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Fear and loathing on Facebook? Tracking the rise of populism and platformization in viral political Facebook posts
by Anders Olof Larsson

Abstract

Adopting a longitudinal 'demand' perspective to the study of online political campaigning, the present study details developments in supporter engagement on party Facebook Pages during three Swedish elections — 2010, 2014 and 2018. Specifically, the work presented here uncovers the roles of populism and platformization as ways of constructing political messages. Results indicate that over time, viral posts emerge as increasingly crafted based on the ever-changing affordances of the studied platform, evolving from text-based in 2010 to image-based in 2014 and emerging as primarily video-based in the 2018 elections. Implications for political campaigning are discussed.

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Introduction

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 led to premonitions of increased opportunities for citizen empowerment in relation to elites (Olsson, 2016) — premonitions whose roots often can be found in musings regarding developments in the pre-digital era. Indeed, authors have suggested that digital opportunities such as social media would be especially suited to increase interaction between citizens and politicians [1], and while politicians still focus on traditional media such as television (Hansen and Kosiara-Pedersen, 2014), the increasing influence of social media like Facebook during political campaigns cannot be ignored.

Research on digital campaigns seems to have been undertaken in primarily two different ways. First, the 'supply' variety of scholarship typically deals with how political actors make use of digital media (*e.g.*, Bimber and Davis, 2003; Foot and Schneider, 2006; Vergeer, 2013). Such studies have generally the normalization hypothesis —

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suggesting larger actors off-line 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 (for a nuanced discussion, see Gibson and McAllister, 2015). Second, 'demand' type studies seek to assess the impact of digital campaigns, 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, *et al.*, 2018) the content posted by politicians to online platforms. This study adopts the latter perspective and traces the development of citizen demand in relation to the Facebook Page activity of political actors during the 2010, 2014 and 2018 Swedish elections. Indeed, authors have suggested that the temporal nature of campaigning needs to be assessed (Stromer-Galley, *et al.*, 2018). The study thus makes a contribution in uncovering what types of content as provided by political actors becomes viral (Nahon, *et al.*, 2011) among potential voters — and how such virality varies over time.

With 76 percent of the population using Facebook (Davidsson, *et al.*, 2018), and with high use levels persistent over time (Nordicom, 2013), Sweden appears as a suitable context in which to study these issues. Specifically, the study traces the longitudinal development of two tendencies that characterize political campaigning. First, we look at *populism* — defined here as a style of political campaigning. Second, we are interested in *platformization* — the ways in which political parties adapt messages to fit with the affordances of the platforms they employ. Based on these two tendencies, the research question for the study reads: how are viral posts from political parties on Facebook changing over time? As such, our primary interest lays in uncovering if content characterized by these tendencies 'work' — if it reaches virality.

Literature review

Early research into the use of online technologies by political actors focused on the degree to which they made use of certain technologies. While such structural analyses of web presences and social media uses can certainly be useful, they provide limited insights into the types of content featured. Comparably recent efforts have thus detailed what is actually being communicated by politicians on the studied channels (as suggested by Bruns and Stieglitz, 2012). The study presented here is inspired by these latter approaches and traces two tendencies that have manifested themselves in recent political campaigning discussions — populism and platformization — among the most popular posts made by political actors in three subsequent elections.

Populism

Researchers have scrutinized a variety of communication channels — party manifestos (Rooduijn, *et al.*, 2014), party broadcasts (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007) and televised and printed news (Herkman, 2017) — to study populism. However, as pointed out by (Author, *et al.*, 2017b), relatively little research has detailed populism in online fora (for a notable exception, please refer to Woolley and Howard, 2018). The study presented here thus provides a contribution in detailing the popularity of populist content in a longitudinal fashion.

Populism has been used to describe a series of different political phenomena. It follows that a series of definitions of the term at hand are available. Mudde describes populism as a "thin-centered ideology" [2] leading to "constitutive ambiguity" (Mény and Surel, 2002) since the term carries many meanings and operationalizations. With this in mind, we draw on Moffitt (2016), who suggests that populism is most interesting when considering how it is performed — and how such performance yields influence in a specific communicative setting, such as Facebook. Thus, while populism can be understood as an ideology (*e.g.*, Mudde, 2004) or as a political strategy (*e.g.*, Weyland, 2001) we take the view of populism as a style of communication (*e.g.*, Jagers and Walgrave, 2007), aligning the study with suggestions that differing definitions are representative of different aspects of populism rather than being mutually exclusive (Aslanidis, 2016).

The understanding of populism as a style takes as its starting point the ways in which political ideas are communicated. We will focus on three such modes of populistic style: emotionalization, negativity and 'the people' versus 'the elite'.

