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Going Negative on Facebook: Negative User Expressions and Political Parties' Reactions in the 2013 Austrian National Election Campaign

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Social media platforms like Facebook are the new neighborhood pubs. Citizens often use these new public forums to talk about their anger and lack of faith in politics. Consequently, political parties' online management of negative user expressions has become increasingly important to build and maintain good relationships with citizens. To explore and identify negative user expressions and how political parties react to them, this article analyzes the Facebook pages of seven political parties during the 2013 Austrian national election campaign. Overall, almost half of the 2,584 analyzed user comments on the parties' official Facebook pages contain a negative expression. Half of these negative expressions are personal or organizational appeals—statements on a party or politician's qualification for the job or personal characteristics. Mostly users' negative comments on Facebook address the party as an organization. Nevertheless, the political parties do not react to these.

Keywords: negativity, user expressions, social media, Facebook, election campaigns, Austria, content analysis

Political parties and politicians increasingly use social media, primarily Facebook and Twitter, to reach out to their voters to inform them and to build and maintain good relationships with them (e.g., Klinger & Russmann, 2017; Lilleker & Jackson, 2011; Williams & Gulati, 2012). One of the greatest advantages of communication channels like Facebook is that parties and politicians do not have to rely on the mass media and "completely control the message conveyed to the public. . . . Most other forms of political communication are subject to filtering or intervention by news media or other players in the political process" (Kaid, 1999, p. 423; see also Hermans & Vergeer, 2013). However, parties and politicians' use of social media also gives the public new platforms to talk to them and about politics. Platforms like Facebook are the new neighborhood pubs. For instance, Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Tolan, and Marrington (2013) found that although off-line social connectedness and Facebook connectedness are distinct constructs, they are also related: Facebook acts as a separate social medium with which to develop and maintain relationships, thus providing some of the same functions as face-to-face communication for the sharing of current topics. A study on newspaper comment threads suggests that readers engage in commenting activities "to express a personal opinion on the subject

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matter of the story . . . and to interact with other readers" (Canter, 2013, p. 607). In addition, a more recent study on Twitter has shown that U.S. adults tweet political content (based on their motivation) to inform and sometimes persuade others and to initiate open and equal deliberative dialogue (Penney, 2016). Social media platforms, however, connect and empower even more people than the corner pub. They provide the growing number of dissatisfied voters with a platform to address a large audience about their anger and about their growing lack of trust and faith in parties and politicians (Dalton, 2000; Eurobarometer, 2016; Niedermayer, 2007).

Political parties' official Facebook pages (on which this study focuses) are such platforms connecting dissatisfied voters with likeminded others and giving them an opportunity to convey their opinions, thoughts, and feelings about politics—often their growing disenchantment with politics—to everyone and the party. The anonymity of the online space allows users to "go negative" (e.g., Kushin & Kitchner, 2009). For instance, a study on the official Facebook pages of parties campaigning before the 2010 regional election in Vienna shows that users partly doubted politicians' and political actions' accuracy and legitimacy (Rußmann, 2012).

Emotional expressions are very important, so people tend to share them socially (Rimé, Finkenauer, Luminet, Zech, & Philippot, 1999), and in the process of social sharing, emotional expressions are canalized and thereby strengthened. Derks, Fischer, and Bos (2008) reviewed research on the potential differences between computer-mediated communication and face-to-face interaction with respect to the communication of emotion. They concluded that emotions are found as frequently online as off-line and that online and off-line emotional communication is very similar. Where they found differences, they showed that computer-mediated communication reinforces the communication of (explicit) emotions, particularly between strangers.

Consumer research studies show that the online sharing of "negative emotions amplifies the sharer's dissatisfaction" (López-López, Ruiz-de-Maya, & Warlop, 2014, p. 475). Releasing or expressing their negative feelings relieves and unburdens people (Nyer & Gopinath, 2005). Specifically, angry people find it more satisfying to share their emotions and thoughts with strangers with the same interest—which a political party's Facebook community represents—than with friends (López-López et al., 2014).

Consequently, the management of negative user expressions (on Facebook) has become increasingly important because negative user expressions impact a party's reputation. In the field of political communication, social media platforms' affordance of two-way communication is one of their main attractions—they allow parties to respond directly to negative user expressions.

In this article, I explore and identify negative user expressions on political parties' Facebook pages and how political parties react to them. Xenos, Macafee, and Pole (2015) have highlighted that research on online campaigning can benefit from study designs that focus more on how social media are used than simply on how much they are used, which is the question on which most studies in the field focus. This study follows the former path, although it does not analyze the full spectrum of how Facebook is used. For instance, the study does not consider text–image relations or the algorithms applied. By focusing on user expressions and reactions to them, this study aims to gain a broader understanding of the nature of online political communication.

