Presidential election campaign. The authors developed 12 "inductively generated categories" (Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017, p. 18): campaign, media work, fan contact, call to action, background



Figure 1.

Exemplary Political Image Quotes on Instagram¹

stories, positioning, discussions, fan art, endorsement, family, meeting politicians, and site visits. Their results show that images related to campaign activities—conveying campaign information and advertisements (all subsumed under the image type ‘campaign’)—dominated the visual campaign communication (24%), followed by images visualizing media work such as press conferences (16%). ‘Positioning’, defined as the pointing towards political issues, played a minor role, ranking on place six out of twelve image types (9%) (Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017, p. 20). The authors conclude that “[p]oliticians *show* different aspects of their personalities, their qualifications for the office, or their understanding of politics than they articulate in verbal or textual form” (Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017, p. 22). This conclusion is also supported by studies demonstrating that politicians use Instagram to present the professionalism of their work in a multi-faceted way by visually presenting their daily activities in different areas of their job (O’Connell, 2018) or by displaying societal support or empathy (Holiday et al., 2015).

More explicitly analyzing which issues are presented and could be accompanying these image types, Ludwig (2018, p. 293) shows that only 19.5% of posts published on Instagram by

candidates running in the primaries five months before the 2016 U.S. Presidential election addressed an issue, while almost 68% addressed campaign events. When addressing an issue, the presidential candidates Trump and Clinton focused on the issues of national security, labor policy, and foreign policy.

Thus, together with the analysis of image types, analyzing the presentation of policy issues and visual personalization might deepen our understanding of how candidates and parties present themselves to voters that potentially base their voting decision on candidate preference and issue orientation rather than on long-term party identification.

The Current Study: Instagram and Political Campaigning in the 2017 German Federal Election

Our empirical study focuses on the campaign surrounding the 2017 German Federal Election (“Bundestagswahl”) which was held on September 24, 2017. Germany is an ideal case to investigate the use of Instagram in political campaigns, as the electoral system combines the proportional representation of parties and the personal election of candidates (Tomuschat, 2013), thus enabling the simultaneous investigation of party- and candidate-focused political campaigns. Although the German chancellor (“Bundeskanzler*in”) is voted by members of the parliament and not directly by the voters, German parties nominate top candidates (“Spitzenkandidat*innen”) who serve as ‘face of the campaign.’

Focusing on Instagram is especially interesting in the context of this election campaign, as it was the first during which all major German parties used the platform. Moreover, apart from the top candidates of the right-wing party *Alternative for Germany* (AfD), all top candidates were actively running an Instagram account. There was a wide variety of policy issues considered relevant by the electorate in 2017: National polls showed that social policy, domestic

security, education policy, foreign policy, and environmental policy were named as most important (Roßteutscher et al., 2019). This ranking changes only slightly when considering answers by the youngest age group (in this study: 18-to-29-year-olds), who perceive education policy as more important than domestic security but otherwise follow the overall trend.

Building on the theoretical assumptions about Instagram's digital architecture and communication norms as well as prior results regarding actual communication practices during political campaigns, our study aims to shed light on Germany's first 'Instagram campaign.' To provide multi-faceted insights, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent do party and candidate accounts make use of network-related Instagram features (e.g., hashtags) in their posts?

RQ2: To what extent do party and candidate accounts make use of text-integrated images (e.g., image quotes)?

RQ3: What are the dominant visual themes of posts from party and candidate accounts?

RQ4: To what extent do party and candidate accounts show tendencies of visual personalization (i.e., individualization and privatization) in their posts?

RQ5: Which policy issues do party and candidate accounts address most in their posts?

Method

To answer the proposed research questions, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of all posts published on the Instagram accounts of the seven German parliamentary parties and their top candidates four weeks before the 2017 German federal election (August 28 to September 24, 2017) (see Table 1). CDU, CSU, FDP, and SPD nominated one top candidate for the election campaign, while the Left party, the Greens, and the AfD each nominated two top candidates. For the Greens, both top candidates' (Katrin Göring-Eckardt; Cem Özdemir)

Instagram accounts could be included in the sample, while only one of the two top candidates of the Left party (Sahra Wagenknecht) had an active Instagram account. Accordingly, the second top candidate Dietmar Bartsch was not part of the analysis. Moreover, both top candidates of the right-wing AfD (Alice Weidel; Alexander

Table 1.

