



Emotional Reactions on Austrian parties' Facebook pages during the 2017 Austrian Parliamentary Election

A preliminary look at the different strategies and user reactions to candidate postings

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A preliminary look at the different strategies and user reactions to candidate postings

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Since February 24th 2016, Facebook users can not only mark posts with a "Like", but with a "reaction" (i.e. emoji-like icon) as well. By means of "reactions" it is possible to react to posts publicly, with something resembling emotions. Facebook offers the reactions "Love", "Haha", "Wow", "Sad" and "Angry".

One year after the introduction of this function, Josef Holnburger (@holnburger) was interested in how these reactions are used on the Facebook pages of political parties in the German Bundestag (see [here](#)). We liked his idea and decided to move it forward by investigating the use of such reactions on Austrian lead candidates' facebook pages during the early phase of electoral campaigning, in the Austrian parliamentary elections of 2017 (#nrw17). Are some

candidates inciting more negative emotions in users than others? Which party's followers tend to express their amusement most often? And which party triggers the most "Love"-reactions on Facebook?



Figure 1: Facebook reactions

Why should we care about how users react on political Facebook pages?

Well, parties' social media communication, as well as electoral campaigns, may be tai-

lored to trigger specific emotions in their supporters. Research shows that emotional cues may mobilize voters. For instance, certain emotions such as anger or anxiety, would lead individuals to pay more attention to campaign communication (Neuman, Marcus, & MacKuen, 2013), mobilize them to vote (Valentino, Brader, Groenendyk, Gregorowicz, & Hutchings, 2011), and also lead them to better remember and seek out information (Valentino, Hutchings, Banks, & Davis, 2008). Campaign ads and communication in particular, are an effective tool for motivating and persuading voters, by appealing to specific emotions such as anger or anxiety (Brader, 2005). In contrast, positive emotions such as enthusiasm, which may be indicated by “Love”, “Haha” or “Wow” reactions on Facebook, invite people to consider new ideas more favorably (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). Research also shows that the use of humor, especially in politically related jokes, enables exposure to diverse and opposing political viewpoints (Althaus, 2012).

New forms of communication have altered the way citizens and political actors interact during elections, as each candidate and party is striving to get their messages across to voters. In pursuit of this endeavor, parties and candidates employ various strategies to reach out to their potential supporters. Parties with previous government experience, and larger parties, tend to emphasize their achievements and potentials Lau and Rovner (2009) – which may be linked to positive emotions – whereas oppositional parties tend to rely on attacking others Fridkin and Kenney (2004), and are therefore more likely to elicit negative emotions.

The Facebook pages of the candidates

In order to follow up on this idea, we downloaded all contributions (posts and shares) from the Austrian parties’ leading candidates’ Facebook pages, as well as related statistics on likes and reactions dating back to the day snap elections were called. The Social Democrats’ *Christian Kern* (SPÖ), the People’s Party’s *Sebastian Kurz* (ÖVP), the far-right’s *Heinz-Christian Strache* (FPÖ), the Greens’ *Ulrike Lunacek* (Greens), the Liberals’ *Matthias Strolz* (NEOS) as well as the populist-left candidate *Peter Pilz* (Liste Pilz) brought it to a total of 1,920 contributions and 302,263 reactions in the period from May 12th to September 25th, 2017.

Of all the leading candidates’ accounts, far-right leader Strache’s account was the most active, with 468 contributions during the investigation period. Pilz has been the least active leading candidate, with only 62 contributions. His party was only founded at the end of July, 2017.

Being the candidate with the highest number of Facebook fans (approx. 737,000) Strache has gotten by far the most reactions (approx. 164.000) to his contributions. Among all reactions to all candidates’ posts, “Anger” is the reaction that is used most commonly, while the reaction “Wow” is not used very often.



Figure 2: Facebook reaction distribution over candidates

Kern and Kurz: An Unequal Strategy



Let us first compare the two government parties' candidates Kern (SPÖ) and Kurz (ÖVP). More than half, and with that, the biggest share of user reactions to Kern's posts, are reactions of "Love" (54 percent). Another 25 percent of reactions are with an expression of laughter ("Haha"). Sebastian Kurz, however, tends to get a lower share of "Love" reactions to his posts (40 percent). Instead, his share of "Anger" reactions is twice as large as that of his former coalition-partner, and second highest to all candidates under investigation. But let us inspect their posts a little more closely. . .