I focus on the 2013 national election campaigns in Austria. Austria has a party-based electoral system, and even though the top candidates' importance has increased continuously, campaigns still take a party-centric view (Plasser & Plasser, 2002). Hence, the focus is on political parties' Facebook pages and not on individual politicians, which would have required investigating these top candidates' Facebook pages. In the 2013 national election, some top candidates such as (the then chancellor) Werner Faymann of the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) did not even have a Facebook page. The Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) was an exception: Its official Facebook page was (and is) also that of its party leader and the 2013 top candidate, HC Strache. The party's website only had a link to HC Strache's Facebook page. Specifically, I analyzed 2,766 party and user posts and comments on seven Austrian parties' official Facebook pages during the six weeks prior to election day. I examined negative campaigning in Austria from a political party perspective in previous studies, which led to mixed findings regarding the level of negativity across party-controlled communication channels (Russmann, 2017). In turn, the question arises: To what extent do Austrian voters engage in going negative? In the content analysis, I focus on the number of negative user expressions, their content, and their targets. Thereafter, I examine parties' reactions to these messages from their communities.

The following section starts with the theoretical framework, followed by a brief overview of the setting, Austria, and the 2013 national election. Thereafter the data are discussed and the results of the analysis reported. The article concludes with a discussion of the results and a brief description of the principal findings.

Theoretical Framework: Political Communication and Negativity

This study's theoretical framework follows previous studies on negative campaigning and on online consumer complaining behavior (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Boote, 1998; Djupe & Peterson, 2002; Geer, 2006; Lau & Pomper, 2001; Mark, 2009; Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010; Wirtz & Mattila, 2004). Consequently, this article's primary focus is on negative expressions (in Facebook posts and comments). These expressions reflect disapproval of parties and their politicians' decisions and statements on current issues and questioning of their policies, records, and qualifications to govern. Consequently, they highlight politicians and parties' shortcomings, criticize their personalities, and call their judgment into question. Parties' campaigns are also mentioned in an unfavorable light in these negative comments (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Djupe & Peterson, 2002; Geer, 2006; Mark, 2009; Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010). In addition, people express in negative comments their dissatisfaction and frustration with politics, their anger and lack of faith in parties, and their fear of what the future might hold (Boote, 1998; Wirtz & Mattila, 2004). Negative expressions are distinguished from positive and neutral expressions. Positive expressions refer to positively mentioning, highlighting, and applauding a party or politician's success, qualifications, accomplishments, and campaign tactics (Djupe & Peterson, 2002; Lau & Pomper, 2001).

Most of the few studies investigating the sentiments (e.g., tone, framing) of user expressions in online political communication are set in a U.S. context. Sweetser and Weaver Lariscy (2008) studied young potential voters' comments on the walls of the Facebook pages of the candidates in the 2006 U.S. midterm election: The majority of wall comments were positive in tone (63%; 18.5% neutral; 13.9% negative), and the young potential voters perceived themselves as being on friendly terms with the candidates. This is in line with studies on personal Facebook pages that have found a "positivity bias" in users' self-disclosure and in feedback processes. In these private settings, negative messages are perceived as less appropriate and

receive fewer comments (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014; Ziegele & Reinecke, 2017). Groshek and Al-Rawi (2013) examined public sentiment expressed on Barack Obama's and Mitt Romney's Facebook pages and on Twitter's #election2012 during the U.S. election in 2012. Barack Obama was regularly mentioned in positive terms (e.g., vote, good, love). Further, "perhaps the most notable finding was the readily apparent lower level of expressly critical key words associated with 'Obama' in what was, for him, an oppositional media space" (Groshek & Al-Rawi, 2013, p. 10). Conversely, Mitt Romney was more often associated with critical key words (e.g., liar, lies, and rich) on Twitter and on his and Obama's official Facebook pages. My study contributes to the research field by addressing the following overarching research question: To what extent are user expressions on Austrian political parties' Facebook pages positive, neutral, or negative?

Content of Negative User Expressions

User expressions vary not only in their tone—positive, neutral, and negative—but also in their content (Fridkin & Kenney, 2008). The literature on negative campaigning distinguishes different types of negative expressions. The following categories have generally been used in studies on political advertisement and mass media coverage and on the evaluation of citizens' reactions to both (e.g., de Boer, Suetfeld, & Groshek, 2012; Fridkin & Kenney, 2004; Haynes, Flowers, & Harman, 2006; Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010; Wicks & Souley, 2003): (a) issue appeals, (b) appeals related to the opponent's record, (c) personal appeals and statements on a party's or politician's qualification for the job, and (d) appeals related to the opponent's campaign tactics and campaign strategy. This categorization provides the basis for the categorization used in this study to answer another research question: Are certain types of negativity more common in user expressions on Austrian political parties' Facebook pages than those in other countries?

Negative user expressions are categorized as (a) issue appeals, which focus on parties and politicians' policies. Previous studies on political advertisement show an increase in issue attacks over the last decades (Geer, 2006, for 1960 to 2004; Walter, 2012, for 1980 to 2006). These appeals concern hard skills (e.g., data, facts, and figures) rather than soft skills. Soft skills pertain to (b) personal or organizational appeals, which are statements on a party's or politician's qualification for the job, such as competence, experience, and leadership abilities. Personal or organizational appeals also focus on personal characteristics, such as a politician's history and character traits (e.g., integrity and charisma). Walter and Vliegenthart (2010) found that major Dutch newspapers' campaign coverage focuses on personality traits rather than on issues. The categorization also includes (c) appeals concerning the election campaign itself (soft skills). In addition, this study also considers (d) appeals related to Facebook, which include negative reactions to other users or to the discussion.

