

# Walking the line of the double bind

*A cross-country comparison on women and men politicians' self-presentations on social media*

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## ABSTRACT

Political leaders play a crucial role in shaping societal perceptions and citizens' expectations of gender roles. Through their self-presentation on social media, political leaders have the power to either reinforce or challenge existing gender stereotypes, thereby influencing how citizens perceive and interpret gender norms. However, research on how women and men politicians present themselves on social media is scarce. This comparative study contributes to remedying this research gap by content analysing the official Facebook and Instagram pages of 18 political leaders during the 2021 national election campaigns in Germany and Norway. In contrast to earlier research on gendered presentations of politicians in the news, we did not find strong evidence of gendered self-presentations in either country, neither in terms of personalisation nor in terms of gender issue ownership. This could be because gender roles in Germany and Norway have become more fluid, or because the successful politicians we have analysed have been successful due to their ability to “walk the double bind” of needing to conform to both masculine and feminine gender expectations. Our study calls for more comparative research into this field, including studies of lower profile politicians and politicians in countries with lower degrees of gender equality.

**KEYWORDS:** election campaigning, standardised content analysis, gender issue ownership, gender stereotypes, personalisation, social media

## Introduction

Politics, “a field created by men for men, making it easier for them to navigate” (Sullivan, 2023: 884), has traditions rooted in the historical association of men with publicity, women with privacy, and a resulting hierarchical superiority of men over women. Even though women make up around half the population, they remain underrepresented in both national parliaments and governments worldwide (UN Women, 2023). This is problematic, since it leads to an underrepresentation of female perspectives in political decision-making and contributes to cementing gender inequalities and gender-hierarchical power relations in society. Moreover, gender stereotypes – widely shared cognitive structures about “typical female and male” characteristics, interests, and behaviours – make it difficult for women to access and hold political office: General ideas about successful politicians correspond with the traditional image of masculinity but contradict the image of femininity (Winfrey & Schoebelen, 2019).

How politicians are presented in public, and the extent to which their presentation conforms to gender stereotypes, can have an orienting function for citizens’ expectations of gender roles. Political news coverage is still strongly shaped by gender stereotypes (Cardo, 2021; Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018). Politicians have only limited influence on their portrayal in the news, but on social media, they can decide themselves on their self-presentation (Brands et al., 2021; Ekman & Widholm, 2017). Thus, they can strategically either bypass or enforce gender stereotypes (Schneider, 2014). However, empirical research on the gendered self-presentation of politicians on social media is surprisingly scarce (Tsichla et al., 2023) and characterised by several shortcomings. First, there is a strong focus on single-country studies (Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Mattan & Small, 2021; Sullivan, 2023; Tsichla et al., 2023; for exceptions, see Bast et al., 2022; Brands et al., 2021; Cardo, 2021; Geber & Scherer, 2015), and particularly on the US (Winfrey & Schoebelen, 2019; McGregor et al., 2017; Mechkova & Wilson, 2021) with its exceptional political system and its “particular style of gendered politics” (McGregor et al., 2017: 279). Second, many studies compared the strategies of selected individual politicians (e.g., Chen & Chang, 2019; Lee & Lim, 2016) – sometimes even only females (Cardo, 2021) – which makes it difficult to evaluate whether they found systematic patterns or idiosyncrasies of individual politicians. Third, most studies investigated only one platform (Brands et al., 2021; Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Hrbková & Macková, 2021; Tsichla et al., 2023; for exceptions, see Farkas & Bene, 2021; Jungblut & Haim, 2023; Sullivan, 2023), neglecting that political actors’ strategies can differ between platforms (Larsson et al., 2024). These limitations restrict the transferability of the findings to other contexts.

