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## **A DECADE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ELECTIONS – A CROSS-NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

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### **PANEL OVERVIEW**

Social media has been a part of election campaigns for more than a decade. Correspondingly, a number of country-specific studies have been conducted of the use of Facebook and Twitter in national and local election campaigns. Until recently, there has been a lack of longitudinal studies; however, Larsson & Moe (2016), Lilleker, Jackson, & Koc-Michalska (2016), and Bruns and Moon (2018) all discuss the role of social media in two or more election campaigns within the same country. Cross-national studies are not frequent either, but Enli et al. (2013) and Moe & Larsson (2013) are examples of studies that compare countries in Western Europe and Australia.

In this panel we combine longitudinal and cross-national studies of social media in election campaigns, expanding the time span as well as number of countries compared to former studies. The four papers present longitudinal studies, covering multiple election cycles from four different countries: Australia, the United States of America, Denmark and Sweden.

By including these cases we focus on countries considered to be “first movers” when it comes to the digitization and internetization of the political life. As such, they are “most similar cases”. However, they also have different political systems: the US and Australia

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are characterized by a Westminster system dominated by a few large parties and a tradition of strong confrontation between government and opposition, whereas Denmark and Sweden are multi-party systems with a tradition of collaboration and coalition governments. Further, the countries' media systems, as defined by Hallin & Mancini (2004), differ significantly; the US is characterized by a commercialized American media system with little role for public service broadcasters, Denmark and Sweden have very strong public service media, and Australia has elements of both these systems. Technologically, the four countries might be similar, but politically and in terms of media systems, they differ. Thus, studies of the four countries form a diverse yet solid set of cases for exploring the growing (and changing) role of social media in national elections.

The papers address such issues by various methods and perspectives, from large-scale big data analyses of tweets to content analyses of Facebook pages and surveys among citizens. From different angles, the four papers circle around the same topics: do social media contribute to narrowing or widening the often-discussed gap between citizens and politicians? Does the increasing use (and changing character) of social media in election campaigns facilitate increased trust or rather a radicalized and more negative discourse? And do citizens feel more empowered and enlightened in a democratic sense?

The Australian case study is based on a comprehensive analysis of interactions around candidates' Twitter accounts, drawing on state-of-the-art methods. It stretches across three election cycles. It presents new evidence both on the use of Twitter in political campaigning in Australia, and on the public response to this use, not at least in the light of the overall context of a decline in trust towards the political system, in Australia and elsewhere.

The US case study examines negativity, incivility, and intolerance expressed by candidates running for governor in 2014 as compared with 2018. In between those two election cycles, the United States had the remarkable presidential campaign of 2016, with an unprecedented volume and style of negative campaigning unseen in modern campaigning. This study thus asks whether the 2018 candidates were more negative and uncivil than their counterparts who ran in 2014. Results will illuminate the nature of political incivility and whether there is a coarseness of political discourse in the United States.

The Danish case study is based on surveys of citizens' Internet use / social media use across four elections, covering a time span of 12 years. It adds to an understanding of the growing use of social media but more importantly it investigates how citizens experienced effects of social media as tools for agenda-setting and efficacy, the latter understood as increased reflection and enlightenment.

The Swedish case study covers three Swedish national elections, in 2010, 2014 and 2018. The research question is: how are viral posts from political parties on Facebook changing over time? By answering that question, the author can track the consequences of increased platformization of politics as well as an increased targeting towards the needs and wants of the audience, through what some will call populism.

The studies all cover more or less the last decade. This represents a time span during which social media have matured and have come to play an increasing role in citizens' daily lives. The contributions are interesting country-based case studies in themselves, but through this panel we seek to engage the audience in a discussion of the developments expected for the coming years.