Targets of Negative User Expressions

Besides considering the content of negative expressions, the targets should also be considered (e.g., Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010; Hansen & Pedersen, 2008; Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010). Research investigating negative campaigning in party-based electoral systems, like Austria, has found that political parties aim at other parties as collective entities rather than at individual politicians (Schweitzer, 2010; Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010). Scholars have generally argued that the type of electoral system influences

election campaigns' general focus (e.g., Plasser & Plasser, 2002). Nevertheless, when investigating social media communication, research needs to generally deal with highly individual and personal communication processes. The question I raise here is: Who are users (more) likely to address in their negative expressions? When analyzing a party's Facebook page, whether users address the party and its politicians or their opponents is of specific interest.

Party Reactions to Negative User Expressions

Citizens are increasingly complaining "that politicians do not listen to them. The old media, and the old politics, are dominated by the images of the unacknowledged citizen and the unhearing representative. Politicians are under greater pressure than ever to be seen as listeners" (Coleman, 2005, p. 274) and to interact. Social media have been acclaimed for their social and technical affordances, which make interaction with one another and group actions a reality (e.g., Shirky, 2009). Hence, according to Coleman (2005, p. 273), politics has also reached "the age of interactive relationships." Scholars highlight that social media platforms enable online public discussions, bringing many citizens together to deliberate on and participate in political decision-making processes (e.g., Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Coleman & Moss, 2012; Dahlberg, 2001; Wright & Street, 2007). Social media are a bridge between citizens and their elected representatives, allowing them to talk with one another directly (Coleman, 2005; Dahlberg, 2001). In these interaction processes, political parties can "aggregate the interests, preferences and values of diverse, represented publics" (Coleman, 2005, p. 279). However, research has also shown that political parties and politicians usually avoid online interaction on Facebook and Twitter: Instead of responding to messages posted on their social media pages, they merely inform the community about their activities, stances, and ideas; attack opponents; and try to connect to the mass media (e.g., Rußmann, 2012; Stromer-Galley, 2000; Svensson & Larsson, 2016; Sweetser & Weaver Lariscy, 2008). In her study on newspaper comment threads, Canter (2013) points out that, because of organizational constraints, such as a lack of resources or lack of guidelines on the removal of user comments, newspaper journalists rarely comment on user comments. However, previous research has not specifically focused on negative online communication and the way parties and politicians deal with it. In their campaigns, parties and politicians aim to specifically create and maintain a very positive image to persuade voters to vote for them. Moreover, Austrian parties are aware that the mass media are keen to find a good story about their online presence (Klinger & Russmann, 2017) and that only bad news is good news. With this campaign goal in mind, I raise my last question: Do political parties react to negative user expressions on Facebook?

Research Setting: The 2013 Austrian National Election

The 2013 Austrian national election was the first in which all the political parties used social media as a campaign tool to reach out to the electorate and the mass media. Social media became very popular with Austrian Internet users, particularly the young, between 2006 and 2008. Nevertheless, compared with other countries with a similar media or political system or with comparable Internet access and use, Austrian parties started using social media to communicate with and connect to the electorate (and the media) very late. The Austrian regional election campaign in Vienna in the autumn of 2010 was the first election in which all the major and the minor political parties in the federal state government used Facebook as a campaign communication channel. Facebook was the only social media site that all the parties in the federal state government used before

the 2010 election (Rußmann, 2012). The Austrian parties had previously seen how the Obama campaign in 2008 had used social media with great success as an integral part of its strategy to raise money and to find volunteers (e.g., Costa, 2009). The parties had also noted how social media had been part of political parties' campaigns in neighboring countries, for example, in the 2009 German federal election campaign (see Schweitzer & Albrecht, 2011).

Before the 2013 national election, about 35% of the Austrian population and 51% of the Internet users used Facebook (the Internet penetration among those 14 and older was 80%; Statista, 2018). Of the various social media platforms, Facebook was (and still is) the most popular in Austria. However, a mass survey conducted during and after the 2013 Austrian national election campaign found that less than 10% of the respondents who used (at least one) social media platform (40% of the 1,504 respondents) were linked to a politician's or a party's social media page (Kritzinger et al., 2016). Of these people, (only) 20% had read opinions on a politician's or party's social media page during or after the election, with approximately 5% actually posting an opinion online.

Austria is a representative democracy. The country has a multiparty political system structure; its electoral system is based on the principle of proportional representation, and it has a consensus-based political culture. The National Council (Nationalrat) is composed of 183 members, who are directly elected by universal suffrage for a five-year term of office (since the 2008 election, previously for a four-year term). Since the 2008 national election, the voting age for all elections has been lowered to 16—the social-media-savvy cohort. Since the Second Republic (1945), coalition governments have always ruled Austria, with the exception of 1966 to 1983. Over the years, participation in elections decreased to an all-time low of 74.9% in the election held on September 29, 2013 (under study; however, in 2008, participation was 78.8%—see Bundesministerium für Inneres, 2013). This unwillingness to vote is also reflected in the lack of trust in politics: In the autumn of 2013, only 22% of Austrian voters trusted politics (OGM, 2013).

