Research Article

"Bread and Circuses" for the electorate: how political parties use social media to reach their voters.

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In modern democracies, elections are always special events, as they structure the political debate, allow voters to choose their representatives, distribute political power and thus influence future policy. The competition for attention is becoming more and more independent of political decision-making. Political communication mutates into "a central strategic game" (Münch 1995, 82) and demands active persuasion work from the parties participating in the elections. This persuasion work - if one follows Praprotnik (Praprotnik et al. 2019) - is increasingly shifted to social media: If one follows Koiranen et al. (2020), but also Miljkovic et al. (2018), political parties on social media sites are more user-oriented than party-oriented. In their paper "Social media sites as a political information channel", Praprotnik et al. have shown that especially users of political information on social networks tend to have little trust in traditional media. (Praprotnik et al. 2019) Sartori (Sartori 1997, 122) believes that elections are the moment when voters actually govern. Elections are thus capable of shaping the political history of a country. This is especially true of elections at the national level, such as the National Council elections in Austria. In this paper - using the example of the 2019 National Council elections in Austria - we will examine how Austria's two largest parties (the ÖVP and the SPÖ) use the social media sites Facebook and Twitter to reach their voters:

Question 1: Is the "ÖVP", which in its party programme tries to appeal more to the centre in terms of economic policy, also an "economic party" on social media sites?
Question 2: What are the issues that the SPÖ and the ÖVP are most concerned with?
Question 3: How did the issue concentration affect the election result?

The Austrian parties
Since the end of the Second World War and the re-enactment of the Austrian Constitution in 1945, the founding hour of the Second Republic, the political landscape in Austria has been dominated by the two major parties, the ÖVP and the SPÖ. These also achieved the most votes in the National Council election on 29 September 2019, with 37.5 and 21.2 per cent respectively. The **Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ)** is a frequently cited example of a mass party and is close to workers and employees (Ucakar 2006). Although the SPÖ is no longer a major party, it is still perceived as such by the electorate (Ucakar 2006). From the 1990s onwards, a continuous decline in party membership set in: From 1995 onwards, the proportion of members in relation to the electorate fell to just over 25 per cent, and in 2002 to below 20 per cent (18.34) (Müller 1996). Since 1990, the SPÖ has lost over two-thirds of its members in absolute terms (1990: 620,141; 2014: 205,224; 2017: 180,000 (Wineroither and Kitschelt 2012; Zirnig 2014; Hager 2017). Ucakar (2006) argues that this decline in party membership is caused by changes in working life, lifestyles, loss of importance of organised political movements and disillusionment with political parties. The **Austrian People's Party (ÖVP)** is close to employers, farmers and industry and is represented almost everywhere with local associations, sections and city organisations (Müller 2006). In an international comparison with other conservative parties, the ÖVP does exceptionally well - in terms of membership numbers (Mair and Van Biezen 2001). At its peak in 1970, 720,000 members were counted (Müller 2006). If one follows Hornig (2008), then the ÖVP, just like the SPÖ, is a member party.

Where do the parties stand in Austria? An analysis of the party programmes
The Austrian party system is strongly polarised: If one follows Thömmes et al. (2019), then the SPÖ has tended to develop in a socially libertarian direction since 2017, while the ÖVP is trying - compared to 2017 - to appeal more to the centre in terms of economic policy. The party system ahead of the 2019 National Council elections is polarised in terms of programmes. No party takes an explicit centre position.

In their analysis, Thömmes et al. examined the party programmes for the 2019 National Council election and came to the following conclusion: Compared to the 2017 election, polarisation has increased. The SPÖ has positioned itself more clearly as a libertarian party in 2019 than in 2017, because although it has clearly more restrictive positions on important issues such as migration and integration than, for example, the Greens, the orientation in the election campaign has shifted slightly in the libertarian direction (e.g. abolition of the 12-hour day, cap on rental prices). There have also been changes in the conservative spectrum - compared to 2017: The Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) has expanded its election programme, especially in the area of economic policy, and thus increased the range of options for voters. However, the demand for compulsory long-term care insurance has moved the ÖVP more towards the centre. (Thömmes and Tomeczeck 2019). If one follows Friedrichsen (2015), then an interplay between the party programme and the appearances on social media sites is necessary to generate credibility among voters (Friedrichsen 2015).