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# TRUST US, AGAIN? TWITTER CAMPAIGNING STRATEGIES IN THE 2019 AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL ELECTION

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## Introduction

Australia has experienced substantial political instability at the federal level for more than a decade: since 2007, it has experienced six changes of Prime Minister, four of which were brought on not by the results of federal elections, but by personal and policy disagreements within the major parties. As a consequence of this unprecedented level of internal disunity, long-term policy-making agendas have often been sidelined by short-term factional machinations, and overall public trust in politicians from all sides, and in democracy as such, has declined to an all-time low (Evans *et al.* 2018). Meanwhile, a range of minor parties and independent candidates have emerged to exploit this disruption and present themselves as trustworthy alternatives to the established parties.

As Australia approaches its next federal election, likely to take place in May 2019, these minor party and independent candidates will likely target marginal electorates (where the sitting member does not hold a strong majority, and may be susceptible to challenge); conversely, the centrist Australian Labor Party and conservative Coalition of Liberal and National Parties will be working to regain the trust (and votes) lost through their internal rancour and disarray of the past twelve years. Social media will play a critical role in their campaigning: overall, Australians are comparatively early and enthusiastic adopters of social media (Sensis 2017), and more than half use social media as a key source of news (Newman *et al.* 2018: 127); more specifically, social media have played an important role already during previous federal election campaigns in 2013 and 2016 (Bruns 2016; Bruns & Moon 2017), and politics is a persistently prominent topic on platforms such as *Twitter* in Australia (Sauter & Bruns 2015).

Building on and extending an established methodological approach, this paper investigates the use of *Twitter* in the 2019 Australian federal election campaign. It examines the activities of political candidates, with a particular view towards their efforts to reposition themselves as trustworthy, as well as the engagement of ordinary *Twitter* users with these candidate accounts, in order to identify campaigning strategies and assess their effectiveness. The results of this work also extend the data gathered in

previous federal election campaigns, to produce a longitudinal dataset across the 2013, 2016, and 2019 elections.

## Method

Following the approach employed in Bruns (2017) and Bruns & Moon (2018), we capture the tweets posted by all officially declared federal candidates, as well as any tweets directed at their accounts (as @mentions or retweets), for the duration of the official campaign (typically 6-8 weeks to the election date). We generate a range of standard metrics as equivalent to the previous studies (including data on tweeting activity and tweets received per candidate and per party); these indicate the candidates' level of social media effort as well as the (supportive as well as adversarial) public interest received. Further, we examine networks of interaction amongst candidate accounts (to show strategies of mutual support and coordinated antagonism within and across parties) and between candidates and the general public. We extend the methodology of previous work by undertaking hypothesis testing of tie formation between these different actors. We use an approach known as exponential random graph modelling (Robins *et al.* 2007) to test and validate assumptions about what structural forces might be driving network formation on *Twitter* during the election campaign.

Extending previous approaches, we also apply machine learning techniques to surface the key topics within the tweets by and at the candidates, and trace topical change over time. We use social semantic network analysis (Angus & Wiles 2018) to examine the degree of topical overlap between key participants and participant groups (e.g. public, politician, party member), and Structural Topic Models (STM) as our core topic modelling approach to summarise the large corpus of tweets into a small number of 'topics' for analysis (Roberts *et al.* 2013). STM extends the conventional topic model analysis of the tweet content to include document-level covariates, such as candidate party affiliation, author type (e.g. candidates, ordinary users, or media outlets), and the change of topics over time. This enables a further investigation of the underlying campaign themes and strategies employed by each party and candidate, and not least also their engagement with questions of trust: in politics and politicians in general, as well as in their ability to manage key elements of government ranging from the economy to border control.