First, for emotionalization, the role of negative emotions — such as fear, anger and resentment (Hameleers, *et al.*, 2017) should not be underestimated and will be dealt with further in the next identified category. Several authors do however point out that beyond such negative content, emotions in general are key drivers of political behavior (*e.g.*, Marcus and MacKuen, 1993). For instance, scholarship has shown that invoking fear will lead to increased attention among citizens (Steenbergen and Ellis, 2006), supposedly making them easier targets for political persuasion. Raising enthusiasm and hope, however, is more likely to get citizens engaged in the campaign whose messages stir such positive emotions (Marcus and MacKuen, 1993; Author, *et al.*, 2017b).

Second, as negative political content appears to be salient among recipients (Lau, 1982; Author, 2014), Facebook posts characterized accordingly should be effective in

terms of attention-making on the platform and beyond — although not necessarily as harbingers of discourse on complex political issues. Researchers have uncovered an overlap between political actors characterized by populistic ideology and the style of often negative campaigning they tend to utilize (*e.g.*, Nai, 2018). While the suitability of the term negativity has been debated (*e.g.*, Geer, 2006), we follow Nai (2018) who identifies two basic types of negative campaigning. The first type can be understood as issue-based policy attacks, furthering the idea that the political agenda of the rivaling party is harmful. The second type is focused on the individual — directing voter attention towards the supposedly undesirable character or behavior associated with opponents. Negativity as a campaigning approach appears as a hazardous strategy (Carraro, *et al.*, 2010), but with some clear payoffs in terms of engagement and attention. Such advantages appear to be especially common for challengers adopting the discussed strategy (Geer, 2006) as they can be seen as having less to lose than incumbents (Stromer-Galley, *et al.*, 2018).

Third, for pitting 'the people' versus 'the elite' or 'the others' often involves viewing the former two groups as creating crisis in society (*e.g.*, Moffitt and Tormey, 2014). Such rhetorical devices can be framed as "nostalgia for a lost heartland" [3] where society is described as developing in a negative way and where societal elites are to blame. A similar technique is often labeled as relative deprivation, invoking "the feeling of belonging to a group that is deprived" [4] in society. Definitions of 'the people' are often related to "notions of authenticity and amateurism, which rely on claims of being similar to everyday people, and in opposition to political or economic elites" [5]. Nurturing an amateur style would involve disregarding polished, well-prepared political speeches, instead using social media here to convey messages utilizing "impoliteness and political incorrectness, often using capital letters" so as to indicate the "sincerity, spontaneity and engagement" and authenticity of the speaker [6]. As for 'the elites' or 'the others', the first conceptualization is usually defined depending on specific ideological leanings. While right-wing politicians might pinpoint 'elites' as the mass media or supranational institutions, left-wingers might choose to direct their scorn at religious or economic elites (Engesser, *et al.*, 2017). The concept of 'elites' can thus be understood as a vertical dimension, with threats coming from above in the societal power structure (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007). Following the same logic, 'the others' are often conceptualized as a horizontal threat. Typically understood as ethnic, religious or other types of minorities, the identification and direction of blame towards the 'others' could be seen as aligned with inclinations to perceive society as consisting of in- and out-groups (as suggested by Reinemann, *et al.*, 2016).

Platformization

The suggestion made by Blumler and McQuail (2001) that "elections provide opportunities to study the roles in political communication of major innovations in media formats" [7] is clearly related to the tendency for political organizations to adapt their communication to suit the dominant media of the day. Drawing from a body of literature which traces the influences of platforms such as the one currently under scrutiny on societal affairs and generally held public values (Bucher and Helmond, 2018), we can refer to such adaptation processes as platformization. While often defined as "the extension of social media platforms into the rest of the Web" [8], the term is used in the paper at hand to denote the ways in which social media have similarly extended into political campaigning — how political campaigning efforts have adapted to fit with the affordances of Facebook.

With our specific research interests in mind, a suitable starting point from which to understand platformization in political campaigning could be the rise of Web sites for such purposes during the mid-1990s. Early research tended to be geared towards assessing whether or not political organizations were "utilizing the full potential of the Web" [9]. Such efforts — akin to the structural studies discussed earlier — typically adopted deductive starting points, providing lists of functionalities that the new communication technology allowed for and then tested for the degree that parties and politicians made use of these functionalities on their Web pages (Lilleker, *et al.*, 2011). Moving beyond Web sites, blogs emerged as the campaign tool *du jour* for the 2010 Swedish election [10] — the first of three elections studied here. As for social media, while pundits suggested the influence of these platforms already during the 2010 election (Stakston, 2010), a study on campaign prioritizations across a series of countries showed that social media were seen as important at a relatively later stage (Tenscher, *et al.*, 2015). This finding mirrors the preference for "mundane Internet tools" among U.S. campaign workers identified by Nielsen (2010), and taken together, the findings confirm the often uncovered conservative nature of campaign professionals when introduced to media formats that afford increased capabilities for interaction (Stromer-Galley, 2000).