In the 2013 election, the governing parties lost seats: The Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ; 26.8%) and the Austrian's People Party (ÖVP; 24%) had the worst election result in their histories. Nonetheless, the SPÖ and the ÖVP retained an overall majority in the National Council, and the "grand" coalition was renewed. The right-wing populist party, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), successfully increased its strength (20.5%; +3% in 2008). In addition, The Greens–The Green Alternative gained a few seats (12.4%). Two new parties, the New Austria and Liberal Forum (NEOS; 5%) and Team Stronach for Austria (Team Stronach; 5.7%) reached the 5% threshold to enter parliament (see Bundesministerium für Inneres, 2013). The Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ) lost more than 7% in votes (received only 3.5% of votes) and was no longer represented in parliament.

Data and Method

Data

This study compares Austrian parties' Facebook pages during the 2013 national election campaign (election day: September 29). I conducted a content analysis of the parties' posts and comments and those of users on the parties' Facebook pages during the six weeks preceding election day (August 19 to September 28,

2013). All parties represented in the national parliament, the Austrian Nationalrat, after the election are included in the study: The Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ), the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), The Greens–The Green Alternative (The Greens), the New Austria and Liberal Forum (NEOS), and Team Stronach for Austria (Team Stronach). In addition, the Pirate Party is considered, as it is Internet oriented and focuses strongly on intraparty participation and democracy.

The data come from 134 posts by parties (of a total of 226 published posts during the period under investigation) and 2,632 comments by parties and users (of a total of 12,889 published comments during the period under investigation), which were downloaded with the software Facepager (Keyling & Jünger, 2013) and archived. All the posts by the ÖVP, the NEOS, and the Pirate Party during the period under investigation were coded. Owing to the great number of comments on the Facebook pages of the FPÖ, The Greens, and Team Stronach and to limited research resources, all of these could not be coded. Using the Facebook pages of the NEOS and the SPÖ—the two parties in the middle—as a benchmark, a random sample was drawn comprising about 500 posts and comments on their Facebook pages. If a post received fewer than 50 comments, all of them were coded. If a post received more than 50 comments—regardless of the number (e.g., 200 comments)—a random sample was again drawn comprising (about) 50 succeeding comments. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample.

Table 1. Sample.

		Total Number of Published Posts and Comments			Sample of Content Analysis			
Party	Community Size (User)	Posts by Parties	Comments by Parties	Comments by Users	Posts by Parties	Comments by Parties	Comments by Users	Total
SPÖ	36.031	21	4	607	21	4	475	500
ÖVP	16.579	13	2	73	13	2	73	88
FPÖ	221.000	75	27	7,633	22	1	613	636
The Greens	44.063	34	18	971	20	11	463	494
Team Stronach	48.537	50	2	3,084	25	1	471	497
NEOS	52.001	25	23	449	25	23	449	497
Pirates	7827	8	6	40	8	6	40	54
Total	-	226	82	12,889	134	48	2,584	2,766

Note. Published posts and comments are from the period under investigation, August 19 to September 28, 2013.

Coding Procedure and Measures

The unit of analysis is a single post or a single comment on a Facebook page. However, only textual content was coded; the analysis does not include pictures and videos (images). Two student coders and I assessed the content of each post or comment to determine whether the views expressed in it were negative, neutral, or positive. Following the categorizations of previous studies (for a detailed description, see Geer, 2006), as outlined above, the negative expressions include all forms of anger, dissatisfaction, disappointment, fear, disapproval, and criticism. These express a lack of trust and faith in politics or (critical) questioning directed at the political party, its politicians, and others. For example, "The Greens are the worst, they are only planning Green jobs, which only exist on paper according to the job center and we cannot live on them!" (ÖVP Facebook page, September 14, 2013). If a post or comment did not include negative expressions, it was coded as a neutral or positive expression. Positive expressions refer to talking about, positively highlighting, or applauding a party or a politician's success, qualifications, accomplishments, and so on (Djupe & Peterson, 2002; Lau & Pomper, 2001). For example, "To be honest, I don't care about the campaign. Only a party's record counts. I am confident that the Greens will be successful" (The Greens Facebook page, August 26, 2013).

Only explicit and visible manifestations were taken into account. The most dominant negative or positive expression of each unit of analysis was coded. Posts or comments could have included a mixture of positive, neutral, and negative views. However, the coding design does not account for multiple negative or multiple positive expressions. If a post or comment included more than one dominant negative or more than one dominant positive message, the first manifestation was coded. If posts or comments included a dominant negative and a dominant positive expression, this was coded as negative and positive.

To sum up, the research design to measure (negative) user expressions on Facebook is composed of the following key elements:

- The number of negative, positive, and neutral expressions to identify their general quantity (in discussions) on Facebook.

- The types of negative expressions. This category measures whether the content of the coded negative expression focuses on (a) issue appeals, (b) personal or organizational appeals, (c) appeals related to the election or campaign, or (d) appeals related to Facebook (e.g., other users).