Kern's posting with the most "Love" reactions (Posting #1) is a short, personalized and privatized campaign spot. In this post, he talks about growing up in a working-class family but making it to where he is now. He underscores his message of optimism and emphasizes that it is important to look out for each other by using the hashtag "together" (#miteinander).

The posting that got most "Haha" reactions (Posting #2) was an Austrian comedian's video that Kern shared and commented with a pun. In this video, the comedian and Kern meet (supposedly) by chance on the street and joke about their clothing styles.



Posting #1



Posting #2



Posting #3

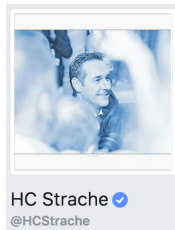
Kurz's posting with most "Love" reactions (Posting #3) was published on the very first day of our period of analysis, where his press-conference has been streamed live on his Facebook page. There, he declared that he will take over as leader of the People's Party and demanded snap-elections, thus starting the election campaign cycle.

The posting that got most "Anger" reactions (Posting #4) was a posting that demanded stronger punishment for sex-offenders. As such, this posting clearly promotes a policy of law and order, however, at the same time, triggers reactions of "Anger" and "Sad"(ness) towards the topic at hand.



Posting #4

Strache: Mobilizing through Anger?



The most obvious difference between Facebook reactions to the leader of the strongest opposition party's (FPÖ) postings to those of other candidates, is that the share of "Love" reactions is strikingly small, while "Anger" reactions are by far the most common.

Of course, criticizing the government is an important part of the opposition's task. But let us inspect more closely, which of Strache's posts got the most "Anger" reaction. . .

Posting #5 links to an article that discusses family reunifications of Syrian refugees in Germany, on the website of the Austrian tabloid Krone. Strache warns in his posting that one million migrants are on their way to Germany and Austria, and blames the Grand Coalition (SPÖ-ÖVP) for this development.

His contribution with the second most "Anger" reactions (Posting #6) is actually a picture of Kurz, including the quote, "Islam is of course part of Austria". Strache emphasizes that he disagrees with Kurz, and warns of the "islamisation" of Austria.

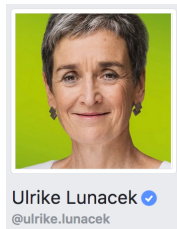


Posting #5

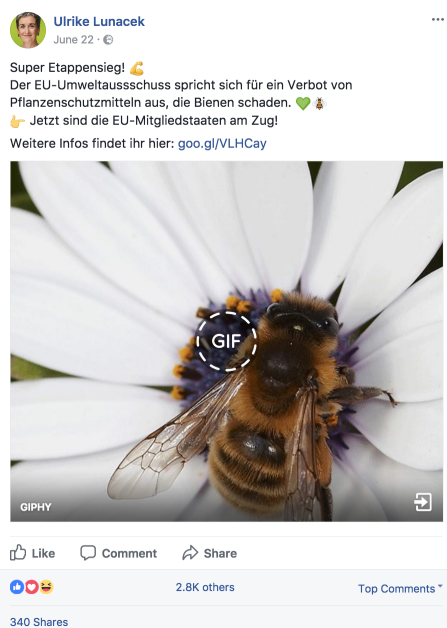


Posting #6

Lunacek: When Environmental Politics Gives You Mixed Feelings



The reactions to postings by the Greens' candidate differ insofar from other candidates, in that Lunacek has the highest share of "Love" reactions (58 percent). While the shares of most other types of reactions are inconspicuous in comparison, the share in "Sad" reactions is second highest to all other candidates. Again, a closer inspection is needed...