Boulianne (2016) but also Jungherr (Jungherr 2016) have already extensively researched campaigning on social media sites: they have examined how campaigns are run, how candidates are embedded in communication networks and how candidates interact with each other and with the public (Jungherr 2016; Boulianne 2016). Nevertheless, research on cross-media is limited in several respects: First, most studies focused on an isolated platform, predominantly Twitter and - less frequently - Facebook. Second, only a fraction of this work focused on the actual content of communications beyond metadata. While several studies coded the content of social media posts by US politicians (Bronstein 2013; Gainous and Wagner 2014), these efforts mostly consisted of smaller samples and/or did not categorise, specifically, the topics politicians posted about. Third, most research was limited to the boundaries of campaigning on a specific social media platform. The few cross-platform analyses were limited to main party organisation accounts (Rossi and Orefice 2015). Building on this, a comparison between multiple social media platforms could reveal even more fine-grained uses of different media. Such platform-specific mediation effects can be taken into account in models of political communication (Jungherr, Schoen, and Jürgens 2016).

This work aims to close the research gap by examining not only the formats but also the form of political communication across platforms.

Examination Design

The period of investigation extends from 1 August 2019 to 29 September 2019: Firstly, because on 2 August 2019 all - nationwide - participating parties were known (= start of the election campaign) (PolitikMagazin 2019) and therefore the day before the announcement is already of great interest for this dissertation, and secondly, because on 29 September 2019 the election campaign ended with the National Council election. The research was conducted in the context of a full survey, i.e. during the research period, all postings of first- or second-rankers as well as party accounts were saved, entered into a database and analysed. For this purpose, not only the type of postings (image, image/text, video, video/text, text) but also the content was saved. The contents were divided into 3 categories: e.g. economy - labour market - labour market / youth).
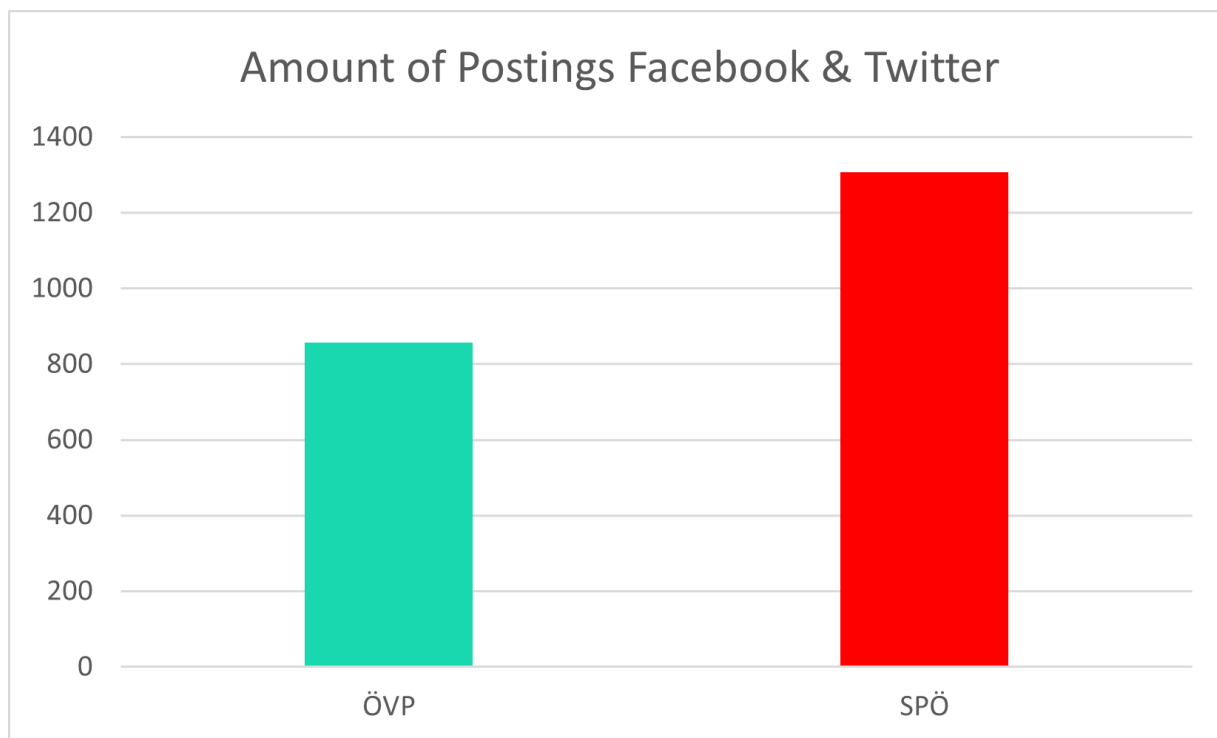
Evaluation