Overview of the Analyzed Instagram Accounts

Party/Candidate (Instagram Account Name) [Election Result]	Number of Posts	%	Date Joined (yyyy/mm/dd)	Number of Followers
AfD (afd.bund) [12,6%]	46	8	2014/09/03	9,112 ^b
CDU ¹ (cdu) [26,8%]	43	7	2014/11/11	12,270
CSU ² (csu) [6,2%]	50	9	2014/11/24	8,936
FDP ³ (fdp) [10,7%]	37	6	2015/07/08	14,300
Left party ⁴ (dielinke) [9,2%]	74	13	2013/09/03	12,813
SPD ⁵ (spd) [20,5%]	31	5	2016/10/30 ^a	12,918
The Greens ⁶ (die_gruenen) [8,9%]	49	8	2015/06/17	16,902
Angela Merkel ¹ (bundeskanzlerin)	9	2	2015/03/11	366,229
Joachim Herrmann ² (joachim.herrmann.csu)	23	4	2015/01/06 ^a	2,147
Christian Lindner ³ (christianlindner)	55	10	2016/02/10	35,020
Sahra Wagenknecht ⁴ (sahra_wagenknecht)	20	3	2017/07/13	7,487 ^c
Martin Schulz ⁵ (martinschulzspd)	36	6	2014/03/12 ^a	20,496
Cem Özdemir ⁶ (cem.oezdemir)	63	11	2016/07/04	4,466
Katrin Göring-Eckardt ⁶ (goeringeckardt)	46	8	2016/06/09 ^a	1,670
Total	582	100		<i>Mdn</i> = 12,541.5

Note: All follower numbers are mean values for the time from 2017/08/28 to 2017/09/24. Matching numeral superscripts indicate joined affiliation (e.g., Martin Schulz is SPD's top candidate).

^aInformation from "About this account" not available. Date of first post is used instead.

^bEarliest available Number of Followers via CrowdTangle: 2017/11/23.

^cEarliest available Number of Followers via CrowdTangle: 2018/06/26.

Gauland) could not be included in the sample due to not posting on and/or maintaining their Instagram account during the period of investigation. The 14 analyzed Instagram accounts published a total of 581 posts that were manually recorded retroactively (from November 24, 2018 to January 21, 2019) and saved as screenshots and/or -recordings on a smartphone.²

The analysis focused primarily on the image and/or video content of the posts, which thus served as the main unit of analysis. However, image captions, hashtags, mentions, and geotags as well as the audio tracks of videos could be used for further contextualization of the post content, to guarantee a valid coding of the content categories. Videos were coded in their entirety. For carousel posts (i.e., a post consisting of multiple images and/or videos), only the first image/video was coded as this one is immediately visible when Instagram users scroll through their feed.

To adequately answer our research questions, five overarching constructs were operationalized: (1) network-related Instagram features, (2) text-integrated images, (3) image types, (4) personalization, and (5) policy issues (see Table 2). (1) To gauge the use of network-related Instagram features, we coded the use of hashtags, mentions, and geotags in the posts. For reasons of comparability, the—originally more detailed—variables ‘use of hashtags’ and ‘use of mentions’ were dichotomized (present/not present). To analyze the use of (2) text-integrated images, it was coded whether the visual focus of the post was primarily on the image or the textual information: ‘focus on image’ was coded when visual elements dominated the post and text was only used sparsely, while ‘focus on text’ was coded when long texts dominated the post and only few visual elements were used (see examples on http://bit.ly/insta_de). Posts containing text and image in a roughly equal amounts were coded as ‘ambivalent.’ (3) The dominant (visual) theme of the post was measured by coding different ‘image types.’ For this category, we used the method of *image type analysis* as introduced by Grittmann and Ammann (2009) and as applied by Liebhart and Bernhardt (2017) in a campaign context. While most of the image types introduced by Liebhart and Bernhardt (2017) could be adopted for our research context, we additionally included the categories ‘negative campaigning’ and ‘supporters’ as our pretest

