Populism in social media election campaigns
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ABSTRACT

In modern democracies, elections are always special events, as they structure the political debate, allow voters to choose their representatives, distribute political power and thus influence future policy. Especially in difficult times, politicians tend to give simple answers to difficult questions - in short, populism seems to be the "measure of all things" especially in election campaigns. Using the example of the 2019 National Council elections in Austria, this paper examines how populist the election campaign is conducted on the social media sites Facebook and Twitter.

KEYWORDS: National election, Nationalratswahl, Österreich, Austria, FPÖ, ÖVP, SPÖ, populism, social media, Facebook, Twitter, Populismus

1. INTRODUCTION

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

According to the theoretical approach of "media populism", populism [7-9] populism can be analysed and understood from the framework of media influence, which continuously shapes its constitutive features [10]. This relationship between populism and the media can be summarised by two symmetrical processes that correspond to the dynamics of popularisation and populism of politics, which have been identified as key features of the third age of political communication, in which politicians are forced to speak in a popular idiom and to court popular support, while they have to look for new ways on social media sites to make politics more interesting and acceptable to the recipients. [11].

Populism in the media has been empirically analysed in relation to different formats (e.g. talk shows, infotainment and debates) and channels: on television [12-14]; in newspapers [15]; in election manifestos and party programmes [16]. However, these analyses have not found a definition of coordinates within which populism could be "framed" as a communication style, which favours a progressive confusion between populist ideology and populist style [17]. Studies focusing on populism in social media are even less widespread; notwithstanding their indispensability in media studies to provide a complete analytical picture of the hybrid media system [18] in the fourth age of political communication [19]. Social media sites are characterised by the possibility of not being bound to the mediation of traditional gatekeepers and support a direct connection between politics and citizens that bypasses the professional norms and news values of the mass media. Indeed, political actors are able to speak directly "to the people" because they use forms of communication that are structurally non-intermediated. Indeed, several scholars have highlighted the suitability of social media

platforms for the communication purposes of populist politicians [20]. If one follows Ernst et al. [21] there is a correlation between the presentation of postings on Facebook and Twitter and the number of reactions to these postings. For this reason the

(1) Hypothesis: Populist posts (Type_P = 1) receive more likes than posts that are not populist (Type_P = 0).

Among new media, Twitter plays a central role in hybridising and redefining the traditional political information cycle [18, 22], as conversations that take place on the microblogging platform often influence the coverage and agenda of traditional media, forcing them to follow independent statements by the elite [23, 24]. Tweets have become a digital version of soundbites, and politicians use them to reach a wider audience thanks to the structural features of Twitter, which is networked, non-hierarchical, democratic and thus perfect for the embodiment of populism. [25]. In the study by Engesser et al. [26] the idea emerges that political leaders on social media manifest the ideology of populism in a fragmented form due to the absence of traditional gatekeepers and news value filters. These authors have explained the use of fragmentation by political actors for three main reasons: first, to reduce the complexity of the ideology in order to simplify its messages; second, to blur the populist ideology in order to facilitate the reception of its message in the "personal action frame"; third, to easily spread fragments of the populist ideology among like-minded people.

This work is based on the 'communication-centred approach', which focuses on communication, as opposed to the 'actor-centred approach', which focuses on political actors [27]. The first method examines populism in terms of the characteristics of populist political communication. The object of research is populist communication strategies, styles, rhetoric and tactics used by all major political actors. For this perspective, populism is an ideology that is determined by the way political actors communicate. [27]and is understood as a distinct style of communication. The second method examines populism in terms of the characteristics of populist political actors and analyses the ideology of those defined as populists. [27]. Communication strategies are only one of the many aspects that characterise the behaviour and choices of populist actors. Nevertheless, studies dealing with populism from a perspective rooted in the political communication approach are rare, and often take an actor-centred approach rather than a communication-centred approach. [13, 27, 28].

If one follows Moffitt & Tormey. [29], then with the increasing mediatisation of the political landscape, political style is becoming an important conceptual tool for the study of contemporary political space [29]. Style has often been identified as a constitutive feature of populism and has been counted among the main framing concepts used in the literature to describe it. Caiani & Grazioni [16] but also Walgrave [28] have summarised their findings on populism in four key dimensions: Style/Discourse, Ideology, Rhetoric and Strategy/Organisation. These key dimensions serve to be used in various, not mutually exclusive, combinations and designations to outline the coordinates for interpreting the complex phenomenon of populism and its developments. Non-populist political actors can also make use of a populist communication style, so the style should not be considered an indicator of populism in a communication-centred approach. On the one hand, the use of a populist communication style is not sufficient evidence for the assumption of a populist ideology. [17] and on the other hand, it is not necessary to understand populism as an ideology in order to study it as a political style, since style is not a function of ideology [29]. To understand populism, on the other hand, it is important to recognise how populist communication is structured.

