

STUDY

POV: Election Campaign

An analysis of short political videos on TikTok and Instagram during the 2025 German federal election campaign

Pablo Jost, Paulina Fröhlich and Melanie Weiser | August 2025

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Executive Summary

During the 2025 German federal election campaign, short videos on social media platforms played a tremendously important role in reaching young voters. Instagram and TikTok were particularly central to the communication campaigns. This is because young people are increasingly taking to the short videos posted on these two platforms to form their political opinions. However, while political parties and politicians in Germany are increasingly facing the challenges of election campaigns on social media like never before, there has been a lack of comprehensive analyses of political content and communication methods on the two platforms. Our study aims to change this and examines which communication styles, forms of address, topics and tones of voice took centre stage on social media during the hot phase of the 2025 German federal election campaign, and which party characteristics were observed in this context. A total of 18,270 short videos (13,669 Instagram Reels and 4,601 TikToks) from 668 Instagram and 252 TikTok accounts that were posted between 1 January and 23 February 2025 by parties and politicians represented in the 20th German Bundestag were analysed. The following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Style and address

- *Platform-specific affordances*¹: Parties and politicians used typical features, such as selfie mode (most frequently the case with the AfD) and infographics (especially the case with The Left Party). The use of affordances was relatively restrained overall, however.
- *Youth reference and direct address*: Over half of the posts (53 %) made a reference to young people and future generations; 76 % of the videos used age-independent direct forms of address (formal/informal “you”). The Greens and The Left Party addressed youth issues most frequently; the AfD the least.

- *Mobilisation through calls to action*: Calls to vote dominated the types of political mobilisation found in short videos on social media. Around 50 % of all posts called for voter participation. Calls to action to digitally mobilise, such as sharing or liking content, were also used comparatively frequently.

2. Topics & tone of voice

- *Thematic focus*: The election itself was by far the most common topic addressed in all short videos (41 %). This was followed by the topics of migration (7 %) and the economy (6 %) with no specific reference to the election.
- *Tone of voice*: Overall, acclaims relating to the party's own policies predominated (64 % of posts). However, content on TikTok was more confrontational than that on Instagram: attacks on political opponents were almost 12 percentage points more common there. Moderate-democratic parties (CDU/CSU, SPD, The Greens, FDP, The Left Party) focused more on positive content, while the AfD and BSW specifically focused on polarisation and attacks. After the motion for a resolution on migration policy passed, the tone adopted by all parties briefly became harsher, but returned to more positive, self-focused communication towards the end of the election campaign.

Our analysis demonstrates that parties and politicians used Instagram and TikTok during the 2025 German federal election campaign to systematically address and mobilise young target audiences. Despite strong trends in terms of the number and design of short videos – for example in the shape of a direct address and mobilising formats – there is still plenty of room for improvement when it comes to adapting to platform-specific communication styles in future election campaigns. Migration once again proved to be a

central and polarising topic, which contributed to an intensification of the communication style – including among moderate-democratic actors. Overall, the study findings suggest that a more professional, creative and constructive use of social media will be crucial for the future success of political communication with young target audiences.

I. Introduction

Gysi dances, #KanzlerEra, Merz Vibes – political content was popular on social media during the 2025 German federal election campaign. This is because two-thirds of people in Germany regularly use social media platforms, and the trend is rising (Müller, 2024). At over an hour a day, those under 30 years of age spend the most time in their feed compared to other generations (Müller, 2024). They also count social media among their most important information channels for news and politics (Schnetzer et al., 2024). In contrast to older generations, young people are more likely to access political content prepared for social media than websites or print offerings from newspapers or political parties. The active and conscious search for information is becoming an increasingly rare occurrence among younger generations (Behre et al., 2024). Consumed content is curated by the algorithms of social media platforms (European Parliament, 2023). At the same time, short videos in particular dominate social media consumption: in this age group; scrolling through clips has overtaken reading static posts in the feed and more active behaviour, such as liking, posting and sharing content (Müller, 2024).

However, while more than 70 % of young people in Germany consider social media to be a *very important* place for forming political opinions in their age group, around the same number rates the communicative skills of German politicians and parties on the platforms as *poor* or *very poor* (Institut für Generationenforschung, 2025). They also want better political address – both online and offline (Okroi & Wendt, 2024) – because young people feel that their political voices are neither heard nor relevant (Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2025). Although their trust in democratic actors and institutions is declining (Vodafone Foundation, 2024; TUI Stiftung, 2024; Institut für Generationenforschung, 2024; Schörghuber Group, 2025), the young generation is neverthe-

less increasingly interested in politics, contrary to prevailing public opinion (Behre et al., 2024; Press and Information Office of the Federal Government, 2025).

Using social media platforms, politicians strive to overcome the gap between themselves and the younger generation (Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2024; Cremers et al., 2022). The short videos offer political actors the opportunity to reach young users through their content at a low threshold, thus enabling them to convey their messages directly to these target audiences without these being classified as journalistic content (Cartes-Barroso et al., 2025). Given the increased relevance of Instagram and TikTok, the two largest visual platforms in Germany (Behre et al., 2024), it is therefore not surprising that campaign teams from all parties in the 2025 German federal election campaign increasingly relied on short videos to address young voters (Wetzler & Kiess, 2025). Thus, the parties continued the trend of increasingly shifting election campaigns to social media, one that was first observed in the 2024 European election campaign (Bösch, 2024).

However, populist and populist radical/extremist parties² seem to hold a communications strategy advantage over the social media campaigns of moderate-democratic parties³ in this field. In both the European elections and the state elections in the Eastern German federal states in 2024, the AfD achieved a high level of reach with its social media posts (Fielitz et al., 2024). Initial comparative analyses of the reach of the parties in the 2025 digital federal election campaign question the narrative of the AfD's unchallenged dominance in social media (Fehrensens & Berlin, 2025; Böhmer et al., 2025; Riedl et al., 2025; Išlerka, 2025). They examine parties across the entire party spectrum, but focus primarily on variables, such as reach and interaction rates of political

accounts, and, in the case of TikTok, occasionally on the categories of topics and tone of voice. Although the role of formats, such as Instagram Reels and TikToks, in digital election campaigns is already widely discussed, there has thus far been a lack of holistic analyses examining the *content* of the videos. This is precisely where our analysis comes in and explores the question of which communication methods and topics were used by politicians and parties across the entire

political spectrum in the 2025 social media election campaign and what role the format-specific affordances, i. e. the possibilities for action of the individual video platforms, played.

II. Empirical analysis

The findings of this brief study are based on the analysis of 18,270 videos, 13,669 Instagram Reels and 4,601 TikTok clips that were posted between 1 January and 23 February 2025 on the official 668 Instagram and 252 TikTok accounts of the German political parties and their politicians (including their top candidates). The accounts selected included all actors who were represented in the 20th German Bundestag and the then governing Federal Government, including representatives of the CDU/CSU, SPD, The Greens, the FDP, The Left Party, the AfD and BSW.⁴ Gemini 1.5 Pro, the large language model (LLM), which lends itself well to processing video formats, was employed to handle the large volume of videos and the complexity of the data, which includes both visual elements and text elements, such as subtitles and captions. To test the reliability of the automated data generation, the AI classifications were compared with data sets that had been manually coded by trained human coders. The results indicate a mostly satisfactory quality of the classification (F-score > .65), although the quality was sometimes lower in the case of rare and more complex categories. Further information on the methodology can be found at the end of this publication.