showed that posts with these overarching themes could not be adequately reflected within the existing categories. 'Site visits' were grouped together with 'campaign events' and 'fan art' was dropped because this image type was absent in the material. To account for posts—especially videos—having several dominant themes each of the image types presented in Table 2 was individually coded as being present or not present. For the analysis, the individual image types were then summarized into nine overarching categories: 'policy,' 'campaign events,' 'call for action,' 'negative campaigning,' 'media work,' 'campaign material,' 'supporters,' 'everyday political work,' and 'private background story.' (4) Personalization was measured using a set of three categories to account for the different subtypes of personalization introduced above. Based on conceptualizations by van Aelst and colleagues (2012), the posts were thus examined for tendencies of individualization, presidentialization, and privatization. (5) Last, to measure the policy issues addressed in the posts, it was coded whether the post mentioned/discussed one of eleven issues from various political domains. To compare the policy issues addressed in the posts to the policy issues considered relevant by the German electorate in national polls 2017, certain subcategories were combined for the analysis to better reflect the systematization used by Roßteutscher and colleagues (2019).

Table 2.*Overview of the Analyzed Constructs and Reliability Scores*

Construct	Variable(s)	Coding Scheme ^a	Holsti CR	Brennan & Prediger's κ
<i>(1) Network-related Instagram features</i>	Geotags	The use of a geotag above the post	1.00	1.00
	Mentions	The use of mentions in the post or the caption; four categories to specify the mention: no mention party political actor(s) non-political actor(s)	.95	.94
	Hashtags	The use of hashtags in the post ^c	1.00	1.00
<i>(2) Text-integrated images</i>	Image/text ratio ^d	The spatial ratio between text and image; four categories to specify the ratio: no text focus on image ambivalent focus on text	.85	.80
<i>(3) Image types</i>		The post...		
Policy		...refers to political issues, presents positions, or explains concepts and political objectives	.85	.70
Campaign events	Election campaign events	...shows election campaign events where a large number of voters/supporters is present	.85	.77
	Individual voter contact	...shows politicians in direct contact with individual voters	.93	.86
Call for action		...explicitly calls for different forms of support or for participation in discussions	.86	.73
Negative campaigning		...attacks political opponent(s) and portrays them negatively	.85	.70
Media work	Survey results	...provides information about the progress of the election [campaign] (e.g., survey results, election forecasts)	1.00	n/a
	Media work	...shows interviews, press conferences, newspaper articles, or TV appearances	.88	.76
Campaign material		...presents advertising materials, shows how they are placed/distributed by campaign workers or introduces the campaign team	.88	.76
Supporters		...shows celebrity or non-celebrity supporters of the party/candidate	.92	.83
Everyday political work		...shows everyday political work outside of campaign activities/events (e.g., meetings, parliamentary sessions)	.97	.93
Private background story		...shows politicians' interests and hobbies or portrays their childhood/development	.92	.83
<i>(4) Personalization</i>				
Presidentialization	Top candidate(s)	The depiction of a top candidate in the post; five categories to specify: top candidate of the own party other top candidate(s)	.78	.74

		other leading politician(s) other politician(s) non-political persons		
Individualization	Number of people	The number of people depicted in the post; five categories to specify: none one two three to five more than five	.83	.79
Privatization	Context	The context in which a top candidate is presented; two categories to specify: political context private context	.83	.77
(5) Policy Issues ^b		Policy issues were coded as a categorical variable. Coders could select one <i>predominant</i> policy issue in a post (if applicable). The following policy issues could be coded...	.86	.85
Economy and finance		austerity policy, taxation, Euro crisis etc.		
Labor & social issues	Labor & social issues	wages, working hours, pensions etc.		
	Refugee crisis	integration, stopping migration, fighting causes of migration etc.		
	Health policy	health insurance, staff shortage in the care sector etc.		
Domestic security		crimes, police work, camera surveillance etc.		
Education		school system, student loans, professional training etc.		
Foreign Policy	Foreign Policy [EU]	cooperation of EU-countries or between EU and Non-EU countries, e.g. Brexit, Turkey's accession to the EU		
	Foreign Policy [Non-EU]	military forces, United Nations, sanctions etc.		
Environmental policy		Climate change, energy policy, electricity prices etc.		
Digitization		digitization, technology, public wi-fi etc.		
Other policy issue		any other policy issue(s)		

Note: ^aAll variables were coded as binary, unless stated otherwise. ^bVariables were recoded in accordance with Roßteutscher et al. (2019) to enable comparison. ^cThis variable was recoded for comparability [original measure: none | < 5 hashtags | 5 or more hashtags]. ^dSee the OSF repository for examples: bit.ly/insta_de.