Nevertheless, as social media have become "integral parts of our media and communication environments" [11], the service under scrutiny here has become an unavoidable communication channel for those on the campaign trail. The study at hand identifies three ways in which the functionalities offered by Facebook appears to have influences political campaigns as well as the engagement patterns of potential voters. Specifically, we will deal with issues of hybridity, the encouragement of voter feedback and with the importance of audiovisual media.

First, for the hybridity of campaign posts, as 'new' and 'old' media intermesh, such categorizations become increasingly difficult to uphold. Indeed, the interplay between

media has been dubbed by Chadwick (2013) as a hybrid media system, "built upon interactions among older and newer media logics — where logics are defined as technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and organizational forms" [12]. Within this system, "a balance between the older logics of transmission and reception and the newer logics of circulation, recirculation, and negotiation" [13] is tangible. As such, different media outlets and practices need to be assessed in tandem, combining comparably 'old' and comparably 'new' outlets and practices. Indeed, Karlsen and Enjolras (2016) suggest that "social media should also be considered in relation to other communication channels and platforms" [14]. While our current efforts do not explicitly take the content of various legacy media into account, we will trace the influence of established media outlets on the campaign materials studied here. As previous research efforts detailing online political campaigns before the advent of social media have found linking to be an important mode of associating to other actors, contextualizing the campaign in society (Foot and Schneider, 2006), the forthcoming analysis will detail the ways in which such linking practices appear in viral posts over three elections.

Second, as mobilizing voters to undertake some on- or off-line task in relation to the campaign is a clear priority of politicians (Lilleker, *et al.*, 2011), we expect such tasks to adapt to the platform under scrutiny. Drawing on the often-discussed potential of the Internet for increasing political engagement among the citizenry (*e.g.*, Norris, 2002), research has shown that features typically made available on party Web sites could be utilized for these matters (Foot and Schneider, 2006). One crucial difference between such sites and Facebook is that while the former is largely malleable to the needs and finances of the political organization operating it, Facebook offers a comparably restricted catalogue of opportunities in this regard. Indeed, Freelon (2017) points out that communication technologies "enable and constrain various forms of citizen participation" [15]. Specifically, while the posts made by the parties can be adorned with all sorts of content, the ways in which mobilization can be performed by supporters appears as limited as potential voters can engage in essentially three ways — 'reacting', commenting and sharing to the posts made by political actors. While these three types of engagement all have influence on the virality of content, the inner workings of the algorithm determining such popularity are largely unknown outside of Facebook. Nevertheless, the option for users to share posts to their own timeline has been pointed to as particularly important in order for content to 'go viral' (Socialbakers, 2013). As our focus here is placed on detailing the most engaged with posts across the three aforementioned elections, the forthcoming analysis will assess if mobilizing techniques urging the voters to share or otherwise engage with posts did indeed emerge as comparably successful.

Third, while early normative views of the Internet as employed for political communication emphasized text-based formats, the utilization of images — be they still or moving — has been a staple of electioneering since at least the "modern" age of political communication (Strömbäck, 2007). This importance of images can be demonstrated by the fact that television still holds strong as one of the most important platforms for political actors on the campaign trail, as it allows for the development of key visual narratives important for constructing and communicating political messages (Filimonov, *et al.*, 2016). In relation to social media, visual content could thus be seen as emotionally rousing and as a result particularly "spreadable" (Jenkins, *et al.*, 2013) from user to user. The Obama campaigns for the U.S. presidency has been pointed to as particularly successful with regards to utilization of visual communication on social media (Goodnow, 2013), and such a focus on images and videos appears to have increased during following U.S. elections (Enli, 2017). The benefits of audiovisual online content are undoubtedly linked to the steadily increasing ease with which users have been able to upload and consume such content in networked settings. Discussing the development of party Web sites, Margolis and Resnick (2000) suggested that visually enhancing sites would require significant amount of resources in terms of Web designers and managers. While social media such as Facebook should not necessarily be viewed as a panacea with regards to usability and diminished resource demand, we nevertheless expect the claim made by Druckman and co-authors that "technology generally becomes easier to use with time" [16] to hold true also for Facebook. Such increased ease of use could also increase the willingness of politicians to experiment as new conventions for online publishing develop (Williamson, 2009). On the demand side of things, we expect increased broadband access as well as high-speed mobile access to the Internet and social media to lead to an increased demand among the populace for this type of content (Vaccari, 2013). As Facebook has expanded the opportunities for audiovisual adornment of Pages like the ones operated by political actors, we expect these to have transformed campaign practices. Similarly, given the increasing importance of audiovisual over textual content as a general tendency of online audience preferences (Karlsson and Clerwall, 2012), we expect the inclusion of audiovisual contents to play increasingly important roles for the virality of posts as we detail the three elections.