As with populism, there seem to be no clear guidelines for operationalising the definition of communication style. First of all, it is necessary to define what political communication style means, what dimensions it has, and then to derive which style can be defined as populist. Pels [30] defines communication style as a unity of language and action - an ensemble of the fusion of message and packaging, argumentation and rituals [30]. This definition integrates verbal and non-verbal elements to create a unique set of communicative performances that characterise the different communication patterns of different political actors. [31, 32]. Based on this definition, it is possible to break down political communication style into two aspects: Form and content. Two aspects that serve to influence interaction and events, to the point that often the style generates the content and the content generates the style. [29, 33, 34]. Based on these aspects, it is possible to construct a model of political communication style that is able to support "what is said" and "how it is said". On this basis, we consider political communication style as the way political actors stage their political performances: The 'form' dimension which is composed of staging art and register, and a 'content' dimension which is composed of theme and function. [35, 36]. Considering the key feature of the third age of political communication, communication style can be analysed in terms of both popularisation and populism of politics. The former refers to processes of popularisation defined by personalisation, intimisation and celebrity politics [37, 38].

The second refers to the act of "populism" through mechanisms of simplification, appealing to emotions such as fear and enthusiasm or resentment, and the use of highly emotional, tabloid-style language based on slogans [9, 16]. Despite this distinction - useful in theory - these processes are often affected by an overlap of indicators at the empirical level. Certain key features of popularisation are the same as those used in the populist style, such as dramatisation, emotionalisation, personalisation, anti-establishment attitudes and simplification, because they fit into the media logic [12, 39]. Therefore, the use of these communication strategies is not necessarily an indicator of the presence of a populist ideology, but could be a symptom of other types of dimensions that political actors bring into play to challenge the demands of the media logic. [17]. *Emotionalisation is the* sharing of emotions or the disclosure of insights. [39, 40]. *Informality* is the direct, simple, non-formal and non-institutional style used. [16, 29]. Exploiting specific events to support political bias and using a type of false inductive reasoning based on current events (cherry-picking fallacy) is called *"instrumental updating"*. [41]. Stanyer [42] means by *"intimisation"* the retelling of one's own life. *Negative affect appeals* to feelings of fear or apodictic patterns in order to arouse interest, to worry and to mobilise people with negative feelings [43]. *Simplification* means the simplification of issues and solutions - in short: simple solutions to complex problems. [43]. *Storytelling is the* telling of politics in a way that is rich in innuendo, wordplay and empty rhetoric. [44] and to seduce and enchant interlocutors. [45]. In the *"taboo-breaker"* dimension, one stands out from the elite, and taboos are broken and political correctness is fought against. [41, 45]. Simple, *vulgar language* is used to reach "normal people". [46].

The use of the communication strategies outlined above does not per se indicate a populist ideology. Therefore, it is worth examining the presence of a populist ideology in order to understand what elements of communication style are associated with it. Based on the current literature [13, 17, 47] right-wing" populism is divided into the dimensions of sovereignty of the people, attack on the elite, and exclusion of others, where "emphasising the sovereignty of the people" means using the word "people" as a generic term for "all" voters - regardless of political affiliation - in order to unite the electorate. [48-52]. "Attacking the elite" builds on anti-elitism and anti-establishment. Anti-elitism refers to all rhetorical discourses that emphasise the distance between "us" and "them". [12]. "Us" stands for the ordinary citizen and "them" represents the common enemy established by the dominant elite, which can sometimes be identified under different categories (politics, media, economic powers, etc.) [53-55]. Their indicators are generic anti-establishment, political anti-establishment, economic anti-establishment, anti-establishment in relation to the European Union, institutional anti-establishment, anti-elitism of the media (refers e.g. to journalists), anti-elitism of intellectuals (refers e.g. to professors). [48, 49, 51, 56]. The "exclusion of others" is based on a narrative that is based on the concept of the "dangerous other" [48] based: The creation of a common enemy who is stigmatised and excluded from the people. [14]. This is a new contraposition between "us", "the people" as a homogeneous category, and "them", an enemy within the people. The indicators of this dimension [48] are the dangerous others, as well as authoritarianism, which refers to a strong leader or strict political measures. Based on these findings, the