- The target of negative expressions. The name of the primary person or organization (e.g., party, government) addressed is coded and thereafter categorized.

The coding was conducted from a user perspective; that is, the post or comment text was analyzed from a user's point of view. This approach allowed us to convey the Facebook user's position as closely as possible and enabled us to "understand the process of campaign communications and the messages which the public received" (Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammell, & Semetko, 1999, p. 43). Intercoder reliability was calculated using Holsti's reliability coefficient and based on 100 (randomly selected) posts and

comments. Overall, the intercoder percentage agreement of each of the items falls within the acceptable range of 0.830 to 1.0.

Results

The overarching research question sought to identify the extent to which user expressions on Austrian political parties' Facebook pages are positive, neutral, or negative. I assessed each user comment to determine its main tone. Table 2 reports the percentages of positive, neutral, negative, and user expressions on the seven analyzed party Facebook pages during the 2013 Austrian national election campaign. Of the 2,584 analyzed user comments, 1,046 contain at least one negative expression.

Table 2. User Expressions in Comments on Party Facebook Pages (N = 2,584).

Party	*n*	Negative Comments (%)	Negative and Positive Expressions (%)	Positive Comments (%)	Neutral Comments (%)
SPÖ	475	37	8	15	40
ÖVP	73	34	12	29	25
FPÖ	613	38	8	26	28
The Greens	463	34	5	10	51
Team Stronach	471	37	10	38	15
NEOS	449	21	4	23	52
Pirate Party	40	8	2	10	80

Note. In each comment, the most dominant expression was coded. The sample period was from August 19 to September 28, 2013.

On five of the seven analyzed Facebook pages, more than a third of the comments that users posted were negative expressions (see Table 2). For example, "But then almost all politicians have to leave, and most of them to prison, for what they allow themselves, but none of them gets convicted" (NEOS Facebook page, September 5, 2013), and "And it's financed through new debts, typical SPÖ, and some economical nitwits are still applauding the SPÖ—unbelievable!" (SPÖ Facebook page, September 17, 2013). In respect of all user comments with at least one dominant negative expression, columns 3 and 4 in Table 2 show that around 45% of all user comments had a negative tone. Only on the Facebook pages of the NEOS (21%), the newly founded liberal party, and of the Pirate Party (8%) were there fewer or hardly any negative comments.

The fifth and six columns in Table 2 present positive and neutral comments. It is interesting that on the Facebook pages of the SPÖ, The Greens, and the Pirate Party only about every tenth user comment

highlighted the party or the politicians' politics, success, qualifications, or accomplishments positively. These three parties are on the left of the ideological spectrum. On the other parties' Facebook pages, about one-fourth of the comments are positive, and the Team Stronach community posted even more positive messages (38%). This could be related to the Team Stronach polls being very positive at the beginning of the campaign, predicting that the newly founded party would gain between 8% and 10% of the votes (Marschall, 2013). This prediction changed toward the end of the campaign when the party's top candidate, Frank Stronach (an Austro-Canadian businessman), argued in favor of the death penalty and against the policy of neutrality (Austria is not a NATO member), two sacred cows.

Content of Negative User Expressions

In terms of the content of users' negative expressions (types of negativity), Table 3 clearly shows that the users primarily questioned the parties' and politicians' qualifications to govern (the job) and their leadership abilities (48%).

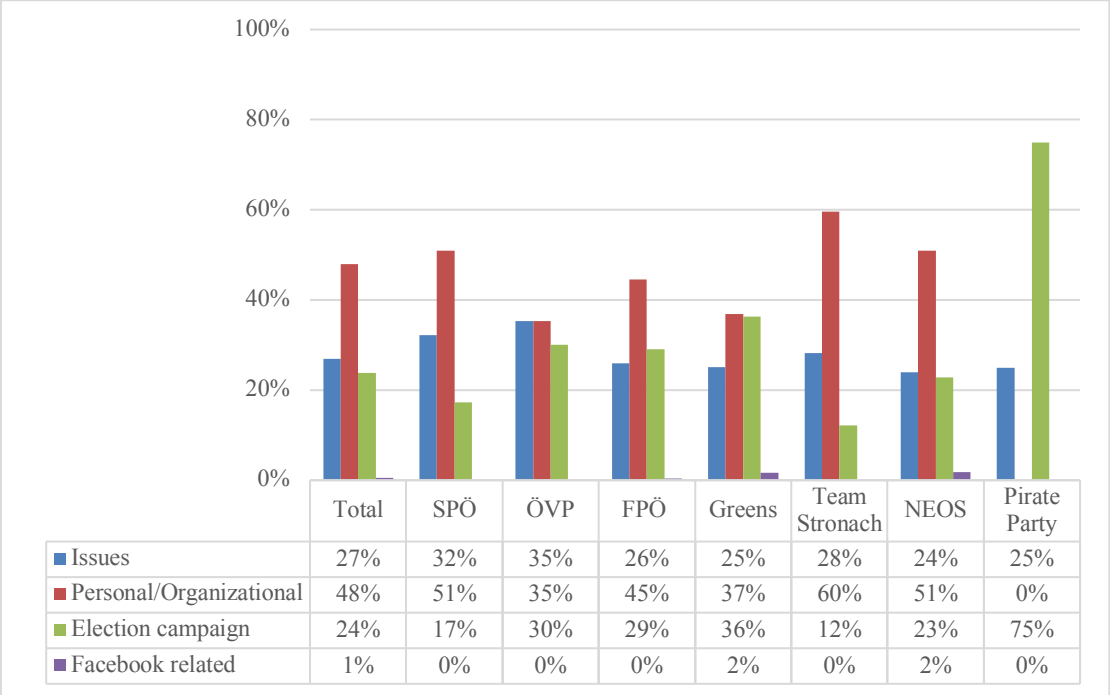
Table 3. Content of Users' Negative Expressions (N = 1,046).