Figure 1- Amount of Postings Facebook & Twitter

A total of 6252 postings were made on Facebook and Twitter during the National Council election campaign, of which the ÖVP made 856 and the SPÖ 1307 postings. The distribution of postings in the main categories is as follows:
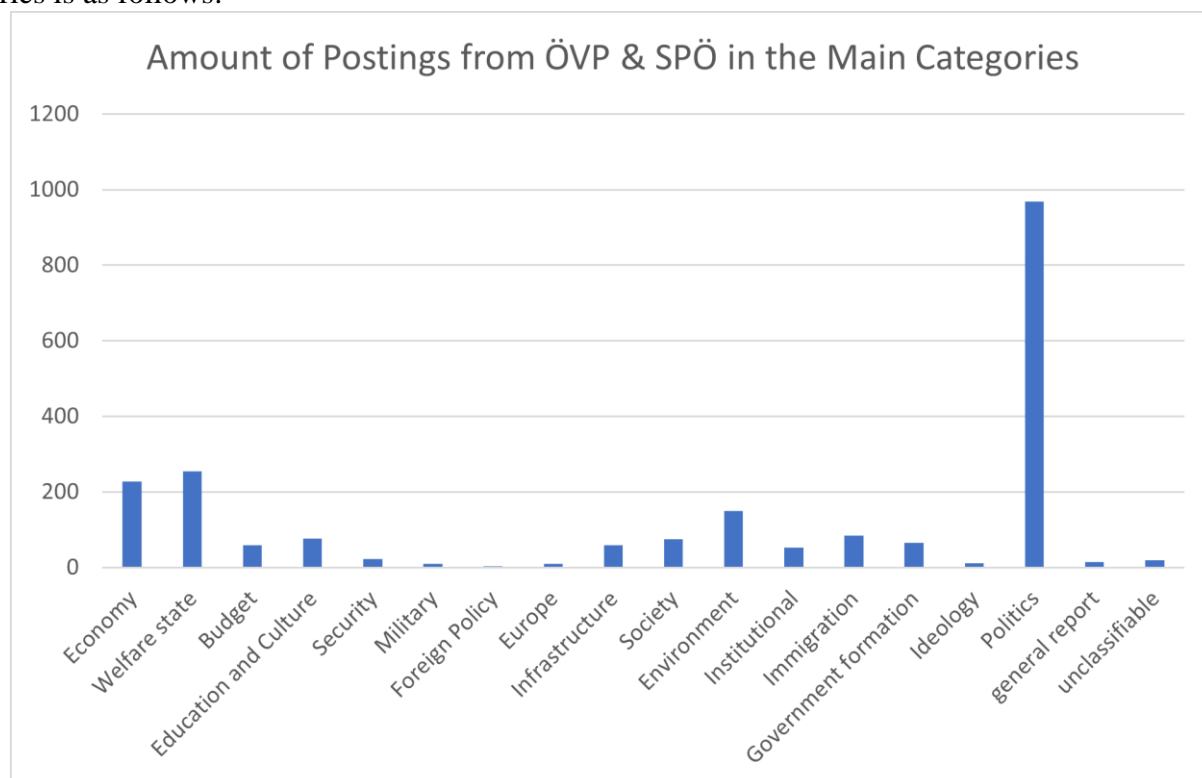

Figure 1- Amount of Postings in the Main Categories

In order to be able to answer the three questions below, it is necessary to take a closer look at the election results of the 2019 National Council elections: In the 2019 National Council elections, six parties were admitted throughout Austria: The ÖVP, the SPÖ, the FPÖ, the Greens, Neos and Liste Jetzt. The ÖVP under former Federal Chancellor Sebastian Kurz was once again the party with the most votes with 37.5 % (up 6.0 percentage points compared to the 2017 election). In second place, the SPÖ with Pamela Rendi-Wagner received 21.2 % (minus 5.7 percentage points), the historically worst result in a National Council election. The FPÖ under Norbert Hofer lost even more, dropping almost ten percentage points to 16.2%. With 13.9%, the Greens returned to parliament with the best National Council result in their history. NEOS also achieved an all-time high with 8.1 %, while NOW fell short of the four-percent hurdle with 1.9 % and dropped out of the National Council. With a total of 1.3% percent, the other parties did not play a significant role (Gründl and Oberluggauer 2021). A total of 6,396,812 Austrians were eligible to vote (Zandonella and Ehs 2020). Voter turnout fell to 75.6 %, the second lowest figure in the Second Republic.