Method

Data collection was undertaken by means of the Netvizz Facebook application (Rieder, 2013). It extracts posts and related meta-data (such as the number of likes, reactions,

comments and shares) from publicly open Facebook Pages, such as those typically operated by political parties up for election. Data collection was performed so as to capture all content posted by the parties to their Facebook Pages during one-month periods preceding the 2010, 2014 and 2018 elections respectively. For 2018, election day took place on 9 September, which meant that all posts from Swedish political parties were archived reaching back to 9 August and terminating one day after the election — 10 September — in order to capture some of the post-election aftermath. For 2014, election day fell on 14 September, which meant that Page data was collected immediately after the election spanning the time period from 14 August to 15 September. For 2010, data was collected in during the 2014 events, detailing a time period from 19 August 2010 to 20 September of the same year (with election day on 19 September). The collection of historical social media data such as was undertaken for the 2010 election raises issues of the availability of such data in hindsight. While Twitter, for instance, is generally restricted when it comes to free access to historical data, the same limitations does not — at least at the time of data collection — appear to hold true (see Rieder, *et al.*, 2015, for further insights into the collection of historical social media data).

While the selected approach essentially meant focusing on parties with seats in parliament, significant out-of-parliament challengers were also included for each election. Table One details the included parties and their vote percentages for each studied election.

Table 1: Parties included in the study. Vote percentages for 2010, 2014 and 2018 elections shown.		
Party (abbreviation)	**Vote % 2010**	**Vote % 2014**	**Vote % 2018**
Left-wing			
Environmental Party (Mp)	7.3	6.9	4.4
Left Party (V)	5.6	5.7	8
Social Democrats (S)	30.7	31	28.3
Right-wing/Liberal			
Centre Party (C)	6.6	6.1	8.6
Christian Democrats (Kd)	5.6	4.5	6.3
Conservatives (M)	30.1	23.3	19.9
Liberal Party (Fp)	7.1	5.4	5.5
Others			
Feminist Initiative (Fi)	0.4	3.1	0.5
Pirate Party (Pp)	0.6	0.4	0.1
Sweden Democrats (Sd)	5.7	12.9	17.5
Alternative For Sweden (Afs)			0.3
Citizen's Coalition (Med)			0.2

Besides the familiar groupings of left-wing and right-wing/liberal parties, the Swedish political system has increasingly become characterized by a series of smaller parties, often representing what could be referred to as niche issues, sometimes reaching elevated electoral success. The clearest tendency involves the growth of anti-immigrant right-wing parties, such as the Sweden Democrats (Sd), who have enjoyed considerable growth during the three studied elections as can be seen in Table One. While similarly right-wing parties such as Alternative For Sweden (Afs) and the Citizen's Coalition (Med) did not succeed in gaining traction at the polls during the 2018 events, they were nevertheless noticeable in public debate and were thus included in the study. The same logic applied to the inclusion of the Feminist Initiative (Fi) party as well as the Pirate Party (Pp).

Given our interest in tracing tendencies of populism and platformization in viral posts, we view the aforementioned engagement modes of 'reactions', comments and shares as measures of public attention or indeed amplification (Zhang, *et al.*, 2018) in relation to posts provided by political parties. Analysis was undertaken by identifying viral posts — posts that had succeeded in gaining comparably large amounts of 'reactions', comments and/or shares — for each election (presented in Figures One through Three). The identified viral posts for each year were then approached by means of qualitative content analysis, tracing tendencies pertaining to populism and platformization as described previously (drawing on work by Co-author and Author, 2018; Kreiss, 2016). Focusing on "how particular phenomena are represented" [17], a deductive approach (*e.g.*, Mayring, 2000) was thus employed in order to assess platformization — "the 'form' in which content is presented" (Paulussen, 2004) — as well as tendencies pertaining to populism within the discourse represented in the highly popular posts. While such an analytical focus on the most popular posts could be called into question (Lorentzen and Nolin, 2017), the selected approach will allow for an emphasis on the types of content most engaged with (as suggested by Mahrt and Scharkow, 2013) — an approach that fits with our goal of tracing developmental trends in campaign engagement.

