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Social media and political communication in the 2014 elections to the European Parliament[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Social media play an increasingly important part in the communication strategies of political campaigns by reflecting information about the policy preferences and opinions of political actors and their public followers. In addition, the content of the messages provides rich information about the political issues and the framing of those issues during elections, such as whether contested issues concern Europe or rather extend pre-existing national debates. In this study, we survey the European landscape of social media using tweets originating from and referring to political actors during the 2014 European Parliament election campaign. We describe the language and national distribution of the messages, the relative volume of different types of communications, and the factors that determine the adoption and use of social media by the candidates. We also analyze the dynamics of the volume and content of the communications over the duration of the campaign with reference to both the EU integration dimension of the debate and the prominence of the most visible list-leading candidates. Our findings indicate that the lead candidates and their televised debate had a prominent influence on the volume and content of communications, and that the content and emotional tone of communications more reflects preferences along the EU dimension of political contestation rather than classic national issues relating to left-right differences.

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The complexity of communicating political messages by European parties and national parties distributed across the 28 member states of the EU poses a significant challenge. Consequently, most communication occurs within national and linguistic boundaries. Modern social media, however, provides a unique technological means to bridge linguistic divides, as well as to extend the reach of political communications by candidates and parties to the electorates located in the multi-national political system of the European Union. Despite this potential, very little is yet known about the role or effects of social media in European political campaigns. Our study addresses this gap by providing a systematic exploration of the social media space in Europe-wide politics, by examining election-related content on Twitter, the micro-blogging platform

with more than 316 million active users worldwide. In 2014, some 18% of MEP candidates had Twitter accounts, but relatively little is known about why only one in five candidates used this medium, what are the patterns of their usage, or what patterns can be found in the content of their messages. With respect to EU citizens, we know even less about how they use Twitter to communicate to or about European election parties or candidates.

In this paper we map the usage of social media in the 2014 European Parliament (EP) election focusing on Twitter, including an analysis of the networks of followers, the usage of national and cross-national hashtags related to the EU, and the types of Twitter communication. We focus on Twitter because it is the most widely adopted platform by politicians for the purposes of personal promotion, diffusing policy positions, mobilization and because it enables a more direct and interactive engagement with the public. Applying sentiment analysis to the text of the Tweets, we also assess various levels of sentiment associated with particular concepts or individuals or countries. Finally, by looking at the

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associations of message content with external policy measures of candidate parties, we are able to map content and associations within the text to get a picture of the dialogue across the European issue space of electoral competition. Our approach allows us not only to observe communication patterns from a structural point of view, but also to investigate the themes communicated in a period during which political communication is heightened, and to do so in a multi-national, multi-language context.

In what follows we first survey existing research on social media and electoral campaigning in Europe and subsequently discuss the European dimension of political contestation which provides the theoretical background from which we derive our expectations for this exploratory study. After discussing our data collection process and methodology, we describe tweets and how, present results obtained by social network analysis, sentiment analysis, and word associations, and offer some concluding remarks along with suggestions for further research.

1. Social media and political communication

1.1. Social media use in electoral campaigns

Election campaigns fundamentally rely on communication. Over the last decade, changes in the communication environment due to innovations in digital technologies (Chadwick, 2014; Castells, 2009), which themselves accompanied a process of modernisation and professionalisation of electoral competition (Lees-Marshment, 2001), have forced political elites to adopt and integrate in their campaigns increasingly sophisticated digital communication practices. Faced with a sharp decline in party membership and a more demanding, assertive and distrustful public increasingly willing to intervene directly in the political process (Dalton and Welzel, 2014) (often through the use of digital media-enabled personalised forms of participation), political parties and candidates embraced new online tools as part of their campaign communication (Gibson, 2013). Social networking sites like Facebook, microblogs like Twitter and video-sharing sites like YouTube have not only given politicians a powerful avenue for interacting with a more demanding citizenry, but also have allowed them to offer more personalised images to the public and have given less resourceful parties the opportunity to match well-funded campaigns in sophistication, using creative and relatively inexpensive strategies. Candidates, members of parliament, and local committee members worldwide are now providing information about their policy positions, invite followers to campaign events or meetings on Facebook, and interact with their constituencies “on the go” and through short messages on Twitter rather than long and time-consuming posts on their blogs or websites (Vergeer et al., 2011; Bode and Dalrymple, 2014).