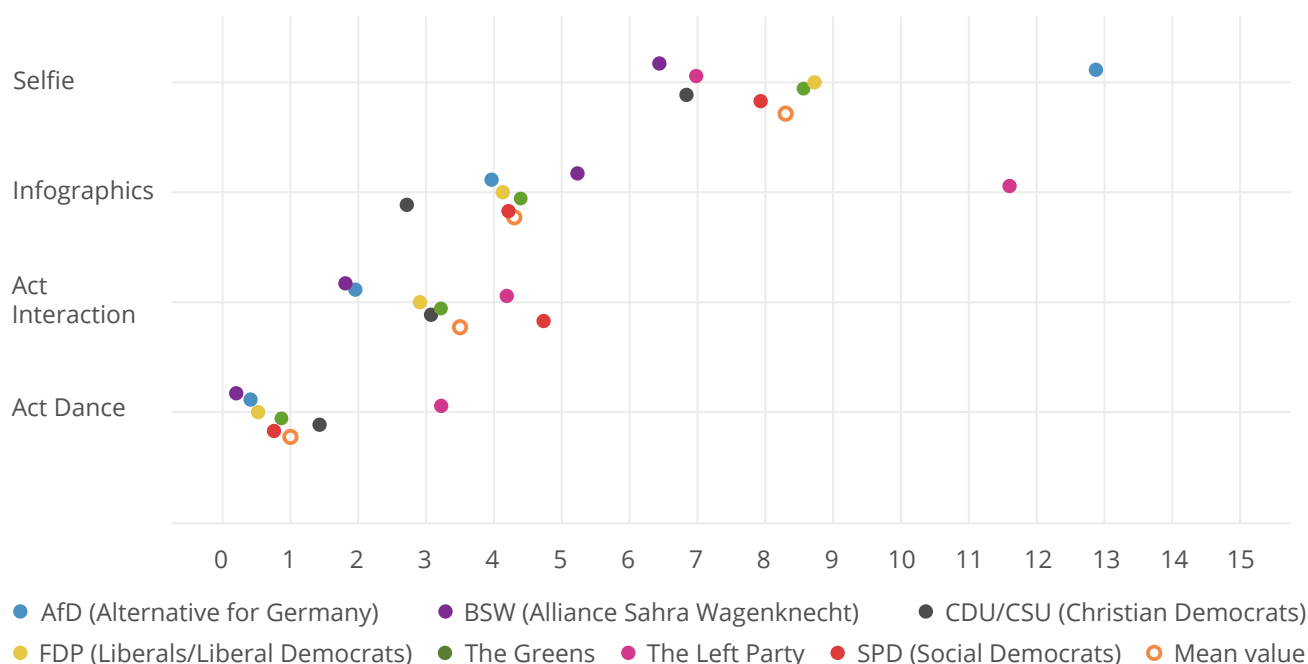
1. Style & address

Affordances

The communication styles applied by politicians and political parties on TikTok and Instagram reflect the specific opportunities for action – so-called affordances – i. e. the technically and creatively predetermined possibilities that platforms provide their users with for interaction and content creation (Evans et al., 2017). Youth studies show that it is precisely these affordances that make it easier for young users to express political positions in a low-threshold and creative way (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019).

The examination of political videos in the context of the German federal elections revealed that certain platform-specific affordances were used significantly more frequently than others. The most widespread was selfie mode, which was used in an average of around 8 % of all analysed posts. The actors also integrated infographics and interactive actions, such as pointing to superimposed content, into their videos. There were some significant differences between the parties in both affordances: selfie mode was used more frequently than on average by the AfD

Fig.1: Affordances by Party (Share in %)



in particular (13 %), while it only occurred in 6 % to 9 % of videos by all other parties. Infographics were primarily employed by The Left Party (12 %), while other parties used them much less frequently. Interactive actions were very rarely used across all parties. The SPD (5 %) and The Left Party (4 %) ranked at the top of the list with single-digit usage rates, while the AfD and BSW used this option the least. Dance challenges were used far less frequently. With the exception of The Left Party (3 %), politicians from the respective parties danced in barely more than one per cent of the videos.⁵

A comparative analysis of the accounts belonging to parties, top candidates and ordinary members of the Bundestag also revealed differences. In particular, the videos involving ordinary members of the Bundestag tended to be recorded in the comparatively simple and spontaneous selfie mode. While the AfD's members of the Bundestag often recorded their videos in selfie mode (15 %), the high-reach and professionally managed accounts of the party's top candidates, Weidel and Chrupalla (3 % each), hardly ever used this mode. Concerning the FDP, on the other hand, it was its

top candidate, Lindner (15 %), who recorded a not inconsiderable proportion of his videos in selfie mode. In general, leading politicians tended to use fewer infographics and interacted less with video elements, thus indicating a lesser degree of adaptation to the platform-specific affordances.

Youth reference

Young people are the main target audience for political address on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram (Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2024; Meyer et al., 2024; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023). Accordingly, we measured whether videos contained a direct verbal address to young recipients ("dear young people") and whether an explicit reference was made to young people or future generations. At the same time, linguistic references were taken into account that focused either on currently young people or on future generations, for example by raising the issue of their prospects, concerns or future opportunities („Securing the livelihoods of future generations"); because when messages address young people directly or focus on their future prospects, the perceived relevance and connectivity increases significantly (Syropoulos et al., 2023; Timmons et al., 2024).

During the election campaign phase, more than one in two videos (53 %) posted on the political actors' accounts directly or indirectly referred to young people, which also included a reference to future generations. Federal politicians thus appeared to be responding to the aforementioned relevance of social media as a means of young people forming their political opinion. At the same time, however, noticeable differences were detected between the various parties represented in the 20th German Bundestag in terms of how often youth played a role in their short videos. The Greens and The Left Party, for example, referred to young people much more frequently (63 % and 64 % respectively) than the CDU/CSU (46 %). Short videos from the AfD contained by far the fewest youth references (40 %), which seems counterintuitive given its great popularity among young people and first-time voters in particular (Drees, 2025). Yet, during the 2024 European elections, the party leadership had already been focusing its social media strategy on broader target audiences and less on youth-specific election promises and raising the issue of young social movements (Cartes-Barroso, 2025).

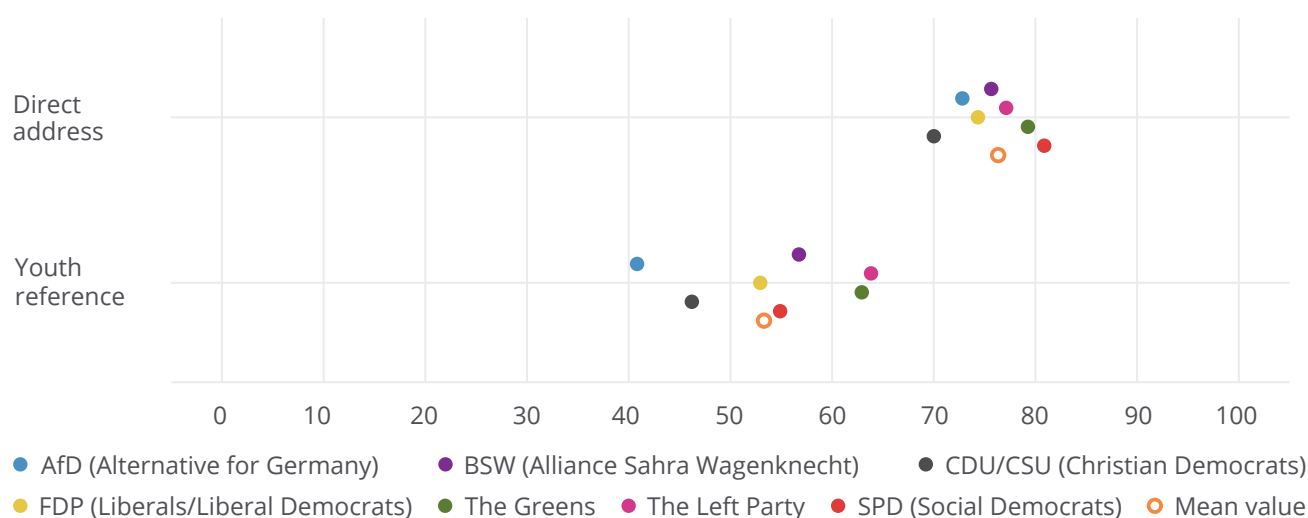
Direct address

Addressing users directly on social platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram, is a key means of establishing closeness, authenticity and a willingness to interact. By directly addressing recipients, political actors open up a personal relationship level that transcends traditional forms of mass communication (Jost, 2023). Direct address signals openness and unprompted communication and is perceived by users as a sign of trustworthiness and credibility. Particularly on social media, which are designed for personal connections and informal exchange structures, direct address is an essential prerequisite for effective political communication (Lindholm et al., 2021; Luebke, 2021).