Results

The viral posts for each year are identified by means of Figures One (for 2010), Two (2014) and Three (2018). Political party posts are visible as nodes in these Figures. Node placement on the horizontal axes of the figures detail the number of comments received per post, while position on the vertical axes is indicative of the number of shares at the time of data collection. The size of each node represents the number of 'reactions' received. As such, what is presented here must be seen as a series of "snapshots" (Brügger, 2012) of malleable online texts (Karpf, 2012; Karlsson and Sjøvaag, 2015) — essentially, the presented numbers could have changed since the time of data collection. Nevertheless, in order to detail developmental tendencies as our aim is here, there is a need to "freeze the flow" (Karlsson and Strömbäck, 2010) of online activities so as to make them possible to analyze.

2010 — Text-based campaigning

Figure 1: Viral posts during the 2010 election.

Note: Larger version of Figure 1 available here.

Mirroring the aforementioned tendency for social media such as Facebook to gain importance in political campaigns at a comparably later state (Tenscher, *et al.*, 2015), the scale of engagement visible in One must be considered as rather limited. As such, not only were the campaign priorities of parties placed elsewhere during the 2010 election — judging by the number of shares, comments and 'reactions', the citizenry did not appear as highly interested in engaging on the platform at hand either. However, when such engagement does take place, it is mainly in relation to the posts

made by parties that at the time were considered as comparably small in terms of voter support — most clearly for the Feminist Initiative (Fi) and for the Sweden Democrats (Sd). As previous research has pointed out that such comparably diminutive actors will often be early adopters of novel campaign techniques (Gibson and McAllister, 2015), the results presented here suggests that such prioritizations appear to have been successful as these smaller parties succeeded to gain comparably large amounts of supporter engagement. With regards to tendencies of populism as defined previously, we can identify such content primarily among the posts made by the right-wing Sweden Democrats (Sd). Throughout a series of posts that had gained comparable popularity, the specified party succeed in engaging their Facebook followers with attacks on news media outlets, Muslims, other political parties, comedians, opponents and what is referred to as a 'left-wing cartel'. Often considered a populist party not only in terms of their communication style, the Sweden Democrats thus emerge in the 2010 data as successful in constructing a narrative of right-wing dissidence in relation to a series of societal actors. As such, this particular party is indeed focused identifying the faults of 'the elites' and 'the others' as suggested earlier.

For platformization tendencies, we can point to the fact that as engagement by means of likes/reactions etc. were a relatively new opportunity at the time of the election (Kincaid, 2009), the levels of such engagement were low as were the tendencies for parties to adapt their communication to such viral possibilities, effectively asking for Facebook followers to share content. While we see some examples of such tendencies of parties asking for platform-specific citizen engagement — e.g., Sweden Democrats (Sd) asking for 'likes' on a YouTube video — the sum of posts visible in Figure One appear to suggest that for the 2010 elections, Facebook was not a prioritized platform for parties, nor for citizens. Going beyond the top posts identified in One we find parties providing visual material indicating particular political preferences for supporters to publish on their own personal blogs, or overlay images (more often than not party of logos) that users are urged to superimpose on their Facebook profile pictures. As such, some adaptation to the platform is taking place, but it is clear from the identified posts that the utilization of Facebook's viral functionalities is at a very early stage. Besides the aforementioned YouTube video and two examples of Sd party leader speeches, the amount of visual or indeed audiovisual content featured here must be considered as limited. Instead, the bulk of highly popular posts for 2010 emerge as mainly text-based, with noticeable examples of hybrid media practices gaining traction as parties link to op-ed pieces and press releases, engage with news providers in different ways and urge their supporters to take part in opinion polls hosted by mainstream media outlets. Granted, while some examples of visual features (campaign poster type content) are making their marks — most notably as provided by the Feminist Initiative (Fi) — these types of posts are not very representative of the type of content that succeeded to gain traction during the 2010 election. As we shall see, these posts are perhaps best understood as forerunners of the types of content that would become popular during later elections.
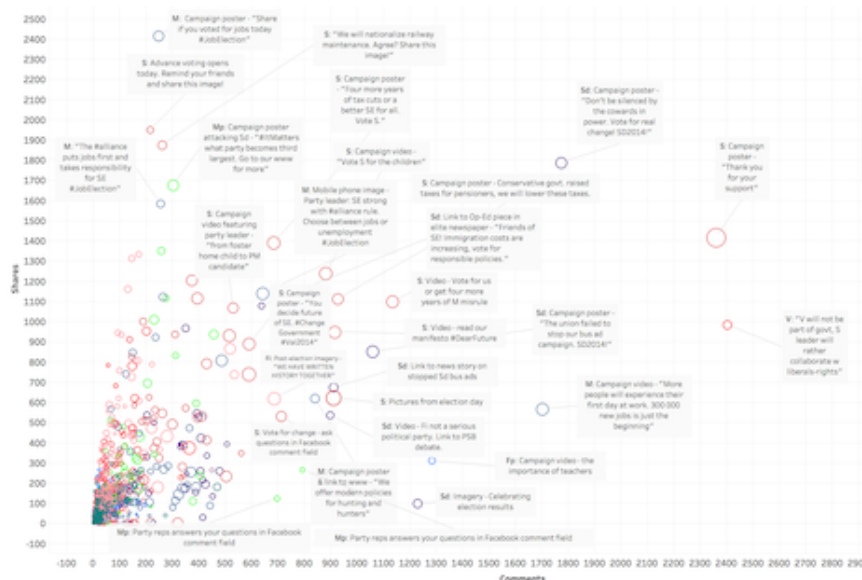
2014 — Image-based campaigning

