



Digital Politics Across Contexts, Social Media, Parties and Citizens:

Technological Opportunities and Challenges in Modern Democracies

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Abstract

Located at the nexus between politics and the digital, this PhD thesis sheds light on the changing dynamics, opportunities and challenges citizens and parties are confronted with due to ongoing technological changes. In particular, I am investigating (1) e-expression as a new form of e-participation, (2) party responsiveness to voters' preferences expressed across social media platforms and (3) the dynamics of issue competition on Twitter. As a cumulative dissertation, each of my three papers examines digital politics from a different disciplinary angle, analytical level and employing diverse methodological approaches. Overall, my findings suggest that politics is affected by digital communication, but not fundamentally reshaped.

In E-participation in a comparative perspective: drivers and constraints of expressing political views online, I examine the conditions under which citizens engage in e-expression by focusing on individual-level motivations and resources, but also bringing back contextual factors such as media dependence, democratic longevity, civil society robustness and electoral events. I am employing multilevel modelling of ISSP 2014 data and reveal that citizens – particularly on the ideological extremes and distrusting politicians – who are residing in established democracies with an independent media are more likely to engage in e-expression. In terms of the contextual prerequisites, therefore, e-expression is similar to offline political participation.

In Trending campaigns? User preferences and parties' issue emphasis across social media, I connect the demand and supply side in digital politics and investigate the extent to which citizens expressing themselves on Facebook and Twitter have an influence over the issue packages that political parties promote on those platforms during the German electoral campaign of 2017. Therefore, I hand-coded all Facebook posts and Tweets that the seven biggest German parties published on their account

during the campaign and conducted a supervised sentiment analysis of all Tweets commenting on the election and Facebook comments on parties' posts. A Poisson time series regression was used to analyse the data. Hence, I take a cross-media approach that is sensitive to the technical opportunity structures and audiences different social media inhabit. My findings reveal that the preferences users express are not considered equally on the two social media platforms and for all issues. This suggests that German parties take their technical peculiarities and audiences into account and act strategically according to the type of issue in focus.

Short-term issue emphasis on Twitter during the 2017 German election: a comparison of the economic left-right and socio-cultural dimensions is a collaboration with Andrea Ceron and Luigi Curini. This paper underlines the importance of taking a time-sensitive approach when investigating issue competition. Based on the German electoral campaign of 2017, we reveal that the attention parties give to issues they are renowned for fluctuates frequently on Twitter and alternates with other thematic priorities that may not be owned. This contradicts earlier accounts of the issue ownership theory. We argue that the dynamics are driven by exogenous shocks and spatial considerations. The exact mechanism behind parties' decision to emphasize a specific issue in the short run depends on the type of issue.

Jury:

Prof. Alexander H. Trechsel, University of Lucerne / formerly EUI (Supervisor)
Prof. Philipp Genschel, European University Institute
Prof. Luigi Curini, University of Milan
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Bio

Wiebke Drews completed her thesis under the supervision of Prof. Alexander H. Trechsel and defended on November 12, 2020. She is a researcher and lecturer at the Universität der Bundeswehr München, Germany. Prior to the EUI, Wiebke studied Integrated Social Sciences at Jacobs University Bremen, Germany. She obtained her double M.A. degree in Politics and Security from University College London, UK, and in Social Sciences from the University of Tartu, Estonia. Her research interests include digital politics and democracy, particularly political participation online, data-driven campaigning, agenda-setting and issue competition on social media, and institutional and contextual prerequisites for e-democracy. Methodologically, she takes a broad interest in quantitative methods, especially quantitative text analysis and multilevel modeling.