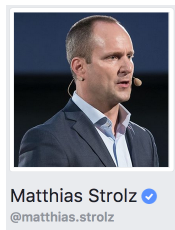
Posting #7

The posting with most "Love" and most "Sad" reactions (Posting #7 and Posting #8, respectively) are both discussing environmental politics, the Greens' innermost policy field. On the one hand, Ulrike Lunacek is celebrating that an EU-Committee has decided on a ban of pesticides that are lethal to bees. On the other, she shared a video from a public broadcaster, warning of world-wide pollution from (micro-)plastic. Although the Greens' candidate has this overwhelming share in "Love" reactions, she also triggers negative emotions in supporters. Either way, she does so while always staying on message and focusing on an issue the party obviously has ownership on.



Posting #8

Strolz: The Entertainer



NEOS' Strolz is not the one with the highest shares in “Love”, “Sad” or “Angry” reactions, he is one who clearly triggers laughter with his posts. The candidate is known for being somewhat unconventional in his presentation style, and tends to use very colorful metaphors when criticizing opponents. Still, the difficulty with the “Haha” reaction is that it can stand for users laughing at the candidate as well as laughing *with* him. A closer look at the posting with most “Haha” reactions (Posting #9) shows that this is clearly a case of the audience laughing with the candidate. Strolz posted a news article showing an unflattering photograph of himself, commenting that journalists always present the best pictures of him, adding a winking-smiley.



Posting #9

Pilz: Heartbroken



Finally, Pilz is the newest leading candidate in our analysis. Before founding his new party Liste Pilz, he was a founding member of the Greens. Of all reactions to his posts, one third have each been “Love” and “Sad”, respectively. As it turns out, this single posting got both the most “Love” and the most “Sad” reactions at the same time. In this posting, Pilz declares that he is leaving the Greens, and thanks his voters and Facebook fans that have supported him over the past 30 years.



Posting #10

SUMMARY

We analyzed user reactions to lead candidates' posts during the first weeks of the Austrian parliamentary election campaign of 2017. Such reactions, so we believe, are triggered by emotional cues candidates may deliberately use in their campaign communication. It turns out that user reactions clearly differ across candidates.

Comparing reactions to posts from Kern and Kurz shows that although both are candidates from incumbent government parties, their campaigns on social media are clearly aiming at different emotional reactions. Kern is running a positive and optimistic campaign, with voters mostly reacting with warmth ("Love") and laughter ("Haha"). Generally, this is a strategy that you would expect from an incumbent. Kurz triggered a significant amount of "Love" reactions as well. However, he also focuses on more negative issues (e.g., crime), leading to higher shares in "Sad" and "Anger" reactions. Here the campaign strategy differs from that of Kern. Research has shown that emotions of anxiety and anger have a greater tendency to mobilize voters; which might be the main goal here, as he is Kern's main challenger.

Strache, takes his job as opposition leader seriously, in that he is mostly inciting reactions of "Anger". This anger is triggered through criticism of the governing coalition on the issue of immigration. Positive emotional reactions like "Love" have no place in this candidate's social media campaign.

The Greens candidate, Lunacek, stayed most on message, triggering both "Love" and "Sad" reactions by discussing achievements and problems concerning environ-

mental developments. Although being the second largest opposition party, she uses social media less as a conduit to criticize the incumbent coalition. Though Pilz is a founding member of the Greens, and had just left the party, his postings receive very different reactions. His decision to leave the Greens seems to, particularly, be driving the large share of "Sad" reactions.

Finally, the high share of "Haha" reactions to Strolz's (NEOS) postings can be explained by this candidate's humorous attitude. He definitely is a candidate who doesn't shy away from laughing at himself.

This analysis has shown us that the use of Facebook reactions can have different emotional triggers, which can be part of different campaign strategies. Some candidates aim at mobilization through optimism, others focus on anger and anxiety. Some direct negative emotions towards other candidates or parties, while others focus on policy. This is only to mention a few of the differences this preliminary analysis has shown.

However, this is just scratching the surface of the use of Facebook reactions in political communication on social media. Sometimes "Haha", "Sad" or "Anger" reactions may be used against the communicators (politicians) themselves. Other times, candidates will ask users to take part in polls using different types of reactions as their way of answering. In order to develop a better understanding of the many different reasons users may use specific reactions much more detailed and systematic analyses are needed.

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