Starting from these research gaps, we investigated how far the self-presentations of political leaders on their official Facebook and Instagram pages were shaped by gender stereotypes in the 2021 national elections in Germany and Norway. We investigated election campaigns as phases in which the impact potential of political communication is particularly large, since political actors

communicate intensively and many citizens have an extraordinary need for political information to make their voting decisions. Moreover, election campaigns are functional equivalent phases, which increases the cross-country comparability of our study.

Our study is comparative in three respects: It compares 1) the self-presentation of women and men politicians beyond individual politicians (micro-level), 2) two platforms (meso-level), and 3) two countries (macro-level). Germany and Norway are similar in many ways but differ in one respect pivotal to our research interest (most similar systems design): While gender equality is high in both countries in international comparison, it is significantly higher in Norway (World Economic Forum, 2022). This difference is related to, partly resulting from, and contributes to shaping gender role expectations which might affect what voters, politicians, and campaign teams expect and perceive as appropriate in terms of politicians' self-presentation. We were interested in whether we would find a reflection of this in how politicians in both countries presented themselves on social media.

## Conceptual framework

### **The double bind and politicians' (gendered) self-presentation on social media**

The public and the private spheres that structure modern societies are historically closely connected with masculinity and femininity. In bourgeois societies, men were assigned responsibility for the public sphere, which comprised social areas like politics and economics, associated with power. Women were associated with the private sphere comprising family, the household, personal relationships, and emotionality. Even though the boundaries between the spheres and the gender-bound responsibilities have become blurred, the patriarchal structures, traditional gender role expectations, and gender stereotypes are still influential. In a comparison of 30 countries worldwide, Williams and Best (1990) identified pancultural gender stereotypes: Characteristics such as dominant, powerful, independent, strong, and active – which are seen as characteristics of successful leadership – were across countries assigned to men by the majority. Characteristics such as obedient, dependent, anxious, soft-hearted, passive, and weak – which seem rather diametrical to successful leadership – were predominantly assigned to women.

Gender stereotypes have a normative character: They “shape what people think is appropriate behavior from men and women” (Winfrey & Schoebelen, 2019: 113), independent of individual characteristics, competencies, and qualifications. Thus, they contribute to unequal starting conditions that make it more difficult for women to start and succeed in a political career: They affect how women and men politicians are assessed by both voters and party organisations in the male-centric political sphere “in which masculine values and political values are often interchangeable” (Meeks & Domke, 2016: 896). Men politicians benefit almost naturally from this gender role congruence between masculinity

and leadership. Women politicians, by contrast, are confronted with the dilemma that gender stereotypes let femininity and leadership appear incongruent (Eagly & Karau, 2002), resulting in a dilemma which men politicians do not face in the same way: They must “walk the line of the double bind by communicating they are masculine enough to lead without violating feminine gender role expectations.” (Winfrey & Schoebelen, 2019: 121)

This requires a well-thought-out self-presentation strategy, which politicians’ social media presences have become a pivotal part of. According to strategic stereotype theory (Fridkin & Kenney, 2014), politicians – independent of gender – will conform to gender stereotypes in their self-presentation when it serves their political goals, but will act against them when the stereotypes threaten to harm them. They can also choose a mixed strategy (Schneider, 2014). However, men politicians can decide more freely than women which approach to follow and benefit more easily from deliberately, well-dosed counteracting of gender stereotypes, for example, by portraying themselves as caring family fathers (Brands et al., 2021); a focus on family for women, however, is often interpreted as a lack of focus on or a lack of suitability for political office. In an interview study with Canadian mayors, Sullivan (2023) found that only women experienced a mental load on how to best present themselves with respect to gender role expectations, resulting, among other things, from comments on their appearance, which men did not receive.