(2) **Hypothesis: On a "left-right scale", right-wing parties (party_ideology >= 4) are more likely to focus on populist issues in Web 2.0 than left-wing parties (party_ideology <=3).**

The question now arises whether populism is a "useful corrective" in a democracy. If one follows Müller [57] then right-wing theorists in particular believe that the relationship between democracy and liberalism or the rule of law is out of balance, and that the democratic side can only be strengthened by populism [57]. However, this assumption has a catch, because populists are not interested in the participation of the population, but primarily criticise the incumbent representatives who allegedly do not represent the interests of the people, often using the instrument of "negative campaigning". [57]A look at the literature reveals two fundamentally different approaches to defining "negative campaigning": a *directional* and an *evaluative* understanding: while the *directional understanding* assumes that "every mention of the political opponent in one's own posting (regardless of whether the criticism is true, false, "ethically correct", trivial, honest or dishonest) already constitutes negative campaigning [58-60]", the *evaluative approach assumes that* Negative Campaigning only prevails when the political opponent is belittled. [61] In the context of this work, the directional understanding is used.

Populists often have simple answers to complex issues, call for direct popular participation, but when populists call for a referendum, it is not because they want to initiate discourse among the electorate, but because they want the citizens to confirm what the populists want to be recognised as the "true will of the people [62].
If one follows Müller's explanations, then the

(3) **Hypothesis: Right-wing parties (party_ideology >= 4) combine their populist postings (Type_P = 1) with negative campaigning (Type_N = 1) more often than left-wing parties (party_ideology <= 3).**

2. CASE SELECTION

At the latest since the Austrian National Council election campaigns of 2017 (which were characterised by a dirty election campaign), social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter have played an important role in Austria's domestic politics [63]. In the so-called "Silberstein Affair". [64] a foreign campaign consultant helped orchestrate negative campaigns with fake Facebook accounts. Less than two years later, on 17 May 2019, the Ibiza scandal hit Austrian politics [65, 66]. While the scandal did not have an immediate impact on the Austrian result in the European elections, the was a profound shake-up of the political landscape. The coalition government between the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ) broke up. [67]. Chancellor Sebastian Kurz lost a vote of no confidence in the National Council. [68]. Federal President Alexander Van der Bellen has called a caretaker government for the first time in Austria's history and called new elections for the parliamentary elections to be held on 29 September. [69]. If one follows Ecker [70]social networks and social media sites have been playing an increasingly important role in the election campaigns of political parties for years. Prof. Dr. Filzmaier has noted in this context (in an interview with Ecker) that millions are now spent by the parties on campaigns on Facebook and Twitter [70]. If one follows the statements of Starzer [63] and Ecker [70] then one realises that social media sites like Facebook and Twitter are causal for the success in the election campaign. If one combines these statements with the findings of Sartori [2] who believes that elections are the moment when voters actually govern, or with the statements of Jahn [71, 72]who found that social media sites are used by parties especially in times of campaigning, then the 2019 National Council elections are an ideal case study to examine the use of social media sites by parties.

3. EVALUATION

Hypothesis 1 Result

A binary logistic analysis test is conducted on SPSS version 26 to analyze whether the populist posts receive more likes than posts that are not populist. The results show that the predictor variable "likes" contributes to the model. The unstandardized Beta weight for the constant; B = (-3.094), SE = .062, Wald = 2482.148, $p < .05$. The unstandardized Beta weight for the predictor variable: B = .001, SE = .000, Wald = 116.631, $p < .05$. The variable, likes, in the equation table has $p < .05$, which suggests that an alternate hypothesis is accepted, which states that Populist posts (type_P = 1) receive more likes than posts that are not populist (type_P = 0).

Table 1

Variables in the Equation

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 0	Constant	-3.094	0.062	2482.148	1	0.000	0.045

Table 2

Classification Table

			Predicted			
			type_P		Percentage Correct	
Observed			Allgemein	Populistisch		
Step 1	type_P	Allgemein	5973	8	99.9	
		Populistisch	270	1	0.4	
	Overall Percentage				95.6	
a. The cut value is .500						

Table 3

Variables in the Equation

								95% C.I.for EXP(B)	
		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	Lower	Upper
Step 1	likes	0.001	0.000	116.631	1	0.000	1.001	1.000	1.001
	Constant	-3.365	0.072	2186.289	1	0.000	0.035		
a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: likes.									