STM also provides an opportunity to assess the extent to which the themes promoted by the candidates are addressed and adopted by ordinary users, or to which these users engage with the candidates around other topics. Our longitudinal analysis over the course of the campaign provides insights into the evolution of particular public debates; further comparisons with the 2013 and 2016 data also show whether in spite of the general turmoil in Australian politics these policy themes have remained broadly stable. Finally, we also apply sentiment analysis techniques to the tweets by and at candidates to assess the emotional tone of these debates over time and examine the use of positivity and negativity by specific candidates and their parties. For this analysis we use the SentiStrength algorithm (Thelwall *et al.* 2010), to assign each tweet a sentiment score ranging from extremely negative (-5) to extremely positive (+5). This approach has been used in previous studies of political tweets (Vilares *et al.* 2015), and

Sentistrength is currently the state-of-the-art for sentiment analysis of *Twitter* data (Koto & Adriani 2015).

## Expected Results

In keeping with the ethos of AoIR conferences, the project presented here is work in progress, as the election itself will take place in May 2019. However, our previous studies of federal and state elections in Australia have already demonstrated the feasibility and value of the approach outlined here. In particular, our reliance on a population of political candidates' *Twitter* accounts has already been shown to generate a substantially more diverse dataset than the more standard approach of tracking election-related hashtags or keywords can produce: Australian politics hashtags such as #auspol or #ausvotes attract only a very narrow, self-selecting subset of those users who may discuss the federal election on *Twitter*, and not all political candidates will use them.

By contrast, our approach captures all tweets by all candidates who operate public *Twitter* accounts, enabling a straightforward comparison of their tweeting activities across individuals and parties. It also captures all public tweets directed at these candidates' accounts, and while tweeting at candidates still involves a certain degree of self-selection, these tweets represent a considerably larger and more diverse subset of the Australian *Twitter*sphere than the corresponding hashtag datasets.

In combination, then, our approach here produces substantial new evidence both on the use of *Twitter* in political campaigning in Australia, and on the public response to this use. By interfacing with previous studies that used equivalent methodologies, it adds to a longitudinal observation of social media campaigning strategies that stretches across three federal election cycles, and serves to complement other such longer-term work (e.g. Larsson & Moe 2016; Lilleker *et al.* 2016).

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# The Rise of Negativity on Facebook and Twitter in U.S. Political Campaigns

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Negative campaigning has long been a concern in U.S. politics. Several studies over the years have content-analyzed television advertising by presidential candidates between 1960 and 1996, and most suggest a general increase in negative messaging over time (Jamieson, Waldman, & Sherr 2000; Johnston & Kaid 2002; for an exception, see Geer 2006). Campaigns have now expanded their campaign communication online to social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Moreover, with the election of Donald Trump and his anti-normative Tweets (Stromer-Galley 2019), as well as the overall remarkable volume of negativity by the presidential candidates in 2016 (Fowler, Rideout & Franz 2017), this study aims to understand whether there is a trend of increasing negativity on campaigns' free public social media accounts.

We define and analyze negativity in three ways: (1) attacking opponents (including candidates, opposing political parties, or institutions and actors, such as government, the news media or specific journalists) on their policies or character but in a civil way; (2) attacking opponents in an uncivil way via name calling or other demeaning language; (3) attacking opponents in intolerant ways, such as through misogynistic or potential racist speech.

Negativity and incivility online have been the subject of over three decades of research. Scholars have raised the concern that incivility undermines the democratic potential of the internet to foster healthy political discussion (Papacharissi 2004), moreover uncivil discourse seems a pervasive feature of online discussion (Coe, Kenski, & Rains 2014; Reagle Jr 2016). The 2016 presidential election seemed to further normalize uncivil discourse with the candidacy of Donald J. Trump. His rhetoric was remarkable for using personal and demeaning attacks on his opponents and institutions, such as the news media (Stromer-Galley 2019). Concerns have been raised the Trump's candidacy has lead to a greater coarsening of public messages, and that social media features, like Twitter's limited number of characters, constrain messages in ways that lead to bald and blunt expressions. Moreover, Twitter, in particular, seems to feed an "outrage culture" where people use Twitter to incite anger and passion rather than engaging in thoughtful and careful discussion (Sobieraj & Berry 2011).