Issue Appeals (%)	Personal/ Organizational Appeals (%)	Election Campaign (%)	Appeals Related to Facebook (%)
27	48	24	1

Note. Sample period was from August 19 to September 28, 2013.

The users criticized politicians' personalities in terms of their integrity and charisma. For example, Frank Stronach was often criticized for not being a real politician and just campaigning for business purposes. Issue-oriented appeals dominated in 27% of the analyzed negative comments. In more than half of the negative issue-oriented expressions (62%), users addressed topics concerning the social and health policies, labor policy, commercial policy, and infrastructure policy. How parties ran their campaigns and how they acted and behaved during the campaign was called into questioned in 24% of the negative user expressions. For example, users quite often discussed the excess of campaign posters on Austrian streets, the costs of these, and, partly, also what and who they depicted. Overall, users' negative expressions on Facebook focus on soft skills (72%) rather than on hard skills (27%). Other Facebook users were hardly ever criticized (1%).

The differences between the seven analyzed parties, as shown in Figure 1, are greater than their similarities.



	Total	SPÖ	ÖVP	FPÖ	Greens	Team Stronach	NEOS	Pirate Party
Issues	27%	32%	35%	26%	25%	28%	24%	25%
Personal/Organizational	48%	51%	35%	45%	37%	60%	51%	0%
Election campaign	24%	17%	30%	29%	36%	12%	23%	75%
Facebook related	1%	0%	0%	0%	2%	0%	2%	0%

Note. SPÖ *n* = 214, ÖVP *n* = 34, FPÖ *n* = 278, Greens *n* = 179, Team Stronach *n* = 223, NEOS *n* = 114, Pirate Party *n* = 4. Sample sizes for the ÖVP and Pirates are very small, but the full sample was considered. Sample period was from August 19 to September 28, 2013.

Figure 1. Content of users' negative expressions by party (N = 1046).

The Facebook communities are divided along ideological lines and size. For instance, negative user expressions on the Facebook pages of the two major parties, the SPÖ and the ÖVP, which formed a coalition government before and after the 2013 election, focused on different content. There are also no great similarities between the old (SPÖ, ÖVP, FPÖ, Greens) and the new parties (NEOS, Team Stronach, Pirates). However, if the Pirate Party is ignored, the party differences are greater in terms of personal or organizational appeals and appeals concerning the election campaign than in terms of issue appeals.

Targets of Negative User Expressions

Whom did users address in their negative expressions on Facebook? As shown in Table 4, they criticized and questioned mostly parties in general without mentioning a particular party.

Table 4. Targets of Negative User Expressions (N = 1,227 in 1,046 Negative Comments).

Organizational Targets	%	Individual Targets	%
Politics in general	5.9	-	-
Government	8.5	-	-
Parties in general	24.4	Politicians in general	9.9
SPÖ	10.8	Faymann (SPÖ; Chancellor)	2.3
ÖVP	1.7	Spindelegger (ÖVP)	1.9
FPÖ	2.0	HC Strache (FPÖ)	2.9
The Greens	11.8	Glawischnig (Greens)	2.2
NEOS	4.2	Strolz (NEOS)	.1
Team Stronach	1.1	Frank Stronach	10.2
Pirate Party	.1	-	-

Note. Sample period was from August 19 to September 28, 2013.

Parties were generally addressed in 25% of all the negative expressions. This was followed by The Greens (11.8%) and the chancellor's party, the SPÖ (10.8%). The Greens were criticized or questioned in 145 comments, most of which, 92 comments, appeared on their Facebook page, followed by 37 comments on the Facebook page of the rival community, the right-wing populist FPÖ. For example, "The Greens are not normal! The Greens are the worst—by the way, the Greens in Germany, too!" (FPÖ Facebook page, September 25, 2013). The SPÖ was negatively addressed in 132 comments, of which about half were found on the party's own page (64 comments). A close examination of these comments leads one to assume that those who posted comments with a negative tone on The Greens' and the SPÖ's Facebook pages are supporters of other parties. For example, "You [The Greens] are so going to mess up completely tomorrow :'D X Fpö ;)" (The Greens Facebook page, September 28, 2015).