Despite these seemingly clear patterns, however, it is far from clear how women and men politicians handle gender stereotypes in their self-presentations on social media (Tsichla et al., 2023). Overall, there are relatively few studies on this question, and they reveal mixed findings. However, the majority of the existing studies found rather moderate differences in women and men politicians’ self-presentations on social media (Bast et al., 2022; Brands et al., 2021; Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Farkas & Bene, 2021; Geber & Scherer, 2015; Hrbková & Macková, 2021; McGregor et al., 2017) to none (Metz et al., 2020). Only a few studies revealed relatively clear gender differences in politicians’ self-presentation (Jungblut & Haim, 2023; Tsichla et al., 2023). When it comes to Germany and Norway – the countries we investigate – research is scarce. For Norway, we only found a comparative study by Bast and colleagues (2022) on the self-presentation of populist leaders on Instagram in several European countries, including Norway and Germany. Concerning Germany, Geber and Scherer (2015) and Metz and colleagues (2020) investigated the self-presentations of German politicians on Facebook but included the politicians’ gender as a peripheral aspect. Germany was also included in a study by Jungblut and Haim (2023) on politicians’ visual self-presentation on Instagram and Twitter across 28 countries in the 2019 European elections, but they did not present results on the individual countries.

Politicians’ self-presentations are part of their strategy to generate votes, the ultimate goal of election campaigns, and thus influence voting behaviour. According to the Michigan model of voting behaviour, voting decisions are influenced by three factors: party identification as a long-term factor, as well as attitudes towards candidates and attitudes towards issues as short-term factors (Asher,

1983). Due to a dealignment process during the last decades, party identification has lost influence (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002), while the short-term factors have become more important for voting decisions. Therefore, we focus on two strategies of (gendered) self-presentation directly related to the short-term factors: personalisation relates to attitudes towards candidates, while gender issue ownership relates to attitudes towards issues.

## Personalisation

Personalisation of politics describes a state and a development through which individual politicians are or become more central in politics, news coverage, and citizens' perception of politics (Van Aelst et al., 2012). While not a new phenomenon, personalisation is central to politicians' communication on social media. It is a communication strategy to reduce complexity of political issues, which resonates well with the brevity of communication on social media. Moreover, the basic idea of social media is to provide a platform on which individuals can share information about themselves and their personal lives, which shapes both users' expectations on what kind of content they receive there and the selection criteria of the algorithms. Politicians must, to a certain degree, adjust their communication to these rules (McGregor et al., 2017; Tschla et al., 2023).

Van Aelst and colleagues (2012) distinguished between two forms of personalisation in news: individualisation and privatisation. Individualisation “concerns a focus on individual politicians as central actors in the political arena, including their ideas, capacities and policies” (Van Aelst et al., 2012: 204–205). While often still focusing on substantive political issues, visibility shifts from parties or governments to individual politicians, for example, by demonstrating a political leader's professional competence (Karlsen & Skogerbø, 2015). Privatisation, by contrast, “implies a shift in media focus from the politician as occupier of a public role to the politician as a private individual, as a person distinct from their public role” (Van Aelst et al., 2012: 205). Indicators are, for example, a focus on personal characteristics and on the private lives of politicians. From a normative perspective, privatisation is often considered problematic, since it turns away the focus from the political sphere. With the stereotypical dichotomy between public (“male”) and private (“female”) sphere in mind, individualisation is closer to male stereotypes, while privatisation matches better with female stereotypes.

This differentiation has been used in some studies on the self-presentation of women and men politicians on social media (e.g., Brands et al., 2021). For Germany (Haßler et al., 2023; Metz et al., 2020) and Norway (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013), it has been shown that individualisation is relatively common, while privatisation happens only rarely, but without focusing on gender differences in politicians' self-presentation. However, given the poor state of research, we formulated a research question for our comparison between Germany and Norway:

**RQ1.** To what degree did women and men politicians use individualisation and privatisation elements in their self-presentations on social media?