To pursue this question of increased negativity in online campaigning, we analyze the Facebook and Twitter accounts of candidates who ran for governor in the United States in 2014 and compare that to candidates who ran for the same office in 2018. Our



hypothesis is that the heightened negative messaging on social media during the presidential campaign of 2016 has created a cultural environment where it is acceptable to attack, demean, and call names of candidates' opponents. We also hypothesize that campaigns will be more incivil and intolerant on Twitter than on Facebook, given that Twitter tends to be publicly and journalist-facing and with a shorter message environment that seems to active outrage culture (Sobieraj & Berry 2011), while Facebook tends to be used to activate supporters and mobilize them to action.

To pursue this research, we collected and analyzed Facebook and Twitter accounts from candidates who ran in 2014 and in 2018 for the office of state governor. This is an executive level office, similar to the presidency, but at the state level rather than the federal level. In 2014, we collected the campaign tweets and Facebook posts of all major-party candidates, 72 in total, who ran for governor in 2014 in 36 states. In 2018, we collected all major party candidates, 64 in total, who ran in 32 states. Our analysis is focused on the general election period, which is roughly the last 10 weeks of the campaign period.

We use supervised machine learning to classify messages on three dimensions of negative messaging: attack, incivility, and intolerance. These categories were adopted from Jamieson, Waldman, and Sherr (2000), and from Rossini (in press). To start, we developed a codebook for the classification of attack messages (as part of a larger set of categories, including advocacy messages and calls to action), and trained students on the codebook. We then developed a gold-labeled training corpus to build the attack algorithm. Given the relative sparseness of uncivil and intolerant social media messages, we used the Hatebase lexicon to tag and oversample potentially negative messages to generate a gold-labeled training set for algorithm development on those categories. We use the python-based machine learning toolkit scikit learn for algorithm development. Measures of the accuracy of our classifications of attack messages suggest an accurate and reliable measure (Twitter: Precision = 0.83, Recall = 0.74; F1 = 0.78; Facebook: Precision = 0.87, Recall = 0.76, F1=0.80). Incivility and intolerance coding are still in process, but preliminary work on classifying the public's political messages on Facebook and Twitter suggest we can achieve a comparable level of validity and reliability for incivility and intolerance. We will classify all of the messages by the candidates and conduct statistical analysis and compare the two campaign seasons to test whether there is a significant increase in attack, incivility, and intolerance in political campaign messages on Facebook and Twitter, and we will compare Facebook and Twitter messages.

The results from this study will inform research on the coarsening and increasing anti-normative discourse that seems to be pervading political and social life in the United States. The work will help us understand whether top politicians' discourse may be having an effect on the decorum of discourse by political campaigns of lesser races. Finally, this work will contribute to our understanding of platform affordances and how they may further shape the nature of political discourse.

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# **Social media, trust and efficacy - citizens' experience of the role of social media in four Danish election campaigns 2007-19**

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Social media play an increasing role in election campaigns in most democracies. Barack Obama's victory in the 2008 American presidential election made many speculate that social media had a decisive role for the outcome. However, as demonstrated by Cogburn & Espinoza (2011) social media played a great role in Obama's recruitment and mobilization of new voters during the primaries, whereas for the presidential election itself old media, most notably TV, still played a dominant role.

Social media, like other technologies, might have over-estimated impact in the short run but under-estimated impact in the long run. Social media use is increasing at a massive speed, also in election campaigns. For instance, during the Danish 2007 national election campaign, five percent of citizens accessed social media for purposes related to the election campaign. In 2015 the corresponding figure was 65 percent. In the coming 2019 election it is expected to be even higher.

But do social media have a corresponding impact on the election campaign, on agenda-setting and ultimately the election outcome? Such effects are hard to measure and conclusions might be only tentative (see for instance Gibson & McAllister 2006; Hoff 2010). When looking at election campaigns from the outside, one might claim that social media have personalized the election campaign and enhanced the focus on politicians rather than on politics (Enli & Skogerbø 2013). Further, the use of social media contribute to a more personal relation between voters and candidates, although they do not seem to have contributed to a more deliberative democratic debate (Linaa Jensen 2014). In this paper, we focus on citizens' experienced effects of social media in four Danish election campaigns, taking the point of departure in the concept of efficacy.