Figure 2: Viral posts during the 2014 election.

Note: Larger version of Figure 2 available here.

Moving from 2010 to 2014, it becomes clear from the change of the scale of

engagement (detailed on the axes and according to node size) that Facebook is now a priority among parties and citizens alike. For tendencies of populism, these are arguably fewer than as uncovered for the 2010 election — in 2014, this type of content is again represented by the Sweden Democrats (Sd) who on one occasion refer to the ruling conservative government as 'cowards'. Beyond this example, the posts visible in Figure Two appear as more clearly influenced by platformization tendencies than by populistic stylings. In a more general sense, it is clear from Figure Two that the popularity of smaller parties evident in the 2010 data has been replaced with a situation largely dominated by their larger, 'catch-all' counterparts — such as the Social Democrats (S) and the Conservatives (M). Such a development could be understood along the lines of the normalization hypothesis, which states that over time, larger parties will prevail online just like they do in off-line settings (Gibson and McAllister, 2015). As shown in Figure Two, these larger parties tend to reach viral success by adapting their messages to the affordances of the platform. For instance, while we did not see the use of hashtags in 2010, these types of thematic keywords emerge as comparably popular during the 2014 campaign. Besides aligning their posts with general election-related hashtags (such as #val2014 — Swedish for #election2014), parties are also using this technique to frame their posts within self-styled narratives relating to their election priorities. Consider, for instance, the Conservatives (M) use of the #JobElection hashtag, or the attempt of the Social Democrats (S) to use the #DearFuture framing of their campaign. While hashtags are perhaps primarily associated with Twitter rather than with Facebook, the tendencies uncovered here would seem to suggest an increased willingness on behalf of the parties to adapt their messages to the platform on which they are campaigning — and indeed, a similarly expanded willingness on behalf of their followers to engage. We also see how urges to engage on the platform itself — such as encouragements to ask questions in the post comments, or the appeal to share campaign-poster style images — have largely replaced the tendency in 2010 to use Facebook as a sort of link to engagement on other platforms (such as YouTube or blogs). One final platform-related development that can be discerned when comparing the figures mapping out the 2010 and 2014 posts has to do with the expanded use of visuals during the latter of the two elections. While some of the truly highly successful 2010 posts featured campaign poster-style contents, primarily offered by smaller parties, the practice of presenting political messages with various forms of imagery has here become widespread among the most popular posts of the 2014 campaign. Much like the 2010 posts featuring images could be considered as harbingers of what proved as a very popular practice in 2014, the presence of a series of posts featuring audiovisual content during this latter election gives us some idea about what tendencies will characterize the final election included in the study.
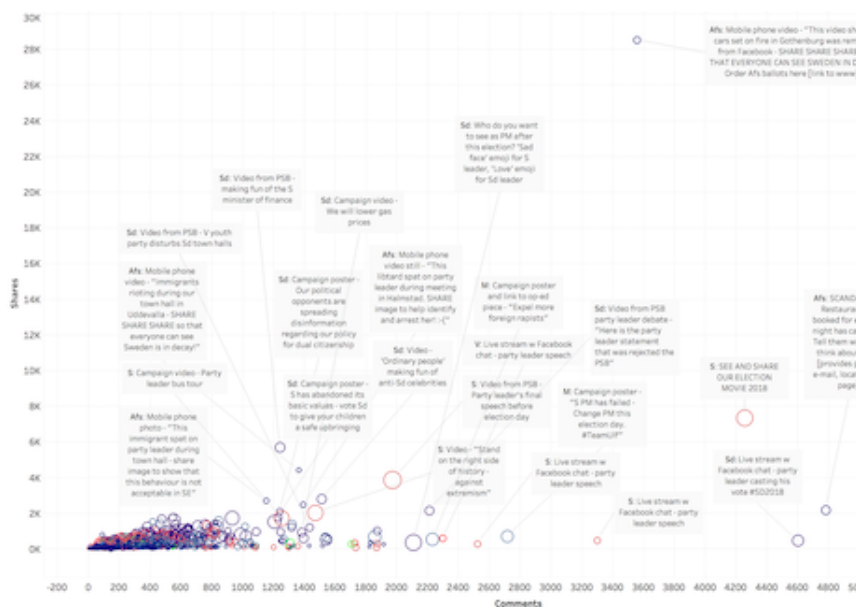
2018 — Video-based campaigning