Two coders were trained extensively to code the Instagram posts. To assure the reliability of the coding, each coder coded a random selection of 10% of the posts in the final sample ($n = 59$). Intercoder reliability tests were calculated using the R-package “tidycomm” (Unkel, 2019) and showed satisfactory values for all variables (≥ 0.70 , see Table 2). The data and

reproducible *R* analysis scripts for the reliability tests and the data analysis can be obtained from the study's OSF repository: http://bit.ly/insta_de [blinded link for peer review].

Results

In the German federal election campaign in 2017, party accounts were overall more active (330 posts) on Instagram than candidate accounts (251 posts, see Table 1). During the four weeks leading up to the election, the number of posts increased for both account types, peaking on the day before the election (see Figure 2). Although it is not a legal requirement, parties and candidates have thus maintained a tradition in German election campaigns according to which advertising is largely avoided on the election day.

Use of Network-Related Instagram Features

The use of network-related Instagram features such as hashtags, mentions, and geotags—central to the contextual, personal, and spatial connection of content on the platform—

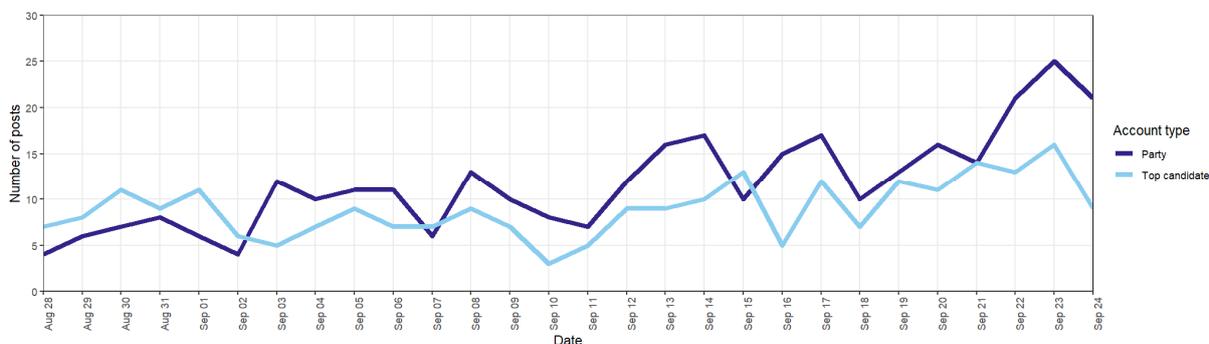


Figure 2.

Number of Posts by Party and Candidate Accounts Over Time

Note: $n = 581$ posts.

differed largely between the two account types and between individual parties (see Figure 3). Overall, hashtags were used most frequently (featured in 89% of all posts), followed by geotags (36%), and mentions (32%). The party account of liberal FDP as well as



Figure 3.

Use of Network-Related Instagram Features by Party and Candidate Accounts

Note: n = 581 posts.

the candidate accounts of Christian Lindner (FDP), Sahra Wagenknecht (Left Party), and Joachim Herrmann (CSU) used hashtags most consistently and connected every post they published with one or more hashtags.

Geotags were predominantly used by candidate accounts. On Angela Merkel's (CDU) and Christian Lindner's (FDP) accounts, geotags were used in every post, indexing it according to the location from where a posted photo was taken. By contrast, Sahra Wagenknecht's (Left party) account did not use a single geotag. Among party accounts, SPD used geotags most often (52%). Interestingly, the parties of the candidate accounts that used geotags in every single post did not necessarily make use of geotags more often than other parties.