In around three-quarters of all short videos posted by political parties and their politicians (76 %), viewers of all ages were addressed directly and personally, for example with informal "you", or "all of us". The CDU/CSU accounts (70 %) and those of the AfD (73 %) used direct address the least frequently, whereas the SPD accounts (81 %), followed by The Greens, made more frequent attempts to address the audience directly. In some cases, direct address was combined with a reference to young people or the future. Heidi Reichinnek (The Left Party) provided a succinct example of direct and colloquially authentic address during the election campaign with her exclamation "*Boah, ihr Mäuse*" ("Oof, you little sweethearts") in a short video in which she responded to direct messages from frustrated 17-year-olds who were not allowed to go to the polls for the first time due to the early German federal election.

Fig. 2: Youth Address and Youth Reference by Party (Share in %)



Call to Action

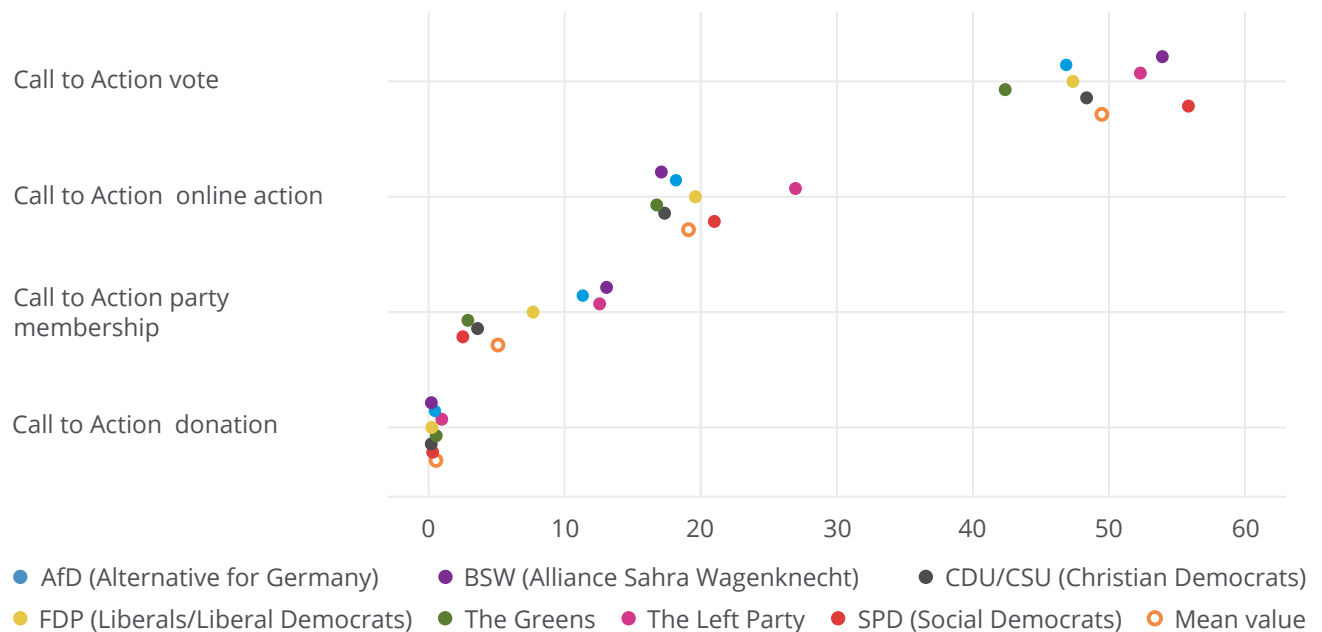
In order to investigate whether and how political actors used the attention generated through explicit or target audience-specific addresses to call for further interaction and political participation, we analysed calls to action in addition to the platform-specific interaction options. Calls to action are part of the conventional repertoire of political mobilisation and address actions in both analogue (e.g. calls to vote, joining a party) and digital spaces (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). Online, these actions in particular (clicking, swiping, liking, commenting or sharing content) can generate algorithmic attention for the accounts (Larsson et al., 2024).

The results of our study show that mobilisation through calls to action was a key component of political communication on TikTok and Instagram. Overall, a clear majority of posts contained explicit rallying cries for further action. The most frequent of these was the call to vote: around 50 % of all posts contained a call for voter participation or to support certain parties and candidates. Hardly any platform differences were determined here. Slight differences between the parties were detected, however: the SPD, the BSW and The Left Party made particularly frequent calls (more than half respectively) to people to get out and vote, while The Greens (42 %) adopted a somewhat

more reserved approach. Online calls to action, such as sharing content or following channels, were the second most common form of call to action. They were found in just under a fifth of the videos, with Instagram (20 %) tending to be more common than TikTok (16 %).⁶ Compared to the 2021 German federal election campaign, in which parties hardly ever used calls for online action on Instagram (Wurst et al., 2023), this time parties seemed to have recognised the participatory potential of social media. The Left Party in particular used this form of mobilisation: in more than a quarter of posts, their accounts called for viewers to interact with posts, share them or engage in other online activities. The other parties used this form of call to action far less intensively, in around 17 to 20 per cent of their videos.

Calls to join a party were only found in around one in 20 posts across all parties. However, a clear difference emerged between the moderate-democratic parties, with the exception of The Left Party as well as the AfD and the BSW. While the CDU/CSU, SPD and The Greens only used this type of call to action in two to three per cent of all videos, the proportion was significantly higher among the other parties, including The Left Party (11 % to 13 %). The FDP ranked somewhere in between, with just under 7 % of videos containing

Fig. 3: Call to Action – Types (Share in %)



calls to join the party. Lastly, calls for donations played a marginal role, accounting for less than one per cent of posts.

Some actors combined direct address, a focus on young people and/or the future with calls to

mobilise. Robert Habeck (The Greens), for example, explicitly addressed young people in an Instagram video and called on them to write their concerns directly in the comments section as a means of giving them “more space and a voice” in the election campaign.



2. Topics & tone of voice

In addition to the platform-specific affordances and mobilisation strategies, we examined which issues the parties and candidates communicated about in their videos and to what extent they used the platforms either to attack their political opponents or to positively highlight their own achievements or political concepts and positions.

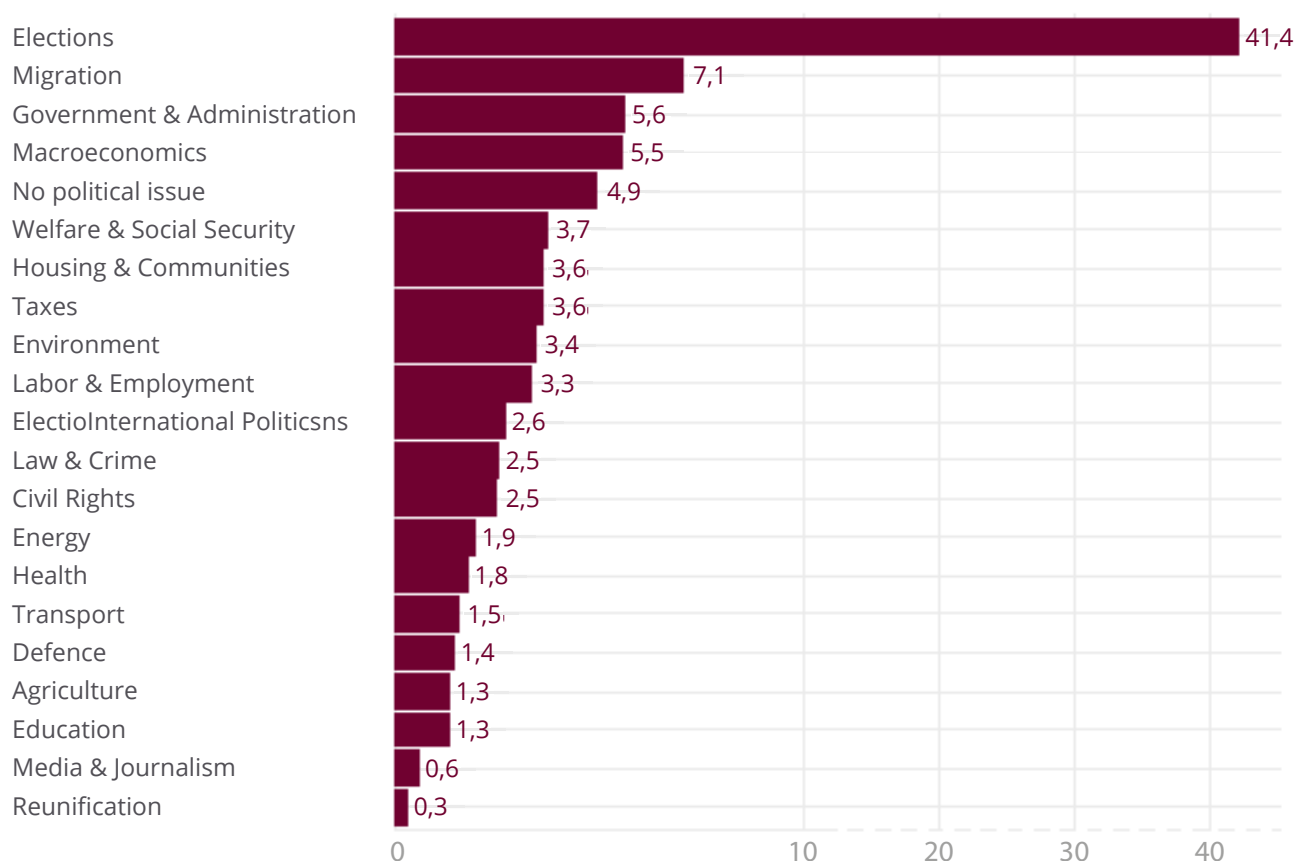
To this end, we first analysed which policy fields were raised by the parties and candidates in the videos on TikTok and Instagram.⁷ Unsurprisingly, elections were by far the most frequently discussed topic in the videos we tracked: around 41 % of all posts primarily dealt with aspects relating to the election and the election campaign and included, for example, voter participation, calls to vote or campaign dates.