Hypothesis 2 Result

A binary logistic test was conducted to analyze the second hypothesis, and the results indicate that the independent variable, type_p1, contributes to the regression model. The unstandardized Beta weight of the constant variable is; B = (-.699), SE = .027, Wald = 677.349, $p < .05$. While for predictor variables it is B = (-3.993), SE = .309, Wald = 166.862, $p < .05$. Given in the results that the significance level of the model is p = .000 that is below .05 or 5 percent which concludes that the hypothesis is accepted that on a "left-right scale," right-leaning (party_ideology $> = 4$) parties are more likely to focus on populist topics (type_P = 1) than left-leaning parties (party_ideology $< = 3$) in Web 2.0.

Table 1

Observed			Predicted		
			Party_Ideology_left_right_scale		
			left_leaning scale	right_leaning scale	Percentage Correct
Step 1	Party_Ideology_left_right_scale	left_leaning scale	4165	11	99.73659004
		right_leaning scale	1816	260	12.52408478
	Overall Percentage				70.77735125

a. The cut value is .500

Table 2

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 0	Constant	-0.699	0.027	677.349	1	0.000	0.497

Table 3

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I.for EXP(B)	
								Lower	Upper
Step 1[a]	type_P(1)	-3.993	0.309	166.862	1	0.000	0.018	0.010	0.034
	Constant	3.163	0.308	105.569	1	0.000	23.636		

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: type_P.

Hypothesis 3 Result

In order to check the thesis — right-wing parties (party_ideology $>= 4$) combine their populist postings (type_p) with negative campaigning (type_n) more often than left-wing parties (party_ideology $<= 3$), we conducted binary logisitc regresion test. The unstandardized Beta weight of the constant variable is; B = (-.699), SE = .027, Wald = 677.349, $p < .05$. While for predictor variables, i.e., type_P, B = (4.011), SE = .309, Wald = 167.997, $p < .05$, and type_N, B = (-0.106), SE = .076, Wald = 1.972, $p > .05$. The results indicate that the model is statistically insignificant, i.e., the p value for type_n is greater than .05 or 5 %, that guide us to reject the study's thesis, hence it is concluded that the right-wing parties do not combine their populist postings with negative campaigning more often than left-wing parties.

Table 1

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 0	Constant	-0.699	0.027	677.349	1	0.000	0.497

Table 2

			Predicted Party_Ideology_left_right_scale		Percentage Correct
	Observed		left_leaning scale	right_leaning scale	
Step 1	Party_ideology_left_right_scale	left_leaning scale	4165	11	99.73659004
		right_leaning scale	1816	260	12.52408478
	Overall Percentage				70.77735125
a. The cut value is .500					

Table 3

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I.for EXP(B) Lower	Upper
Step 1[a]	type_P	4.011	0.309	167.997	1	0.000	55.175	30.086	101.187
	type_N	-0.106	0.076	1.972	1	0.160	0.899	0.775	1.043
	Constant	-0.812	0.031	700.267	1	0.000	0.444		
a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: type_P, type_N.									

4. CONCLUSION

Using the Austrian National Council election 2019 as an example, this work has asked the question of how populist the election campaign is on social media sites: The first question was: Do populist postings receive more approval than non-populist postings? To be able to answer this question, a binary logistic analysis test was conducted: The variable "Likes" has $p < .05$ in the equation table indicating that the alternative hypothesis is accepted, which states that populist posts (Type_P = 1) receive more likes than posts that are not populist (Type_P = 0).

The second question was: Do right-wing parties focus more on populist issues in social media campaigns than left-wing parties? To be able to answer this question, a binary logistic test was conducted and the results show that the independent variable Type_p = 1 contributes to the regression model. The unstandardised beta weight of the constant variable is B = (-.699), SE = .027, Wald = 677.349, $p < .05$. For the predictor variables, it is B = (-3.993), SE = .309, Wald = 166.862, $p < .05$. The results show that the significance level of the model is $p = .000$, i.e. below .05 or 5 per cent, leading to the conclusion that the hypothesis is accepted that on a "left-right scale" right-leaning parties are more likely to focus on populist issues than left-leaning parties on Web 2.0.

The third question was: Do right-wing parties combine their populist postings with negative campaigning more often than left-wing parties do? To test the hypothesis that right-wing parties combine their populist postings with negative campaigning more often than left-wing parties, a binary logistic regression test was conducted. The results indicate that the model is not statistically significant, i.e. the p-value for type_n is greater than .05 or 5%, which leads us to reject the thesis of the study, so we conclude that right-leaning parties do not combine their populist postings with negative campaigning more often than left-leaning parties.

This work has shown that in social media election campaigns, populist topics receive higher approval from voters than non-populist topics, that right-wing parties tend to focus on populist topics, but that there is no significant correlation between populist/negative postings and the alignment of the Party.

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