Account-based connections—realized via so-called mentions—were rather uncommon. Social democratic SPD made use of mentions in 77% of their posts, followed by CDU (56%), and the Left party (23%). Among top candidates, Joachim Herrmann (CSU) used mentions most frequently (100%), followed by the top candidates of the Greens (50%). To identify the broader communication practice behind the use of mentions, we further examined what types of accounts were mentioned. Of all mentions used, mentions of non-political actors were the most common (44%). However, mentioning other political actors such as local representatives (28%), top candidates of parties (19%), and party accounts (9%) combined to a total amount of 56% 'political mentions.' Following from this, two nearly equally weighted communication practices can be identified: (1) Mentioning non-political accounts and thus trying to reach audiences that would otherwise have been unlikely to be exposed to political content, and (2) building a political network between different political entities by using 'political mentions.'

Use of Text-Integrated Images and Dominant Visual Themes

The communication norm of visualizability was most consistently followed by the candidate accounts of Angela Merkel (CDU) and Martin Schulz (SPD) which exclusively published posts without integrated text or a clear visual focus on the image. The candidate account of Christian Lindner (FDP) (87%) showed comparable communication practices. Among party accounts, social-democratic SPD was most picture-focused with 97% of posts focusing primarily on the image. The AfD, on the other hand, has predominantly used text-integrated images (e.g., image quotes) with only 13% of their posts *not* containing text or having a visual focus on the image. Overall, as can be inferred from Figure 4, candidate accounts made less use of text-integrated images than party accounts and published more images without text and a clear focus on the image.

To get a sense of dominant visual themes and thus more insights into the actual (visual) content of the posts, we then analyzed which image types were most common. Again, party and candidate accounts showed quite different communication practices (see Figure 5). While parties focused on the presentation of policy issues, candidate accounts most frequently displayed campaign events. Combining both steps of the analysis shows that the use of text-integrated images is closely associated with the use of different image types: On party accounts, the combination of text-integrated images with the “policy” image type could be observed most frequently (21% of all posts on party accounts), while image-only posts with the “campaign events” image type were most common for candidate accounts (34% of all posts on candidate accounts). This suggests that

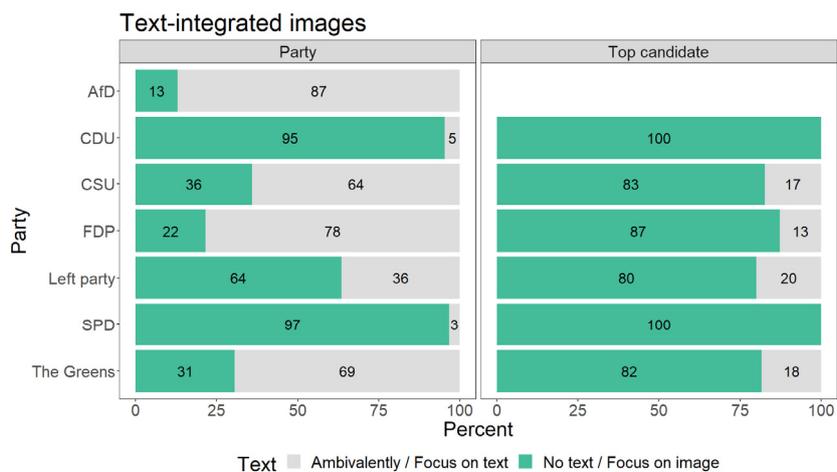


Figure 4.

Use of Text-Integrated Images

Note: n = 581 posts.