## **Methods**

Among the best ways to measure effects of campaigns are to ask those involved, citizens and politicians about their perceived effects. Interviews and surveys are common methods. Where interviews are in-depth and qualitative, it is impossible to ask enough people to draw a broad picture, for instance of social media effects in the general voter population. Here surveys come at hand. Although somehow reductive, by asking a large number of respondents, the impact of subjectivity or bias is reduced and one can get at least a general overview. Besides, surveys are easier to replicate, allowing for longitudinal analysis. Further, survey data are more standardized and surveys can be replicated over time.

This paper is based on data from four consecutive Danish national elections, in 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019 (not held at the time of submission). By replicating the research design and most questions in four consecutive surveys the data provides us with a unique time series analysis of the citizens perception of social media in election

campaigns across a time span of twelve years. The participants were recruited through online panels. N was 970 in 2007, 1973 in 2011, 3589 in 2015 and we have agreed on app. 2000 in 2019. The average response rate has been between 25 and 35 percent, similar to other online surveys. We have used stratified sampling to attract an adequate number of participants in all demographic categories. Despite that, women, foreigners and those with less than nine years of schooling were slightly underrepresented and in the final data set data were weighted in order to be representative for the general voter population. The surveys are designed and managed by a research group for which the author has been in charge and cover broader topics than discussed here, where I focus particularly on social media and perceived effects.

### **Preliminary findings**

As mentioned, the 2019 election is not yet held at the time of submission but will take place no later than June 18th, according to the Danish constitution. The survey is already designed and ready to launch right after the election. In this section, we reflect on issues and findings from the first three surveys and discuss some expected findings in the survey yet to come.

In general, citizen use of social media related to the election campaign has been increasing from 5 percent in 2007 to 30 percent in 2011 and 65 percent in 2015. We expect the figure to be even higher in 2019. However, "social media use" is a diversified phenomenon. "Likes", visiting and following politicians' and parties' on Facebook and Twitter and political quizzes and tests account for most of the social media activity, what Halupka (2014) has defined as "clicktivism", informal and non-obliging online political participation.

However, an increasing number of citizens use social media as a gateway to news, through links to stories shared by media, political actors and other users. Thus, social media have come to play a crucial role in the election news cycle and thus they form important arenas for campaigning for political parties. Especially the 2015 election campaign was a breakthrough for "second screens" in election campaigns; citizens followed and engaged in on Facebook and Twitter while watching TV debates prior to the election.

In all surveys, respondents were asked to evaluate the importance of the Internet in general and social media in particular, compared to for instance TV and newspapers. TV is still regarded as the most important medium even though the gap from the Internet narrows as time goes by. In 2011, social media overtook radio and in 2015 newspapers, illustrating the central role of social media in the 2015 election campaign. Despite importance, social media are met with skepticism, still lagging behind both TV, radio and newspapers in terms of trustworthiness. We address this issue in more detail in the 2019 survey with new questions on the attitudes towards social media that might have changed in a negative direction after Cambridge Analytica and other scandals.

Next comes the questions on social media effects on citizens. In the surveys, we framed questions based on "efficacy", or "subjective political competence" (Barnes & Kaase 1979; Almond & Verba 1963). The concept addresses respondents' experience of democratic capability and knowledge. In all four surveys efficacy as a latent variable is

measured through seven manifest statements, based on a Likert scale. By comparing the answers we can measure the impact of social media for efficacy over time.

Among the findings, between 11 and 20 percent state that social media have had an effect on their opinions, slightly increasing over time. There are similar limited effects of social media on democratic competence, respondents stating that social media have made them more well informed. On the other hand, there is an increasing share replying that social media do not contribute to a qualified debate. As such effects over time are mixed.