In addition, negative user expressions quite often (9.9%) targeted politicians in general. Politicians were hardly ever targeted personally, with Frank Stronach being the exception. He was the focus of 10.2% of all negative user expressions targeting an individual. As outlined above, the Austro-Canadian businessman argued in favor of the death penalty and against the policy of neutrality. I found most of the 125 appeals against Frank Stronach on the FPÖ's Facebook page (56 appeals in total). Austria's neutrality is untouchable for the FPÖ and its supporters.

It is rather surprising that most of the negative appeals (22 of 28) targeted at the chancellor, Werner Faymann (SPÖ), came from his own community (SPÖ Facebook page). After the 2013 election, he became chancellor again, but resigned in May 2016.

The two parties that were not very active on Facebook during the campaign (full sample), namely the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the Pirate Party, were hardly ever negatively addressed.

Reactions of Parties

Ultimately, it is of great interest whether political parties reacted to the negative user expressions. The pattern of results reported in Table 5 clearly shows that the political parties did not engage in two-way communication. The seven analyzed parties posted 48 comments during the last six weeks of the election campaign. Of these comments, nine were negative messages posted by the parties. The NEOS criticized the state's funding of parties. As a new party, it did not receive any state funding to run its campaign. The ÖVP and The Greens attacked their opponents. Team Stronach criticized a voter who did not support the party but used its Facebook page to mobilize others against the party.

The third and fourth columns in Table 5 show that users posted 1,046 negative comments on parties' Facebook pages but received no response. A total of 14 reactions were identified, which only expressed information (facts and links); The Greens and the liberal NEOS posted most of these.

Table 5. Reactions of Parties on Their Facebook Pages.

Party	No. of Party Comments	No. of Negative Comments	No. of Negative User Expressions	No. of Party Reactions to Negative User Expressions
SPÖ	4	0	214	2
ÖVP	2	1	34	1
FPÖ	1	0	278	1
The Greens	11	3	179	4
NEOS	23	4	114	6
Team Stronach	1	1	223	0
Pirate Party	6	0	4	0
Total	48	9	1046	14

Note. Sample period was from August 19 to September 28, 2013.

Discussion

This study expands our knowledge of how social media is used (Xenos et al., 2015) by demonstrating that negative user expressions on official parties' Facebook pages are common. Of the 2,584 analyzed user comments on seven political parties' Facebook pages, 1,046 contained at least one negative expression. On the majority of the Facebook pages, more than a third of all user comments were only negative in tone. User comments including only positive expressions were less common.

These findings therefore do not confirm those in prior studies on U.S. settings, which report a more positive tone in users' expressions on political Facebook pages—especially among young potential voters (Groshek & Al-Rawi, 2013; Sweetser & Weaver Lariscy, 2008)—and certainly not the positive bias found on personal social media pages (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014; Ziegele & Reinecke, 2017). However, social media play a much larger role in U.S. campaigns' communication with voters than in Austria (Pew Research Center, 2016). In the United States, Facebook and other social media platforms serve as connection points with

voters, and candidates are quite active on them. In the 2013 Austrian election campaign, only two of the seven analyzed party Facebook pages—those of the NEOS and the Pirates—had far fewer negative comments and slightly more positive comments than negative comments, although the percentages only differ very slightly. Both these parties were new and therefore not represented in the parliament at the time, were Internet oriented, and were focused strongly on intraparty participation and democracy. They might not have disappointed voters yet. The NEOS posted 23 comments, almost as many as all the other parties together (48 party comments in total). The liberal NEOS actually succeeded in entering the Austrian Nationalrat in 2013. These differences call for further research on other contexts, such as electoral systems and between elections, as this study presents the results of only a single campaign and a single country. Consequently, the presented findings cannot be generalized.

In the context of negative comments, social media bots and their harmful effects are phenomena that could raise questions. The possibility of social bots influencing the analyzed Facebook communication cannot be excluded. However, during the coding of the sampled material, there were no signs of social bots. Moreover, qualitative interviews with party Web strategists and heads of communication after the 2017 Austrian national election revealed that Austrian political parties did not use social bots in the 2013 (or in the 2017) national election.

When users go negative on Facebook, they focus on soft skills (72%) rather than on hard skills (27%). In about half of all negative expressions, users criticize and question parties' and politicians' qualifications for the job, for example, their competence, experience, leadership abilities, their integrity, and politicians' charisma. It should be noted that in party-centered countries like Austria, politicians epitomize the party, which could stimulate users to go negative about them on the party's Facebook page. This finding shows the Austrian population's lack of trust in politicians and their parties (OGM, 2013). The focus on soft skills might also be because of the general nature of communication on Facebook, which is rather private and individual.

The findings concerning the targets of negative user expressions provide some support for the argument that the type of electoral system influences the general focus of communication about campaigns and politics (Plasser & Plasser, 2002; see also the studies on negative campaigning by Schweitzer, 2010, and Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010). Austrian Facebook users address the entity for which they vote, and they vote for a party, not for an individual candidate, when they enter a voting booth. With their 10.8% and 11.8% of the comments, the ruling Social Democrats and the incumbent Greens were the most targeted single parties. Parties in general (24.4%) was the single target that users addressed most often. This could have been because of voters' general dissatisfaction with the parties, as partly reflected by the lowest voter turnout on record.