Question 1: Is the "ÖVP", which in its party programme tries to appeal more to the centre in terms of economic policy, also an "economic party" on social media sites?
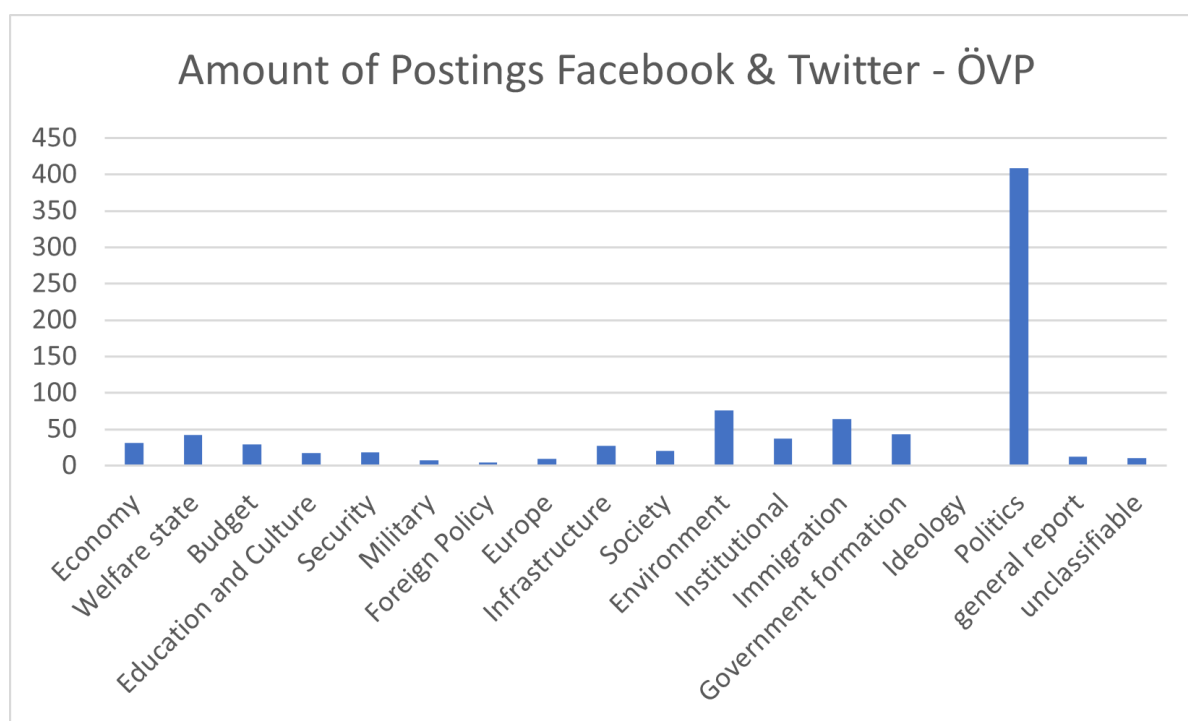
Figure 2- Amount of Postings Facebook & Twitter - ÖVP

If you look at the postings of the ÖVP on Facebook and Twitter, you will see that - of the 856 postings made - only 31 can be assigned to the area of "economy", while in contrast - over 400 postings - can be assigned to the category of "politics" (e.g. election campaign events). The ÖVP's focus on Facebook and Twitter is clearly on election campaign events, which means that the ÖVP's economic policy orientation does not play a major role on the social media pages. On the contrary, on Facebook and Twitter, the recipients are mainly presented with Sebastian Kurz and the ÖVP at election campaign events (see table below with the list of formats used) and less attention is paid to the party programme.