Migration ranked as the second-most popular issue, which was addressed in around 7 % of the posts. Migration-related topics were frequently discussed in the context of integration issues, border control and deportations. The topics of government action⁸ and the economy⁹ played a similarly important role, each accounting for around 6 % of all posts. Social security¹⁰, housing and community¹¹ as well as taxes and duties¹² were topics that each accounted for around 4 % of all posts. Other issues played a subordinate role compared to the dominant policy fields. Individual posts dealt with civil rights, defence and security, agriculture, education, labour policy, health, environmental protection, energy policy, technology and digitalisation, among others. Around one in 20 posts contained content that could not be assigned to a clear-cut political issue. This category included personal statements, humorous content or general lifestyle topics with no clear reference to the core political issues.



However, the example of Friedrich Merz's (CDU) visit to a US fast food chain during the election campaign shows that even supposedly non-political posts can provide a gateway for political debates. In addition to demonstrating closeness to the people, the restaurant visit was also associated in the German press with the CDU/CSU's political desire for better transatlantic relations (DIE ZEIT, 2025).

Fig. 4: Share of videos (in %)



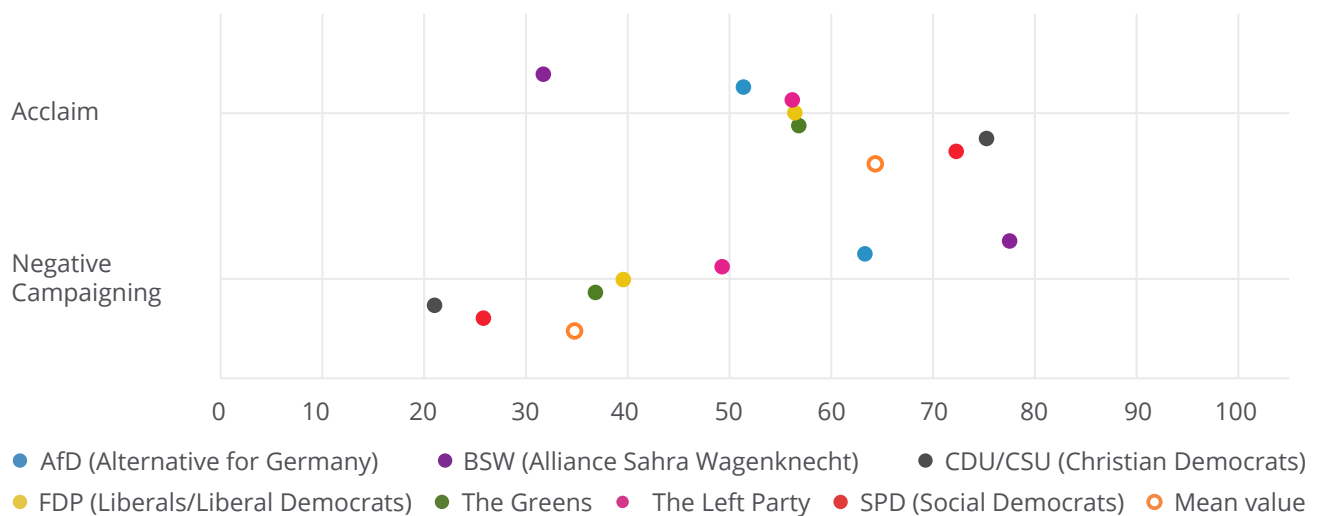
Attacks & acclaims

In research, attacks on political opponents are referred to as negative campaigning (Haselmayer, 2019). Such attacks range from topic-related criticism and personal accusations to excessive messages that competitors associate with emotions, such as fear or anger. This contrasts with the acclaims put forward by parties or candidates. Here, their own expertise, values and successes are accentuated in order to create trust and prevent counterattacks (Haselmayer, 2019). Achieving a healthy balance between acclaims and justified criticism is considered crucial in order to secure credibility and mobilise potential supporters at the same time (Fridkin & Kenney, 2004; Polborn & Yi, 2006).

Our analysis shows that political actors predominantly focused on acclaims in their posts on TikTok and Instagram. Some 64% of all posts em-

phasised their own expertise, values or successes, while attacks on political opponents were found in around 32% of all posts. Overall, the parties and candidates thus favoured communication strategies that recognised their own performance. However, a comparison of the platforms reveals differences in the communication style used: on Instagram, acclaims dominated more heavily (67%), with attacks on political opponents occurring in only around 32% of all posts. On TikTok, on the other hand, the proportion of acclaims was lower (55% compared to 43%). Overall, communication on TikTok was therefore more confrontational and aggressive than on Instagram. Moreover, a combination of attacks on political opponents and acclaims was used in 12% of all videos. By the same token, an equal number of videos contained either no attacks or no references to the individual's or party's own track record.