Figure 3: Viral posts during the 2018 election.

Note: Larger version of Figure 3 available here.

While the 2010 posts visible in Figure One were primarily text-based, the posts from 2014 emerged as mainly centered on visual contents. As can be seen in Figure Three, detailing the most popular posts during the 2018 election, the most popular posts provided by the parties were largely characterized by different types of audiovisual

content. Viewing the figure as a whole, it is possible to differentiate between three main types of such videos — the professionally produced campaign video; the mobile phone video taken *in medias res*, signaling urgency; and the live broadcast video, often featuring political speeches and encouragement on behalf of the sending party for Facebook followers to engage in relation to the video. This latter type could be considered as a technologically enhanced continuation of the tendency visible in 2014 for parties to ask for follower engagement by means of comments and shares. Such encouragement has also taken on other new forms, as the Sweden Democrats (Sd) in one post poll their followers regarding their preferences for prime minister. Those interested are asked to choose the 'sad' emoji reaction for the Social Democrat (S) leader or the 'love' emoji for the Sweden Democrat (Sd) leader. The increased use of video taken together with the by now very common rhetoric device encouraging supporters to like/react, share or comment on posts are indicative of platform-adapted, professionalized campaign logic — rationales that are apparently successful in terms of gaining traction.

For populism, while this type of content was not as stated in the 2014 data as it was in 2010, it appears to have made a comeback of sorts during the 2018 elections. Much like the Sweden Democrats (Sd) dominated the 2010 events with regards to populism as a style, the 2018 campaign period is characterized in this regard by the activities related to another small, right-wing party — Alternative For Sweden (Afs). Much like the Sweden Democrats (Sd) did in 2010, Alternative For Sweden (Afs) succeed in raising attention with similar means — although clearly integrated with the affordances of the platform under scrutiny. By utilizing capital letters and by similarly repeating urges to "SHARE SHARE SHARE", the Afs posts adapt to the logic of the platform and play into the populist rhetoric of placing blame on others and in so doing evoking a sense of urgency and authenticity as discussed earlier. Interestingly, the Sweden Democrats (Sd) also utilize similar techniques this time around, albeit in a manner that could perhaps be described as more stylized or controlled — such as in a video where supposed ordinary citizens make fun of celebrities — elites — who had made discouraging statements regarding the party.

In sum, it would appear from the data in Figure Three that truly viral success is reached at a nexus of populist rhetoric presented to the potential voter in a platform-adapted fashion. This study has thus shown how the reception of political campaigning has changed over three elections on a platform that is currently considered as highly important for voter engagement. The final section of the paper discusses the possible implications of these findings.

Discussion and conclusion

While studies that focus on the reception of campaign messages during one election can provide in-depth knowledge on the specificities of that specific event — or indeed about the specific communication technologies employed — the longitudinal insights offered by these studies are often limited. As discussed in the introduction, the present study sought to provide such over-time insights regarding the developments of campaign message engagement. This was done by tracing the influence of populism and platformization in the Facebook posts offered by political parties during three Swedish elections. Granted, services like the one under scrutiny have a tendency to fade from the public limelight over time — as an example, consider MySpace, which rose to campaigning fame during the 2006 U.S. elections (Gueorguieva, 2008) but which is arguably not essential in our current environment. Considering the increasing scales necessary to depict the engagement levels during the elections covered here, Facebook appears to have enjoyed a reverse development. The specified platform could thus be considered as a suitable case also for future, follow-up research efforts in the same vein as the study presented here.