Finally, the analysis of the negative communication clarified that political parties and politicians usually avoid online interaction. Only 14 party reactions were found to the 1,046 user comments that included at least one negative expression. Given that Austria is a country with a consensus-based political culture, one would expect the parties to make a greater effort to resolve the citizens' disenchantment with politics. Here, as outlined in the theoretical part of this study, this finding resembles previous research on online political communication in general. In addition, a recent study by Svensson, Russmann, and

Cezayirlioğlu (forthcoming) on Swedish political parties' use of Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter between elections also shows that parties seldom respond to follower reactions. Political actors' failure to recognize their online communities and to build relationships with them seems to be a phenomenon across countries and time. In one of the first studies to examine the interaction between citizens and political leaders, Stromer-Galley (2000) already pointed out that political leaders avoid human interaction "because of the potential for a loss of control and ambiguity of campaign communication" (p. 111). After the 2013 national election, interviews with the heads of communication and the Web party strategists of the Austrian parties revealed that the parties considered responding to individual messages a challenge, mostly because of their lack of resources. Moreover, just as Stromer-Galley (2000) highlighted in her study more than 15 years ago, "all Austrian parties mentioned the loss of control over political messages on social media as a primary challenge in their online campaigns" (Klinger & Russmann, 2017, p. 308). In "the age of interactive relationships" (Coleman, 2005, p. 273), Austrian parties are clearly lagging behind. However, because this study does not contain any interviews with users, conclusions cannot be drawn about whether it matters to them when campaigns do not engage online.

A noticeable difference that should also be further investigated is that the Facebook communities of the three parties on the left side of the ideological spectrum (SPÖ, Greens, Pirates) highlighted the party's and politicians' success, qualifications, and accomplishments less often than the Facebook pages of parties on the right sight of the ideological spectrum (ÖVP, FPÖ, Team Stronach). The tone in user expressions in communities on the left is more neutral.

Despite the limitations, I believe the presented study is an important step toward future research on online campaigning by addressing a specific issue related to the social media interactions of parties and users (and, hence, of their supporters and voters). Following Kushin and Kitchner (2009, para. 2 of 14), I conclude that continued investigation is needed into aspects of user expressions "to understand those factors that could improve online political discussion, ultimately serving democracy."

Conclusion

Facebook has provided political parties with a new way to present messages directly to the voters and to connect with them. But Facebook also has drawbacks that parties must consider before using it. In this community of strangers, people can easily express their negative thoughts and feelings about parties, politicians, and politics. In this sense, political Facebook communities act as a new neighborhood pub. Further, citizens' criticism is indisputably important in a democracy, but, as the examples provided in the results section show, we seldom find well-grounded or constructive criticism on parties' Facebook pages. Nevertheless, parties need to react to these user comments; they have to convince their potential voters that they had done a good job during the previous legislative period. Parties have to try to reduce Facebook users' dissatisfaction with them and, thus, maintain their relationship with these users, especially during campaigns when trying to convince potential voters to vote for them (again; cf. López-López et al., 2014). Nevertheless, the political parties did not react to voters' disenchantment with politics during the 2013 Austrian election campaign, even though all the parties mentioned Facebook as their top social media platform (Klinger & Russmann, 2017).

Moreover, despite the small percentage of the Austrian population that posts on parties' Facebook pages, the Facebook communication might influence far more people. First, people posting on parties' Facebook pages probably have a general interest in politics and therefore also talk about politics off-line, which would mean transmitting Facebook communication through their social interactions (cf. Bennett & Manheim, 2006). This is comparable to the "so-called 'water cooler effect'—by which mass mediated messages reach audience members who were not directly exposed to them through secondary interactions with friends and colleagues" (Bennett & Manheim, 2006, p. 214)—only here, it is not about mass mediated messages, but Facebook messages. Second, the mass media regularly report on parties' social media communication, of which Austrian parties are very aware (Klinger & Russmann, 2017). In the end, many more people than just the few community members gain an impression of what is happening, or not happening, online.

This was specifically the case in the early parliamentary election on October 15, 2017. This election was originally scheduled for 2018, but a snap election was called in May 2017. Multiple smear-campaign scandals about the use of Facebook (Otti, 2017) dominated the mass media coverage for more than two weeks during the campaign, which might have affected users' Facebook communication. Moreover, the Austrian population's steadily growing dissatisfaction with the political parties and politicians (with the exception of the FPÖ), which, for example, the Austrian presidential election in April 2016 showed, might have driven users (voters) to use the new neighborhood pub to an even greater extent to express their disenchantment and their alienation. Future research should investigate this supposition. Nevertheless, when campaigning on Facebook and social media in general, parties have to realize that the management of negative voter expressions has become increasingly important. Canter (2013) has already noted that an unmoderated system generates challenges such as "the posting of abusive comments, the posting of defamatory comments and brand damage caused by comments" (p. 612). Parties' social media presence should be used as an advertisement to set them in the best light. Today, parties are fated to deal with dissatisfied users who verbalize their negative opinions, thoughts, and views openly on social media, but interaction can be used as a strategy to retain dissatisfied voters (users).

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