Table 1- Number of Postings sorted by contribution

Category	Picture/Text	Text	Video	Video/Text	Overall
Economy	14	1	0	16	31
Welfare state	20	2	0	20	42
Budget	6	1	0	22	29
Education and	8	1	0	8	17

Culture					
Security	6	4	0	8	18
Military	4	2	0	1	7
Foreign Policy	1	0	0	3	4
Europe	3	1	0	5	9
Infrastructure	7	8	0	12	27
Society	6	0	0	14	20
Environment	50	7	0	19	76
Institutional	13	2	22	0	37
Immigration	26	2	0	36	64
Government formation	12	2	0	29	43
Ideology	1	0	0	0	1
Politics	198	2	1	208	409
general report	9	0	0	3	12
unclassifiable	6	2	0	2	10

However, if one looks at the mean value of the likes received on Facebook and Twitter, one can see that the potential of the economic postings has not been ideally used, because compared to the election event postings, the ÖVP has received more likes per posting in the areas of "economy", "foreign policy" or "Europe":
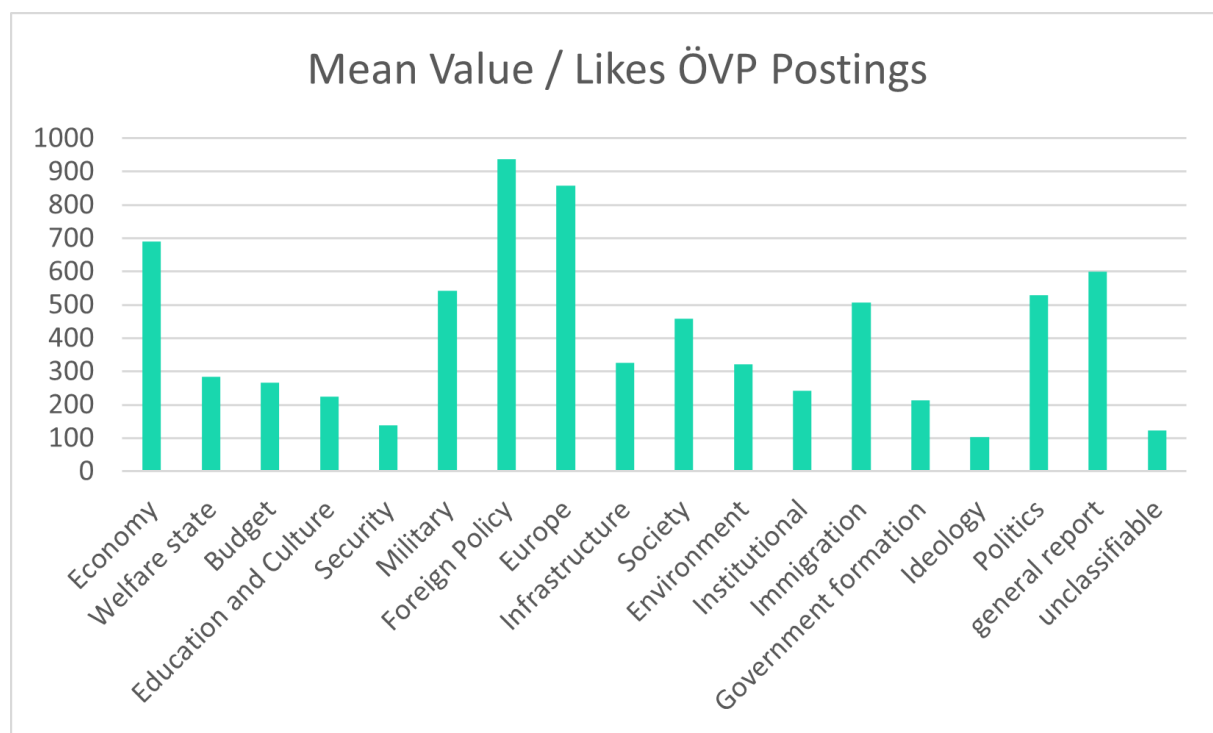

Figure 3- Mean Value Likes: ÖVP Postings on Facebook & Twitter

With regard to the results of the National Council elections, it can be concluded that even though the ÖVP did not present itself as a business party on Facebook and Twitter, it nevertheless used its presence on the social media pages very well to attract the attention of recipients - critically, however, it can be said that it could have used its potential better.

Question 2: Which issues are most taken up by the SPÖ and the ÖVP?