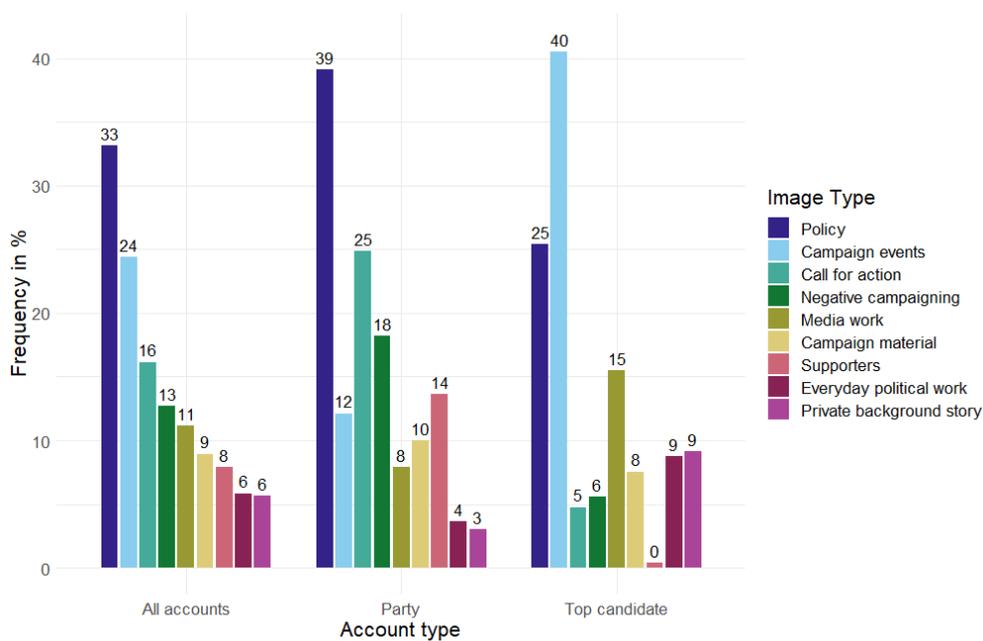


Figure 5.

Use of Image Types (Dominant Visual Themes)

Note: n = 581 posts.

the communication practices of party and candidate accounts complement each other by focusing on different visual strategies.

Visual Personalization

As described in the theory section, Instagram's digital architecture and resulting communication norms should favor the use of personalization in the form of candidate pictures. In line with previous research (e.g., Filimonov et al., 2016), visual personalization also dominated the 2017 German federal election campaign on party and candidate accounts, with pictures of individual persons being most common. 71% of posts by party accounts and 90% of posts by candidates displayed individuals (see Table 3). However, digging deeper into more fine-grained personalization strategies, differences in the communication practices of party and candidate accounts emerged.

Presidentialization—the tendency to focus on top politicians—dominated within the posts of party and candidate accounts, but the intensity with which the two account types used this communication practice varied greatly: 31% of posts on party accounts and 85% of posts on candidate accounts displayed the top candidates, suggesting that these were the main hub for presidentialization. Focusing on individualization next, there was a trend towards showing two or more people in pictures where individual politicians or non-political persons were displayed. Accordingly, there was no clear tendency towards individualization as a personalization strategy: Even when the top candidates were displayed, they were most often shown together with other people. Last but not least, the results do not show a tendency towards privatization of political communication on Instagram. Both party and candidate accounts displayed top candidates

overwhelmingly in a political context (26% of the posts of party accounts; 72% of the posts of candidate accounts) instead of a private context (4% resp. 13%).

Overall, building on these results, two complementary personalization practices emerged in the German federal election campaign on Instagram in 2017: Candidate accounts followed a communication practice that can best be described as visual personalization with a tendency towards presidentialization (but not towards individualization and privatization): 64% of all posts on candidate accounts displayed top candidates together with other persons and 72% of all posts on candidate accounts displayed top candidates in a political context. The communication practice applied on party accounts is less clear-cut: 29% of all posts on party accounts did not display individual persons and another 40% of posts displayed other politicians or non-political persons but not the top candidates.

Addressing of Policy Issues

An Instagram post can—but does not have to—address specific policy issues. This is, for example, the case when a candidate explicitly addresses economic issues in a post.

Table 3.*Personalization Strategies Within the Posts of Party and Candidate Accounts*

Presidentialization	Individualization	Privatization	Account Party (n = 327) %	Top candidate (n = 251) %
No individual person			29	10
Top candidate			31	85
	Individually		16	21
	Two or more persons		15	64
		Political context		26
		Private context		72
			4	13
Other politicians			15	1
	Individually		7	<1
	Two or more persons		8	<1
Non-political person			25	4
	Individually		11	0
	Two or more persons		14	4
Total			100	100
			-	-

Note: n = 578. Three posts were excluded due to being not identifiable.

Overall, about half of the posts on party accounts (47%) but less than one-third of posts on candidate accounts (31%) contained specific policy issues.