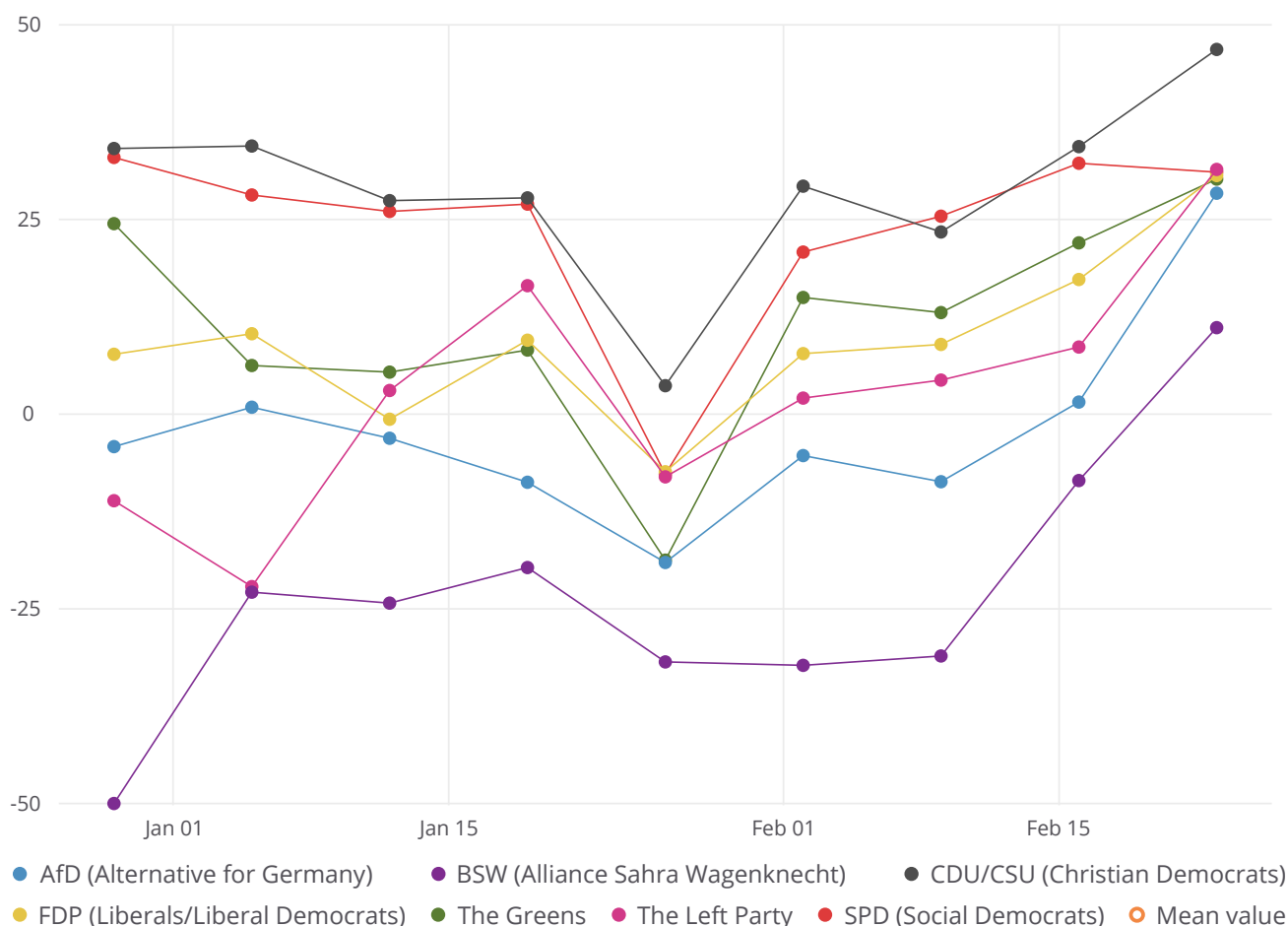
Fig. 5: Attacks & Acclaims by Party (Share in %)



At the same time, it is not unusual for the use of strategies to vary between parties. Studies also show systematic differences between the government and the opposition: challengers and opposition parties tend to go on the attack significantly more often, while incumbents focus their communications more on acclaims and track record (Walter et al., 2014; Maier & Nai, 2023). These findings are also reflected in the way the parties and candidates communicate on the video platforms while the Bundestag is in session: overall, the CDU/CSU and SPD clearly favoured a positive communication strategy. In around three-quarters of their videos, they focused on acclaims and avoided attacks for the most part. In doing so, the SPD lived up to its role as the party of the chancellor, while the CDU seemed to anticipate this role in its campaign communications despite its role as an opposition party. The FDP and The Greens also chose a positive address for the most part, albeit with a higher proportion of attacks than the SPD and the CDU/CSU. In contrast, the BSW and the AfD relied particularly heavily on attacks: both parties attacked political opponents in more than 60 % of their posts and – especially in the case of the BSW (32 %) – used acclaims much less frequently. The Left Party exhibited a comparatively balanced communication pattern, with similar proportions of positive messages and attacks.



Fig. 6: Balance Attacks & Acclaims over Time (Share in %)



Partisan tones of voice over time

Lastly, we looked at how communication strategies were employed during the hot campaign phase from 1 January 2025 up to and including election day on 23 February 2025. For the sake of simplicity, a bottom line was calculated by subtracting the number of attacks from the number of acclaims. The results show that the campaigns of the moderate-democratic parties exhibited a certain constant where the relationship between attacks and acclaims is concerned. What is striking, however, is that, during the days when the CDU/CSU put forward their motion for a resolution on migration policy, the campaign styles of all parties became significantly more aggressive in tone: until the knife attack in Aschaffenburg on 22 January (tagesschau.de, 2025), the picture presented by the CDU/CSU, SPD, The Greens and the FDP was one of mostly appreciative commu-

nication (referring to the positive benefits of their own policies) and by the Left Party one of ambivalence (appreciation and attack in equal measure), with the AfD and the BSW both positioning their parties very clearly by issuing an overriding number of attacks on the other parties. However, on 29 January, the day on which the CDU and CSU passed the motion for a resolution on migration policy in the Bundestag with the supporting votes of the AfD and FDP, all parties launched significantly more attacks and, with the narrow exception of the CDU, even did so preponderantly. Following this, however, things swiftly returned to the 'familiar' picture. During the last week of the election campaign, all parties refrained from making attacks and instead focused on their own presumed positive acclaim.

Of the moderate-democratic parties, The Left Party was the only one that, at times, mostly employed attacks or negative campaigning in its communications. One such short video became the highest-reach hit of the entire German federal election campaign: Heidi Reichinnek's *Brandmauer* ('firewall') speech went viral with over 8 million hits on TikTok and Instagram (FAZ, 2025). Prior to this, the party had communicated conspicuously positively about everything happening at its party convention, at which the election programme was adopted.

Political issues over time

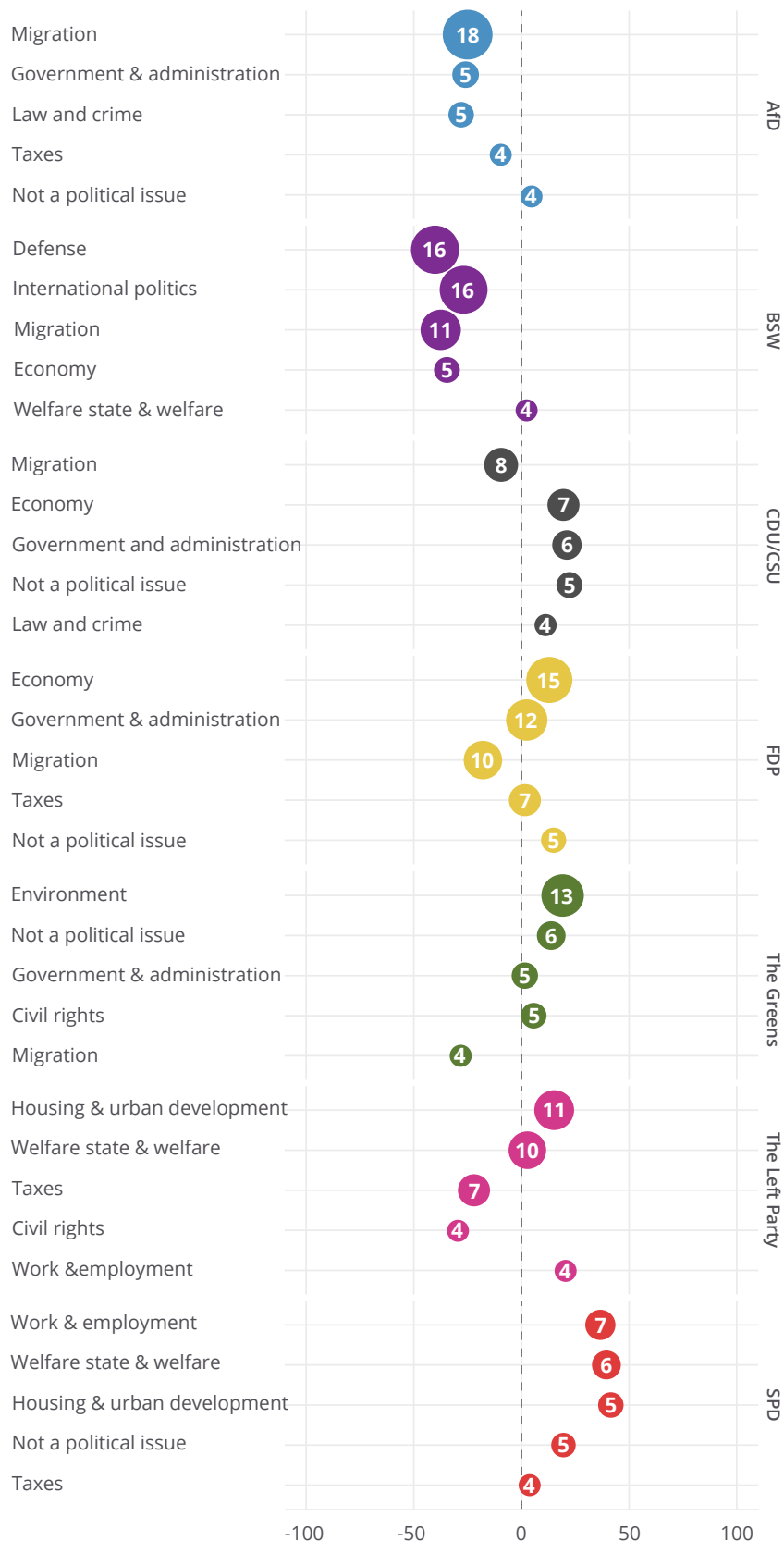
In addition to the question of whether political actors attacked their opponents or emphasised their own achievements, the choice of topics addressed also played a central role in strategic communication. With this in mind, we determined for each party which five topic areas were addressed most frequently in the period examined, excluding the topic of elections. We also analysed the extent to which parties and candidates used certain issues in particular to attack political opponents or to present their own achievements and visions in a positive light. To this end, we calculated topic-specific bottom lines¹³ comprising attacks and acclaims for each party and each of the top issues.