With regards to platformization, the results presented could be construed as the story of how Facebook emerged as increasingly important for online campaigning. Given its leading role in terms of everyday use combined with the tendencies revealed for parties to adopt their messages to the ever-changing affordances of the platform, increasingly focusing inwards to functionalities native to Facebook rather than urging their followers to link, share or otherwise engage elsewhere, the ways in which Facebook increased its importance appears as unquestionable. Granted, as the present study did not compare Facebook activity with similar data from other competing platforms, this finding needs to be corroborated by means of comparative research. Nevertheless, the role of the platform at hand cannot be easily ignored.

Such a dominant position undoubtedly raises questions regarding the changing nature of campaigning — and of party campaign organizations. As political actors enjoy unprecedented possibilities to track the minutiae of how their online offerings fare once they meet with their potential supporters on a platform such as Facebook (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016), they become increasingly dependent on what Kreiss and McGregor has labeled "quasi-digital consultants" (2017) — technological staffers who through their expertise of 'what works online' appear to be increasing their influence over political campaign prioritizations. While such tendencies might be more tangible in the U.S. context, developments like these have indeed spread to other political systems (Karlsen, 2009; Kalsnes, 2016). The results presented here could be seen as

testament to such changes. Indeed, the inward-facing or indeed Facebook-facing tendencies shown here — less engagement with other media over time, increased utilization of party-operated Facebook presences for "controlled interactivity" (Stromer-Galley, 2014) with supporters by means of self-hosted Q&A sessions and live streams of speeches — are indicative of the often discussed need for campaign control (Author, 2013; Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016) that characterizes electioneering. With the aforementioned influx of technological staffers and their supposed increased role in message construction (Kreiss, 2016; Kreiss and McGregor, 2017), such control might have consequences for political campaign operations that arguably go beyond ideological prioritizations in ways previously unknown — or at least uncovered.

The results further suggest that one such consequence could involve utilizing populism as a style to reach higher levels of engagement. Granted, while the parties reaching higher levels of engagement by means of providing populistic content — the Sweden Democrats (Sd) and Alternative For Sweden (Afs) — they often do so while simultaneously using platformization techniques as shown earlier. While this is not to suggest that parties that could be considered as non-populist in terms of their ideology and their style would start employing such rhetorical techniques in order to gain traction on platforms like Facebook, previous changes in campaign style have indeed emanated from external, sometimes rather extreme actors and subsequently influenced what could be considered mainstream campaigning (Karlsen, 2013).

Taken together, the tendencies uncovered here seem to suggest that parties are indeed developing into what Mancini (1999) referred to as "communication machines" — increasingly dependent to digital-technical expertise and indeed feedback from potential supporters in order to provide campaign materials that can truly excel in an increasingly complex media environment. Such developments can be understood in line with the tendency for campaign professionalization (Strömbäck, 2007), but we should perhaps also be wary of the extent to which these tendencies are competing with the ideological or political prioritizations that shape parties and campaigns. As shown in the paper at hand, Facebook engagement has shifted from adhering to text-based to video-based via image-based content. Such development raises questions regarding to what extent and how changes in engagement patterns influence campaign prioritizations. As communication professionals can track the minutiae of post performance in almost real time, it does not seem unreasonable that these opportunities for benchmarking will yield influence over the way political rhetoric is fashioned, distributed and adopted. Thus, future research might find it feasible to look into how party utilization of communication technologies changes over time — ideally in a comparative fashion, detailing such developments on a series of platforms. Specifically, combining quantitative efforts like those presented here with more qualitative approaches — such as interviews with communication professionals or ethnographic work within campaigns — could help increase our knowledge about how campaigns and indeed communication efforts in general are developing seemingly in tandem with the affordances offered by the platforms *du jour*. 🅵🅼

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Notes

1. Lüders, *et al.*, 2014, p. 448.

2. Mudde, 2004, p. 544.

3. Elchardus and Spruyt, 2014, p. 7.

4. Elchardus and Spruyt, 2014, p. 9.

5. Baldwin-Philippi, 2019, p. 379.

6. Enli, 2017, p. 58.

7. Blumler and McQuail, 2001, p. 217.

8. Helmond, 2015, p. 1.

9. Stein, 2009, p. 764.

10. Karlsson and Åström, 2016, p. 465.

11. Nielsen and Schrøder, 2014, p. 475.

12. Chadwick, 2013, p. 4.

13. Chadwick, 2013, p. 208.

14. Karlsen and Enjolras, 2016, p. 343.

15. Freelon, 2017, p. 3.

16. Druckman, *et al.*, 2007, p. 429.

17. Krippendorf, 2004, p. 14.

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