Research has extensively documented the integration of new media tools, and Twitter specifically, in election campaigns held in numerous European countries (see Strandberg, 2013; Gibson, 2013; Jungherr, 2014a), yet it has yet to achieve the central role that social media has played in recent US elections. Developments such as what Gibson has termed “citizen-initiated”-campaigning, aiming to denote the devolving power over core tasks to the grassroots, is only now slowly emerging in Europe (Gibson, 2013), though with significant variation across countries and parties (Hansen and Kosiara-Pederson, 2014; Jungherr, 2014a). Despite lacking in innovation, however, European candidates do use digital media for other purposes. Facebook and Twitter have allowed candidates to increase their exposure at very little cost (as well as significant risk (Theocharis et al., 2015)), a development that enabled lesser known candidates to rise from obscurity (Vergeer et al., 2011). Social media has also provided a platform for citizens to communicate directly

with political candidates.

1.2. Social media campaigning in European elections

Research into the integration of social media in European election campaigns is underdeveloped, due in large part to the phenomenon itself being limited. Even by comparison with their national political counterparts, European election candidates have been slower to adopt on-line campaigning tools. For example, Vergeer, Hermans and Cuhna (Vergeer et al., 2012), in their comparative study of European parties' and candidates' use of websites (and therefore of a much less interactive platform than social media) during the 2009 EP elections found significant interactivity divides with many candidates being only minimally active on them. Their study's insights corroborate findings by Lilleker et al. (2011) showing that, despite the integration of some more interactive Web 2.0 features into the 2009 European campaign websites, these were used far more for static advertising than for interactive communication. Lilleker et al. (2011) also found that the integration of “Web 2.0” features on campaign websites by extreme left- and right-wing parties – a topic for which we continue to know very little, especially with regard to interactive social media – was associated with policy extremism. Right-wing parties offered the greatest opportunities for interaction, while far left parties were at the frontier of information provision (Lilleker et al., 2011, 206). In the same vein, an overview of the literature on Twitter use by candidates by Jungherr (2014b) confirms that past research has shown that politicians that lie on extreme positions in the ideological continuum use Twitter more frequently and intensively than moderates.

More recent studies have focused exclusively on social media, rather than the integration of Web 2.0 features on older platforms such as web sites. In a first look at the use of social media during the 2014 EP elections, Lorenzo-Rodríguez and Madariaga (2015) found that candidates' presence on social media is strongly related to incumbency status, party visibility, position on the ballot, as well as Internet penetration in a given country. Usage of these platforms seems specifically designed for campaigning, rather than general political communication: once elections are over, there is very little use of Twitter by parliamentarians for the purpose of campaigning outside electoral periods Larsson (2015). To date, no studies have examined the *content* of social media communications by European candidates.

With the greatest integration of social media tools in an EP campaign thus far, and with the vibrant contestation of the EU project at the foreground of the electoral narrative, the 2014 EP elections provides a unique opportunity for mapping EP candidates' use of Twitter. Although EP elections traditionally have been dominated by national politics, with European politics playing, at best, a marginal role (Schmitt, 2005; Reif and Schmitt, 1980), the increased contestation of the European project brought forward the politicisation of European issues. Our main expectation is that the growing importance of the EU topic in EP elections will be captured by the social media communication centered around the communication of the MEP candidates.

1.3. Spitzenkandidaten and the EU's first “Presidential” campaign

A novelty of the 2014 EP election campaign was the system of *Spitzenkandidaten*, also known as list-leading candidates. For the first time in the history of EP elections, EP party groups had the chance to nominate their candidate for the Presidency of the European Commission. This move was expected both to personalize and politicise the EP elections campaign and also to increase the democratic legitimacy of the Union (Hobolt, 2014; Schmitt et al.,

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