The parties' thematic focus exhibited clear priorities, which, in the main, followed established areas of expertise but also revealed some individual peculiarities: the SPD, for example, focused on labour and employment issues as well as welfare and social security. Housing policy also played an important role. This focus on traditional social policy issues remained prominent. The CDU/CSU was unequivocal in their emphasis on migration and economic issues. Law and internal security formed a complementary but particularly salient issue for the CDU/CSU, which was given less prominence by other moderate-democratic parties, at least where short videos were concerned. The FDP also placed economic policy issues and taxes at

the centre of its communications. This economic thematic structure clearly distinguished the party from the more socio-politically orientated parties, such as the SPD and the Left Party. The Greens' focus clearly lay on environmental and climate issues as well as civil rights. It was striking that environmental policy played a more inferior role for the other parties in this election campaign. The Left Party focused on housing and community as well as welfare state issues. Labour policy rounded out its profile. The Left Party thus remained clearly focused on core social issues. In terms of communication, the AfD dominated the field on migration issues as well as law and internal security. Compared to the other parties, its emphasis on security aspects stood out in particular. The BSW was a thematic exception: in addition to defence and international policy, migration and economic issues played a role. Its explicit emphasis on foreign policy (security) issues clearly set the BSW apart from the other parties.

An analysis of the bottom lines for each party's top five issues confirms the patterns that were already apparent in the review of the general campaign strategies: the SPD and its candidates relied strongly on presenting their acclaims across all key issues. The CDU/CSU also communicated predominantly positively – the clear exception to this being the issue of migration, where the attacks on political opponents outweighed the party's acclaims. Migration proved to be a particularly contentious issue across party lines: a negative communication style dominated for all parties where migration was a top issue. This shows how strongly migration policy issues polarised opinion during the election campaign. In this context, the basic communicative stance of the AfD and the BSW, which was also reflected in their respective election manifestos, is striking: in both cases, almost all of the main issues had a negative bottom line. This consistently confrontational approach to the issues underscores that both actors relied on polarisation and demarcation as central communication strategies.

Fig. 7: Balance Attacks & Acclaims of Top 5 Topics by Party (Share in %)



Overall, the findings show that the choice of topics not only reflected the traditional areas of expertise of the parties, but also made the strategic decision more visible as to whether content was used primarily to promote their own image or to confront political opponents.

III. Discussion and outlook

Political parties and politicians have realised that Instagram and TikTok are a suitable place to address primarily young people. Accordingly, it seems proper and necessary for political actors to establish a direct or indirect connection with young people in order to win them over to their positions and ultimately as voters. To achieve this goal, they must engage with the specific requirements of video platforms.

Overall, the modest use of format-specific affordances such as selfie mode, infographics and other interactive design elements suggests that, whilst parties and politicians did make use of some platform-specific design options, they were not yet exploiting them systematically. Despite the different logics behind TikTok and Instagram and the associated potential for interactivity and audiovisual staging, platform customisation remained limited in many cases. Potential explanations for this range from a certain reluctance to use experimental communication formats and limited knowledge of platform-specific possibilities, to the avoidance of increased resource expenditure (Jost, 2023). However, the use of affordances varies unsystematically between parties, top candidates and members of the Bundestag, suggesting that individual preferences play a greater role than structural factors.

Address and calls to action

Calls to action were a key element of social media communication. Parties primarily relied on calls to vote and low-threshold interaction options, such as sharing or commenting, while calls for more in-depth interaction were rarely used. Individual actors specifically combined direct address, youth relevance and unequivocal calls to action. This three-pronged strategy not only has the potential to create closeness, but can also encourage recipient engagement – both online and in terms of offline political participation. In particular, formats that directly address the realities

of young people's lives can prove to be connectable (McGee et al., 2021; Atad & Cohen, 2024).

Tone of voice

Overall, political communication during the election campaign focused more on acclaims than on attacks directed at political opponents. The SPD and the CDU/CSU in particular favoured a predominantly positive address, while confrontational tones were used more frequently by the AfD and the BSW. This form of communication follows classic patterns: while governing parties tend to rely on their record in office and expertise, challengers more frequently resort to attacks (Walter et al., 2014). The communicative restraint of the SPD and the CDU/CSU can therefore be interpreted as an expression of institutional responsibility, while the AfD and the BSW both used their role as opposition parties to deliberately escalate and polarise, and, in doing so, also followed a communication style propounded by populist currents (Hillje 2021, Lewandowsky 2024).

Studies show that attacks on political opponents can weaken citizens' trust in government action and reduce their sense of political self-efficacy (Lau et al., 2007) as well as promote polarisation (Nai & Maier, 2023). The communication style adopted by The Left Party suggests that a balance between attacks and acclaims is appropriate in order to enable both differentiation from political opponents and the affirmative articulation of the party's own positions.

Topics

The parties' political communication focused heavily on the topic of elections. This can be interpreted as an attempt to motivate first-time and young voters in particular to get involved in politics. The comparatively frequent raising of the issue of social security also addressed relevant future prospects. However, it remains striking that topics such as the environment, education, pension policy and housing, were underrepresented in the parties' communication – even though they are regularly identified in surveys as being particularly relevant for young people (Behre et al., 2024; Schnetzer et al., 2024).

Differences between the parties' top issues confirm the assumptions of the *Issue-Ownership-Theorie* (Petrocik, 1996): parties primarily emphasised all those policy fields in which voters ascribe particular competence to them. For example, the SPD emphasised social security and labour policy, the CDU/CSU focused on migration, the economy and internal security, while The Greens set clear priorities for environmental and climate policy. Also, the FDP, Left Party and the AfD focused primarily on issues that correspond to their well-known profiles. The choice of topics on TikTok and Instagram thus served to strengthen existing attributions of competence.

Topic-specific tone of voice

When analysing the tone of voice concerning the parties' top issues in the election campaign, it is noticeable that the CDU/CSU and SPD communicated predominantly positively, i.e. in a self-praising rather than an attacking manner. This state-supportive attitude stands diametrically opposed to the predominantly negative tone of voice adopted by the BSW and the AfD on their top issues.

The tone of voice on the topic of migration was predominantly negative in short videos during the election campaign and intensified noticeably in the wake of the assaults. Political accusations were particularly prominent after the CDU/CSU, FDP and AfD jointly passed the motion for a resolution on migration policy on 29 January and in

the aftermath of the acts of violence perpetrated in Solingen, Magdeburg and Aschaffenburg. During the last week of the election campaign, most parties returned to a more positive form of communication, focusing on their own policies.

In summary, the findings show that parties and politicians developed initial approaches to platform-specific, youth-focused communication on Instagram and TikTok during the last election campaign. At the same time, it is clear that the potential offered by these formats is far from exhausted. There is still room for improvement, particularly with regard to the targeted use of platform-specific affordances, addressing youth-specific topics and creative mobilisation. This is by no means to say that creative expression in short videos, for example in the form of dancing, should occur at the expense of political substance. It also remains to be seen to what extent the communication strategies actually meet the expectations and needs of the target audience addressed.