Of all presented policy issues, ‘labor & social issues’ and ‘environmental policy’ were most frequently addressed (see Table 4). On party accounts, ‘labor & social issues’ was the leading policy issue, while ‘environmental policy’ dominated on candidate accounts. The attention that parties and candidates devoted to specific issues was thus pretty much in line with the issue agenda of the electorate, as the issues addressed most often in the Instagram posts also were among the five issues identified as Germany’s most important problems in national polls

(Roßteutscher et al., 2019). However, having a more detailed look at differences between the parliamentary parties, we found that Christian democratic CDU focused on policy issues the least (14%), while the Greens addressed policy issues in more than half of their posts (52%). Focusing on the specific issues, the Greens addressed ‘environmental policy’ in 29% of their posts, while the Left party (23%), SPD (19%), and right-wing AfD (15%) posted most often about ‘labor & social issues.’ Liberal FDP, by contrast, showed a focus on policy issues surrounding digitization. However, overall, the results show no clear tendency that specific ‘young’ issues were addressed by all parties. Instead of broadly following the communication norms on Instagram, the parties were mainly concerned with pushing the issues central to their federal campaign.

Taken together, two general conclusions regarding parties’ and candidates’ communication practices on Instagram can be drawn: (1) While candidate accounts showed tendencies of presidentialization, this was not accompanied by a strong focus on policy issues, suggesting that the strategy of using top candidates as ‘visual ambassadors’ was rarely applied. (2) Party accounts focused more strongly on the presentation of policy issues and did not resort to consistent personalization strategies. Quite generally, their communication practice was not as clear-cut as the one observed for candidate accounts.

Discussion

Building on the academic debate about how different digital architectures and communication norms on social media platforms are changing political campaigning, this study provides an analytical and empirical look at the use of Instagram during election campaigns. Using Germany as an exemplary case for campaigning in a personalized proportional representation voting system—that rewards both personalized and party

Table 4*Share of Posts Addressing Specific Policy Issues by Account Type and Party*

	Party (<i>n</i> =330) in %	Top Candida te (<i>n</i> =251) in %	AfD (<i>n</i> =46) in %	CDU (<i>n</i> =51) in %	CSU (<i>n</i> =73) in %	FDP (<i>n</i> =92) in %	Left party (<i>n</i> =94) in %	SPD (<i>n</i> =67) in %	The Greens (<i>n</i> =158) in %
No Policy Issue	53	69	65	86	52	67	62	61	48
Economy and Finance	7	1	9	2	6	8	8	0	1
Labor & Social Issues	16	7	15	2	14	2	23	19	9
Domestic Security	2	2	7	0	8	0	0	0	2
Education	2	2	0	0	3	2	0	8	1
Foreign Policy	5	2	4	2	1	3	4	6	3
Environmental Policy	7	12	0	2	8	1	0	0	29
Digitization	3	2	0	2	3	11	0	0	2
Other Policy Issue	6	4	0	4	6	5	3	6	6
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Note: *n* = 581.

campaigns (Tomuschat, 2013)—, we analyze how top politicians and parliamentary parties have used Instagram during the hot phase of the 2017 federal election. Deriving from the platform’s digital architecture, communication norms on Instagram can best be described as posting content that is good to visualize, aesthetic, personalized, adequately tagged, optimized for mobile devices, and aimed at young audiences (Bossetta, 2018). However, as the results of our content analysis show, these norms do not necessarily translate into what both party and candidate accounts post and communicate on Instagram.

The results of a quantitative content analysis ($n = 581$) suggest that parties and candidates used complementary communication strategies instead of relying on a single tactic (i.e., repeating uniform content in a uniform style). Campaigners only conformed to Instagram's communication norms where it fitted the political logic. This can be shown by the example of four out of five communication practices researched in this article: (1) the use of text-integrated images, (2) dominant visual themes (i.e., image types), (3) visual personalization, and (4) the addressing of policy issues. (1) As has been argued, the communication norm on Instagram is clearly shaped by the platform's "image first logic" (Ekman & Widholm, 2017, p. 18). However, only candidates preferred 'pure' image posts while parties—in line with results from previous studies (Muñoz & Towner, 2017)—tended to use text-integrated images, thus trying to convey hard-to-visualize campaign messages to voters. (2) The analysis of different image types further shows that parties might need to seek ways to convey complex political messages on Instagram: Party accounts predominantly presented policy issues, while candidate accounts aimed their attention at presenting campaign events. Yet, compared to previous results, image types presenting policy issues played a comparatively big role on both account types (Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017, p. 20; Ludwig, 2018, p. 293). (3) The complementary strategies of party and candidate accounts can further be illustrated by the differential use of personalization strategies: Consistent with previous research on politician's use of Instagram (Filimonov et al., 2016; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019), candidate accounts showed tendencies of presidentialization, while party accounts seemed to favor displaying non-political persons, politicians that are not the top candidate(s), or even displayed no individual person at all. (4) Adding to this finding above and beyond the pictorial presentation of image types, party accounts focused more strongly on communicating policy issues than candidate accounts did.