In sum, the paper provides a longitudinal study of social media use, agenda-setting effects and experienced efficacy across four elections, contributing to the literature and to the debate on the role of social media in the future of democracy.

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# **“Fear and Loathing on Facebook? Tracking the Rise of Populism and Platformization in Viral Political Facebook Posts**

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The relationship between technological developments and societal change continues to be a common theme in communication research. Comparably recent changes in the digital realm have often led to premonitions of increased opportunities for citizen empowerment in relation to power elites (Olsson, 2016) – premonitions whose roots often can be found in reflections emanating from musings regarding technological developments in the pre-digital era (Enzensberger, [1970] 2003). Indeed, authors have suggested that digital opportunities such as social media would be especially suited to increase the interaction between citizens and their elected officials (Lüders, Følstad, & Waldal, 2014, p. 448), and while political campaigns still tend to mainly focus on traditional media such as television (Hansen & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2014), the slow but steadily increasing influence of social media platforms like Twitter or Facebook during political campaigns in a series of countries cannot be ignored.

Authors have pointed out that studies on digital campaigns have developed primarily on two distinct trajectories (Nielsen & Vaccari, 2013). First, the ‘supply’ variety of scholarship into this theme is typically focused on whether and how political actors make use of digital media (e.g. B. A. Bimber & Davis, 2003; Foot & Schneider, 2006; Vergeer, 2012). Such studies have generally found what is often referred to as the normalization hypothesis - suggesting larger actors offline prevail also online - to hold true over its competing equalization hypothesis – which suggests that less established actors would balance the competition by utilizing digital technologies – although some evidence exists that the degree to which these hypotheses can or cannot be confirmed fluctuates over time (Gibson & McAllister, 2015). Second, ‘demand’ type studies are generally geared towards assessing the impact of political campaigns in various ways, such as gauging the relationship between taking part of political information and subsequently engaging in some way – by means of voting for a particular political actor, or by means of engaging and thus “amplifying” (Zhang, Wells, Wang, & Rohe, 2017) the content posted by such actors to online platforms (B. Bimber, 2003; Williams & Gulati, 2012). The study presented here takes the latter perspective and seeks to trace the development of such citizen demand in relation to posts made on the Facebook Pages of political actors during three Swedish national elections – undertaken in 2010, 2014 and 2018. While digital platforms like Facebook make it possible for political actors to communicate directly with citizens without having to engage with the gatekeeping functionalities of traditional media, there appears to be a dearth of knowledge regarding what types of content as provided by political actors becomes popular or even viral (Nahon, Hemsley, Walker, & Hussain, 2011) among potential voters – and how this popularity varies over time.

With 76 % of the population using Facebook (Davidsson, Palm, & Mandre, 2018), and with such high shares of use remaining comparably persistent since the launch of

Facebook (Nordicom, 2013), Sweden appears as a suitable context in which to study the development of citizen demand for political content during political campaigns. The featured longitudinal approach also seems appropriate given the multitude of studies that focus on these issues during a single political campaign. As pointed out by Stromer-Galley et. al. (2018), the temporal nature of campaigning needs to be assessed further. Indeed, trends come and go, also with regards to political campaigning. As such, our current efforts utilize data from the three previously mentioned elections to trace the development of two tendencies that have recently gained the attention of political communication scholars. First, we look at populism – defined here as a style of political campaigning. Second, we are interested in the ways in which tendencies of platformization – the ways in which political parties adapt their messages to fit with the features of the platforms they use to campaign. These two tendencies are further discussed and will help to inform the research question for the paper at hand: how are viral posts from political parties on Facebook changing over time? As such, our primary interest lays here in uncovering if content characterized by these tendencies ‘works’ – if it becomes comparably popular – and, as a result of this, what repercussions such popularity might have for future political campaigning efforts and indeed the democratic system as such.

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