Further research findings

In autumn 2025, the overarching study „How to sell democracy online (fast)“ will be published by Das Progressive Zentrum in cooperation with the Bertelsmann Foundation and supported by Stiftung Mercator. The study will analyse around 18,000 short videos on TikTok and Instagram from some 900 political accounts (668 Instagram and 252 TikTok accounts) over a period of six months outside the election campaign period. In addition to the categories already covered in this study (e.g. affordances, address and tone of voice), we will statistically model the influence of the content characteristics on the respective reach of the short videos. Moreover, we will analyse the wishes, expectations and preferences of young people with regard to political communication on social media in qualitative group discussions and a quantitative, representative survey. This method will enable us not only to better assess the actual impact of previous approaches, but also to develop concrete recommendations for addressing the target group in the future.

Analysis Methods

For this analysis, all short videos posted on the official Instagram and TikTok accounts of politicians and the associated parties between 1 January and 23 February 2025 were examined.¹⁴ All relevant actors who were part of the 20th German Bundestag and the current Federal Government were taken into account, including representatives of the CDU/CSU, SPD, The Green Party, FDP, The Left Party, AfD and BSW. A total of 18,270 short videos were tracked, including 13,669 posts on Instagram and 4,601 posts on TikTok.

The process for collecting data depended on the individual platform: for TikTok, the content was continuously collected externally by Prof Dr Pascal Jürgens (University of Trier). The Instagram data was collected using a specially developed Python scraping tool. Due to technical limitations (rate limits), the collection of the latter extended over the period from 2 March to 5 May 2025. To validate the data collection, a sample of the data was also checked between 21 and 23 March via the commercial platform, Apify. The videos were then cropped so that the first and last 30 seconds were taken into account in each case. For videos with a running time of less than one minute, only the first 30 seconds were taken into account.

The Gemini 1.5 Pro large language model was used to code the content. The model is optimised for multimodal tasks and can process both text and image elements, making it particularly suitable for the combined evaluation of video content and associated captions. To ensure the quality of the automated classifications, a manual content analysis was carried out first: three trained coders manually coded an extensive sample of 200 to 1,000 posts per category. Reliability tests were then carried out for all of the categories used;

the values for all of the categories were above a Krippendorff's alpha of 0.67, which indicates a satisfactory degree of coding reliability.

The coding instructions defined in the manual codebook were then converted into suitable prompts for the language model. Both simple instructions (instruction prompting) and structured tree-of-thought (ToT) prompts were employed. The final optimisation of the prompts was based on approaches by Hulbert (2023). For the content analysis, the models were fed with both the videos and the corresponding captions. In some cases, additional examples (few-shot learning) were integrated into the prompts in order to further increase classification accuracy. To ensure data quality, the AI-classified content was systematically compared with the results of the manual coding. Deviations – especially in rare categories – were analysed and led to targeted adjustments to and refinements of the prompts.

To evaluate the accuracy of the model, the quality of the automated content analysis was systematically checked using manual coding. The results show an overall satisfactory model performance: the core content categories, such as direct address ($F1 = .76$), use of interaction stickers ($F1 = .74$) and attacks on political opponents ($F1 = .73$), were recorded with high F1 scores, which indicates a reliable classification of these core elements. Formats such as selfie videos ($F1 = .66$) and calls to vote ($F1 = .65$) were also identified with reasonable accuracy, as was the recording of acclaims ($F1 = .62$). For less frequent or more complex categories – in particular specific forms of calls to action or interaction formats – the F1 scores were lower (in some cases below .4). These lower values are mainly due to the comparatively low frequency of such

phenomena in the data set and the sometimes high semantic proximity to related categories. This shows the limitations of the model we used. Accordingly, the results should rather be understood as tentative values and interpreted with caution. That being said, the accuracy values for most categories were well above 90 %.

Endnotes

1. Technological and design-based affordances provided by platforms for user interaction and content creation, such as background music, photo overlays, or visual integration of comments (Evans et al., 2017).
2. Populist actors like the BSW fundamentally pursue an anti-establishment approach, which primarily targets the liberal component of our democracy (Decker, 2025). Radical and extremist actors—such as the AfD—can also adopt populism as a “thin ideology” (Mudde, 2004), but programmatically, they represent a fundamental critique or outright rejection of the entire democratic system (Art, 2023; Arzheimer & Berning, 2019).
3. Moderate-democratic actors such as the SPD, CDU/CSU, FDP, and the Greens follow a centrist programmatic line according to the left-right classification scheme and fully adhere to the core principles of liberal democracy (Jolly et al., 2022; Akkerman et al., 2016). Due to a political de-radicalization process in recent years, the Left Party is now considered a borderline moderate-democratic actor in current literature (Thomeczek, 2024), as a substantial portion of its current political positions align with the above criteria (Rooduijn et al., 2023).
4. The results therefore refer to the totality of the analyzed accounts per party—regardless of the reach or prominence of the profiles. Since communication behavior can differ between party accounts, top candidates, and ordinary members of parliament, the findings do not allow for direct conclusions about the actual visibility of individual content or strategies. Due to the complexity of the content and the low frequency, classification reliability regarding these affordances was limited. Accordingly, the findings should be considered tentative, and party-specific differences should be interpreted with caution.
5. Differences in online views should also be interpreted cautiously due to the fuzziness in classification. The categorization of thematic areas was based on the topic classification of the “German Policy Agenda” project (Breunig et al., 2024), with topics aggregated into their broader categories.
6. Includes activities of political institutions or the federal government.
7. Includes overall economic developments, inflation, or growth.
8. Includes pension issues, healthcare systems, and social justice.
9. Included affordable housing and urban development.
10. Included tax policy debates and calls for financial relief.
11. Calculated as attacks minus positive self-presentation of a party.
12. An exception was made for the AfD, as the party’s official main account was banned by TikTok in May 2022 for violations of community guidelines, particularly for hate speech violations (Röhlig, 2022). Instead, we used TikTok videos from the parliamentary group account @AfDFraktionimBundestag.
13. Party attacks minus its acclaims
14. We made an exception for the AfD, as the party’s official main account was blocked by TikTok in May 2022 due to violations of the community guidelines, particularly where violations relating to hate speech were concerned (Röhlig, 2022). In its place, we used TikTok videos from the party’s parliamentary group account @AfDFraktionimBundestag.

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The Team behind the Study



Dr. Pablo Jost is a communication scientist at the Institute for Journalism Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, where he completed his doctorate in 2022 on “Popularity indicators in political communication research”. He currently researches and teaches as a visiting professor at the Institute for Journalism and Communication Research at the Hanover School of Music, Drama and Media. As co-founder and strategic advisor to the Federal Association for Countering Online Hate, he investigates the mobilization of radical and extremist protest movements on digital platforms and their offline effects. His research interests also include the media representation of social controversies, the communication of political actors and their adaptation to the conditions of digitalization.



Paulina Fröhlich is deputy managing director and responsible for the focus “Resilient Democracy” at the Berlin think tank Das Progressive Zentrum. There, she heads the democracy conference “Innocracy”, designs dialog and discourse spaces and is co-author of several publications such as “Die Übergangenen – Strukturschwach und Erfahrungsstark.” (2022). After completing her studies, Paulina co-founded the Kleiner Fünf initiative, which supports people in taking action against right-wing populism with the help of “radical politeness”. She comments on political events for Deutschlandfunk Kultur and regularly on “Die Frage des Tages” at Radio3. In the winter semester 22/23, Paulina taught as a guest lecturer at the University of Arts in Berlin and was appointed to the Forum #Zukunftsstrategie at the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research in 2023.



Melanie Weiser is a project manager for democratic policy projects in the focus area of “Resilient Democracy” at the Berlin think tank Das Progressive Zentrum. Previously, she worked in the German Bundestag at the interface of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Protection and at the Alliance for Securing Democracy of the German Marshall Fund in Brussels. She completed her studies in the fields of politics and international relations as well as international security at Lake Constance, in Berlin and in the USA.



Sibylle Gröbel has been working as a project manager in the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Education & NextGeneration program since 2023. Her focus is on political communication and campaigning. In addition to the empirical study on how young people can be better reached with political content, she is responsible for the Bertelsmann Stiftung's target group approach to young people on [gennow.de](https://www.gennow.de). Before joining the foundation, she worked as a consultant for Scholz & Friends and Jung von Matt, where she supported award-winning campaigns in the public sector. She studied political communication as well as communication and cultural studies.