Looking at the use of network-related Instagram features, it appears that all parties and top candidates have adapted to the technical ability to connect content contextually via hashtags, but do not show consistent patterns regarding the use of geotags and mentions. Geotags were rarely used by parties, but certain candidates strongly relied on this feature. Mentions—used to connect accounts—are utilized in two different ways: either to interconnect (own) political accounts or to deliberately affiliate party and candidate accounts with non-political accounts, thus connecting them to actors outside of the ‘political bubble.’ The results from our content analysis show that—although hashtags were a comparatively popular element to connect content (cf. Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019)—the technical potential of the platform was not yet fully used in 2017 (Eckerl & Hahn, 2018, p. 237).

Taken together, the combined analysis of party and candidate accounts paints a picture of a communicative division of labor with top candidates emphasizing presidentialization (i.e., individualization with a strong focus on themselves) and parties emphasizing the presentation of policy issues. But what can parties and politicians gain from using Instagram? Focusing on a positive perspective first, Instagram could help parties and candidates to enter a pre-political space, where users can be exposed to political content incidentally. Indeed, it could be argued that parties and politicians should use every possibility to meet (possible) voters where they are. This is particularly true for Germany, where there has been a long-term decline of citizens’ party identification. As a result, instead of relatively stable party loyalty, sympathy for individual politicians and preferences for certain issues have gained in importance. Social media such as Instagram thus provide a useful tool for politicians to present their professional and personal skills and for parties to repeat their stances on issues voters positively connect them with. Accordingly, the use of Instagram could be recommended almost unconditionally. However,

especially parties' communication practices might contradict communication norms on Instagram to an extent that might annoy users, thus limiting people's willingness to engage with political posts. Focusing on engagement and, consequently, possible effects of interacting with Instagram posts by parties and politicians also challenges us to consider the question of which users actually are exposed to these posts. Due to processes of algorithmic filtering, users' explicitly expressed (political) preferences, interests, and their resulting behavior on Instagram, parties, and politicians are most likely to reach audiences that already show some affinity towards them—or at least towards politics in general (Kümpel & Rieger, 2020, p. 23). While political actors can increase the discoverability of their content to some extent by consistently using network-related features or creating promotions for selected posts, future studies should pay particular attention to the *audiences* of political Instagram posts: Which users 'stumble' upon these posts and what outcomes can therefore be expected? An answer to this and similar questions is of great importance for campaigners and the targeted development of political campaigns.

Some limitations of our study need to be acknowledged. First, the digital architecture of Instagram is constantly changing, and not all (new) features and formats can easily be archived for scientific analysis (see also Bossetta, 2018, p. 492). For example, our retrospective data collection process prevented us from analyzing the use of *Instagram Stories* (i.e., a slideshow of photos/videos that disappears after 24 hours) that nowadays is a central mode of communication on Instagram. Accordingly, future studies could focus their attention on this kind of 'ephemeral campaigning' and analyze how parties and politicians integrate stories into the campaign toolkit. Second, we were only able to study a single country and a single election, which naturally limits

the generalizability of the results. Despite its exploratory nature, this study serves as a fruitful starting point for further comparative studies or studies in different national or electoral settings.

¹: Sources: https://www.instagram.com/p/B_b9EKYcmuy/, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CE3xI5miBoL/>, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CDTRbs0Fo0v/>

²: Due to the retroactive recording of the posts, Instagram stories—which disappear after 24 hours—had to be excluded from the sample.

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