To answer the question, the frequency of postings by the ÖVP and SPÖ on Facebook and Twitter was counted:
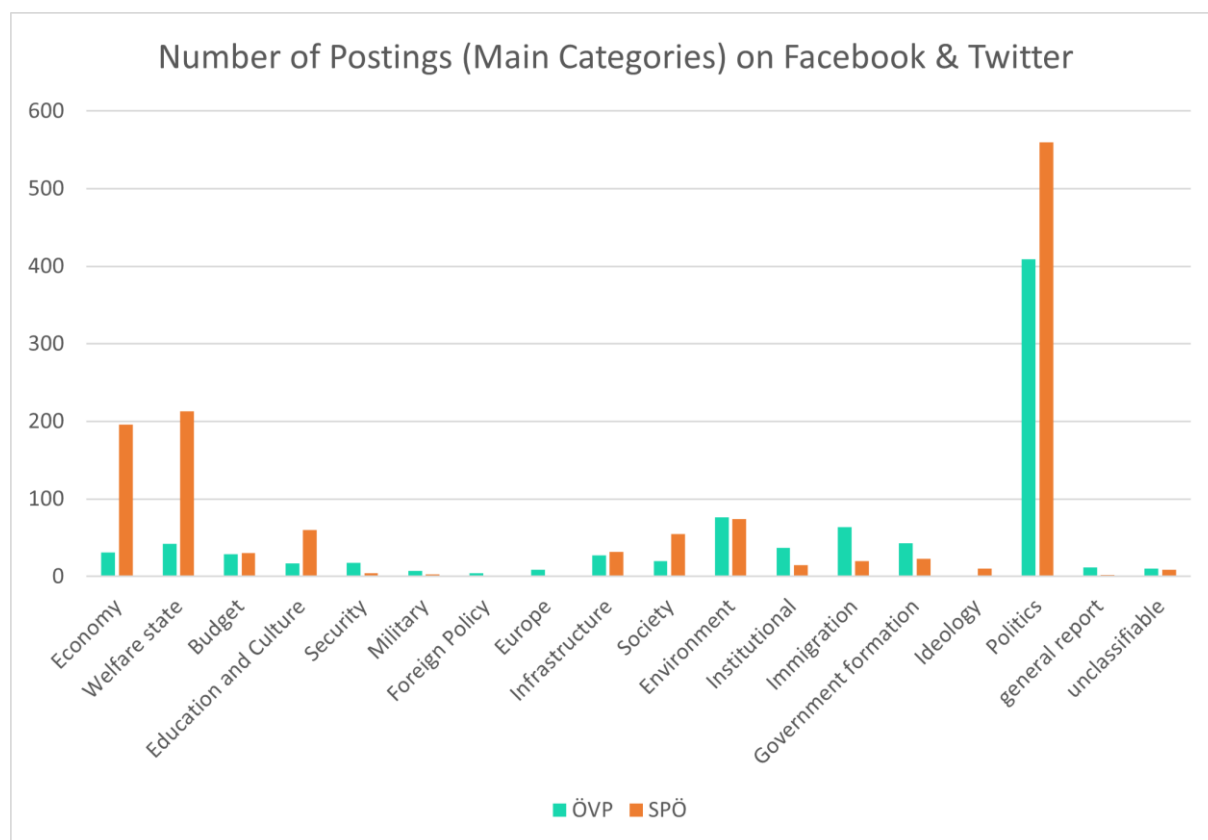

Figure 4- Number of Postings on Facebook and Twitter

If you look at the graph, you can see that - as already mentioned - the focus of the ÖVP is precisely in the area of "election events". This is also the case with the SPÖ, but there are other topics in the SPÖ's election campaign that they pay attention to on the social media sites Facebook and Twitter: these are the "economy" and the "welfare state". While the topic "economy" is usually not occupied by a "left" party (Blue 1970), the SPÖ has deficits in the area of immigration, which is dominated by the ÖVP. It is interesting to see that topics such as security, the military, foreign policy or Europe do not play a major role for either the ÖVP or the SPÖ. There is a rough tie in the areas of the environment and the budget, but the SPÖ has also posted about 500 postings more, i.e. the percentage share in these categories is larger for the ÖVP.

Question 3: How did issue concentration affect the election result?