Amber Jensen Amber Jensen has been working as a project manager in the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Democracy and Cohesion program since 2023. Her focus is on the participation of young people in political processes. She initiated the Bertelsmann Stiftung's first TikTok campaigns in the context of the European elections, the debate on the compulsory national service in Germany, and the 2025 Bundestag elections. Amber is committed to addressing young people in a target group-oriented manner on social media. She studied psychology, vocational training with social pedagogy and educational science.



Kira Schrödel has been working as a project manager in the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Democracy and Cohesion program since the beginning of 2025. Her work focuses on the question of how values can be strengthened and implemented in various policy areas – in particular by promoting political participation among young people. Previously, she worked for the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Protection, among others. Kira Schrödel studied Public Administration and International Relations.



Hannah Fecher is a research assistant at the Chair of Political Communication at the Institute of Journalism Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. She holds a Master of Science in Communication Science with a focus on Political Communication from the University of Amsterdam. In her research, she deals with the use and effects of new technologies and social media platforms in political campaign communication. Her focus is on how digital innovations influence strategies, content and perceptions of modern election campaigns and what effects this has on the formation of political opinion.



Yannick Winkler has been a research associate in the research area Computational Communication Science at the Institute for Journalism at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz since November 2022. Previously, he was a member of the project “Multilevel Flows of Political Communication on Facebook – A Computational Approach Using Individual Digital Traces”, which was based at JGU and at the University of Hohenheim. As part of the project, he investigated the communication behavior of political actors and users on Facebook. In his current research, he is primarily concerned with the use of large language models (LLMs) in communication science. Prior to his academic career, he worked for German members of parliament at state and federal level.



Carla Agha Ebrahim works as a project assistant in the field of “Resilient Democracy” in the Berlin think tank Das Progressive Zentrum. After completing her interdisciplinary bachelor’s degree at Leuphana University of Lüneburg, she focused on political science in the master’s program “Current Democracies” at UPF Barcelona. She conducted research in the areas of democratic innovation, (right-wing) populism, narratives of sustainable transformation, and gendered digital violence, among others. Carla gained practical experience at the intersection of research, conceptualization and communication. She is passionate about designing future-oriented, just and sustainable democracies.



Jan Kjell Lange Jan works as a junior project manager in the Resilient Democracy and Green New Deal programs of Das Progressive Zentrum. At present, he focuses on the projects “How to sell democracy online (fast)” and “Transatlantic Dialogue on the Industrial Heartlands”, which reflect his research interests in international public policy for democracy and the role of transnational networks in strengthening democratic principles. Previously, he worked for a Member of the European Parliament in Brussels and the European Coordination Group of the German Federal Foreign Office in Berlin. Jan completed his studies in European Public Policy and International Affairs at the London School of Economics and Political Science, the Hertie School and the Johns Hopkins University (SAIS).

Partner



Das Progressive Zentrum is an independent and non-profit think tank based in Berlin. Since 2007, the organization has been providing impetus for social progress with studies, publications and events. Its goal is to provide orientation in political debates and, with its network, to offer a platform for progressives from Germany, Europe and North America – and thus come a step closer to a sustainable society that enables all to have equal and good opportunities in life.

With its projects, studies and events, the **Bertelsmann Stiftung** stimulates debate and provides impetus for social change. Charitable work and sustainable impact are the foundations of its actions. The foundation's initiatives not only point to solutions, but also create empirically supported orientation for the broad public.

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Partner endorsement

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V.i.S.d.P.:

Dominic Schwickert

c/o Das Progressive Zentrum e.V.
Werftstraße 3, 10577 Berlin

Executive Board:

Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Schroeder, Judith Siller,
Joachim Knodt

Directors:

Dominic Schwickert, Paulina Fröhlich

Chairwoman of the Scientific Advisory Board:

Prof. Dr. Anke Hassel

Collaboration:

Prof. Dr. Pascal Jürgens

Editing:

Aaron Remus, Stefanie Barth

Layout and typesetting:

Greta Fleck, Lukasz Czeladzinski

Graphic design:

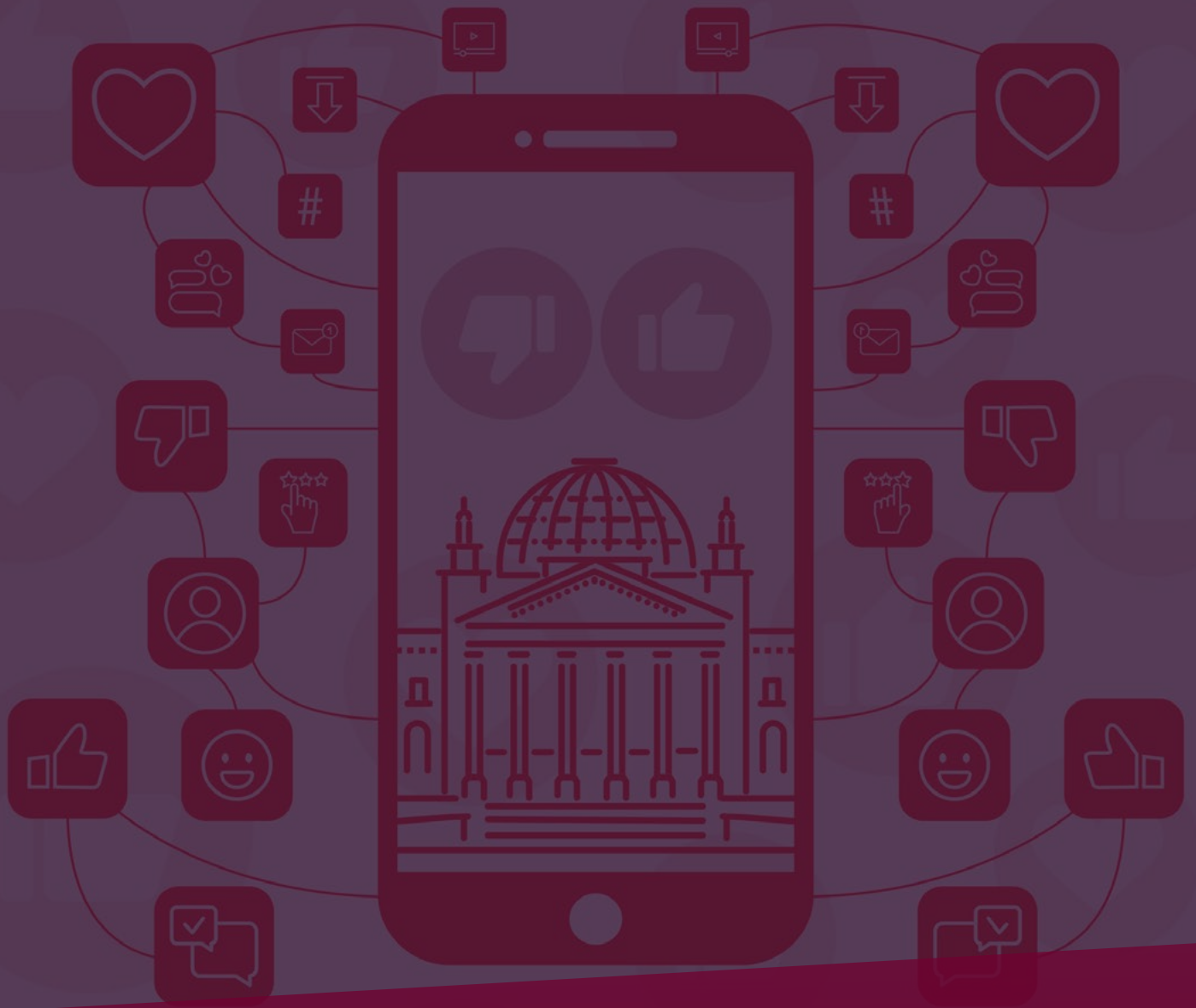
Daniel Djuhandi

English Translation:

Bettina von Arps-Aubert GmbH

www.progressives-zentrum.org
mail@progressives-zentrum.org

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 Das Progressive Zentrum

 @dpz_berlin

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