Election result 2019

Election Result 2019
Numbers in Percent

1,9

13,2

37,5

8,1

16,2

21,2

■ ÖVP ■ SPÖ ■ FPÖ ■ NEOS ■ Die Grünen ■ Jetzt
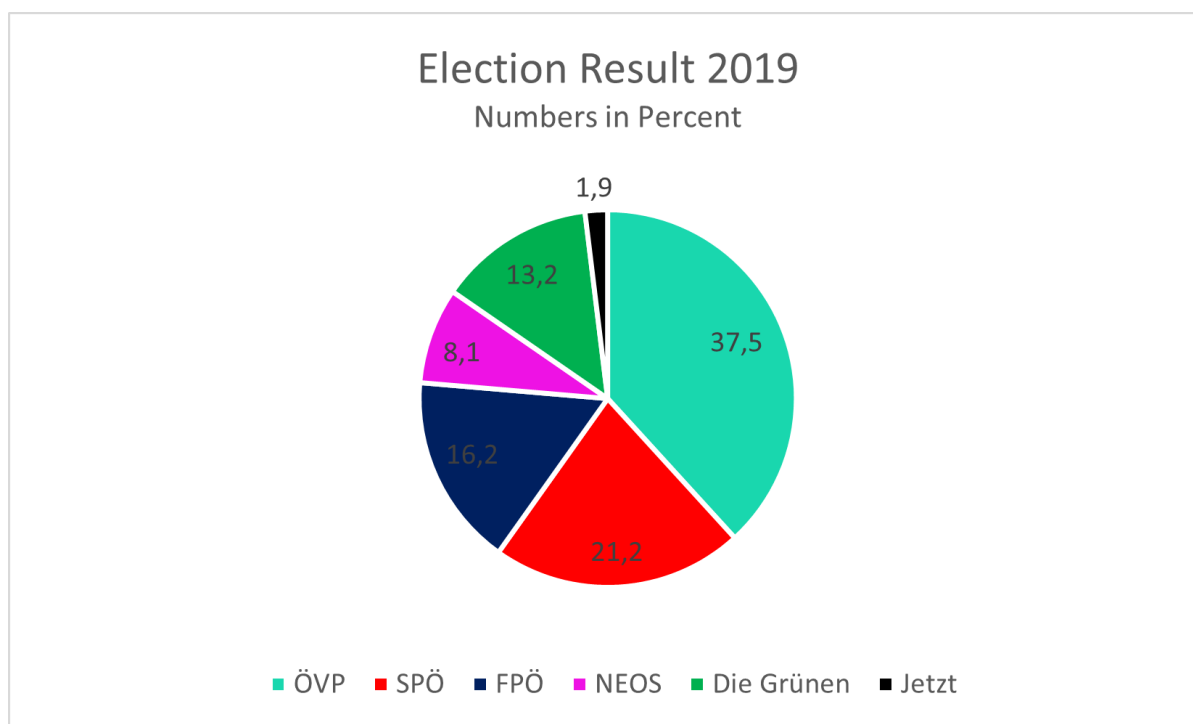
If you look at the election results, you can see that the concentration of topics paid off for the ÖVP, while the SPÖ probably overtaxed the voters with the large number of main topics (Econonmy, Welfare State, Society, Education and Culture,..). This is also reflected in the average number of likes the SPÖ received on its postings: In total, the SPÖ's postings were "liked" an average of 346 times, while the ÖVP received an average of 444 "likes" per posting. The election campaign on the social media pages was thus more successful for the ÖVP than for the SPÖ.

Conclusion

The effect of social media sites on election campaigns is undisputed (Fujiwara, Müller, and Schwarz 2021) - especially because the influence of "alternative media" is becoming more and more prominent (Kenski and Conway 2016) and more and more people inform themselves about news exclusively on social media sites (Schillinger, Chittamuru,and Ramírez 2020). The 2019 National Council election has shown that parties - at least on social media sites - do not necessarily stick to their own party programme and address the issues in the way they think their voters will like them. If you look at the approval rates of voters, however, you can see that they would be more interested in content-rich postings than in pure election event postings. The ÖVP's and SPÖ's issue line-up has shown that the best strategy is to concentrate on a few key issues. This can ensure that voters stay in their own "filter bubble" (Strauß, Alonso-Muñoz, and de Zúniga 2020) and thus increase the efficiency of the election campaign.

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