## Gender issue ownership

Another focus in existing research on politicians and gender stereotypes is the association of certain political issues with women and men politicians. Following the traditional dichotomy of public and private spheres, both genders are stereotypically considered more competent to handle certain issues: Men are considered more competent in relation to policy issues that are strongly associated with leadership (Brands et al., 2021), for example, economy and finance, (national) security, crime, terrorism, and defence, while women are associated with “soft”, “compassion” policy issues related to caring, for example, health, family, social policy, education, environment, and culture (Lee & Lim, 2016; Winfrey & Schoebelen, 2019). This so-called “gender issue ownership” (Herrnson et al., 2003) is often reflected in which ministries are headed by men and women. “Male” issues are often perceived as societally more important – including by the voters and the news media (Zulli, 2019) – which brings along larger budgets, more societal power (Cardo, 2021; Lee & Lim, 2016), and higher news visibility (Zulli, 2019).

If politicians choose a gender issue ownership strategy, they address issues “matching” their gender. However, it can also be promising to address “male” issues as a woman and vice versa, for example, due to proven personal competence for certain topics, to add new facets to their profile to become more relevant to new target groups, or since their party is considered more competent to handle issues (party issue ownership; Petrocik, 1996) which are “contradictory” to the politicians’ gender (Fridkin & Kenney, 2014). Moreover, it can be strategically advantageous to address issues that voters are particularly concerned about (riding the wave; Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994), even if they “contradict” a politician’s gender. A recent example thereof are environmental issues: Given that this was by far the most important issue in the 2021 national election campaign both in Germany (GLES, 2023) and in Norway (Institute for Social Research, n.d.), there may have been something to gain by addressing this “female” topic, even as a man. The state of research on gender issue ownership in politicians’ self-presentations on social media is mixed (Brands et al., 2021; Cardo, 2021; McGregor et al., 2017), and studies on Germany and Norway are missing. This led to our next research question:

**RQ2.** To what degree did the topics addressed by women and men politicians in their social media campaigns reflect gender issue ownership?

## Contextual influences on politicians’ self-presentations

How political leaders manage to walk the line of the double bind is affected by the framework conditions under which they work and communicate. These are shaped by both social media platforms and countries.

At the meso-level, platforms have differing characteristics – for example, the technical features and the usership of the platforms (Kreiss et al., 2018) – and they can facilitate different campaign strategies. A current study by Larsson and

colleagues (2024) – which, however, does not deal with the self-presentation of political leaders – has shown that Norwegian political parties employed different campaign strategies on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter in 2021. Concerning the platforms we compare here, Facebook is more text-heavy (Magin et al., 2024), while visuals are more central on Instagram (Brands et al., 2021; Ekman & Widholm, 2017). Following previous scholarship, such a visual focus might contribute to a stronger focus on the private sphere on Instagram (Kreiss et al., 2018). Concerning usership (see Table A1 in the Appendix), both platforms are more popular in Norway than in Germany, which might make them more important campaigning tools in Norway. Instagram has younger users than Facebook, which makes it attractive in election campaigning for reaching age groups that are more difficult to reach via more traditional communication channels. While Facebook is more popular than Instagram independent of users' gender, Instagram is more popular among females than among males, particularly in Norway (Newman et al., 2021). However, it is unclear how these differences relate to the strategic self-presentation of women and men politicians, which led to our next research question:

**RQ3.** To what degree did the self-presentations of women and men politicians differ between Facebook and Instagram?

With regard to country context (macro-level), the American political system – on which a large part of research in this field focuses – appreciates stereotypical male characteristics in a special way due to its strong focus on the president as the world's most powerful man. Stereotypically feminine characteristics are considered strongly negative in this respect (Winfrey & Schnoebelen, 2019). However, the latter might be considered more desirable in consensus- and compromise-oriented multiparty democracies (McGregor et al., 2017), such as Germany and Norway. In both countries, the election campaigns are less prone to personalisation than in the US, since they are mainly run by parties and the individual candidates are less central (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Cardo, 2021; Geber & Scherer, 2015), including for voting decisions.

Despite many similarities, however, both countries differ in one respect which might affect how women and men politicians present themselves, and it is thus pivotal to our research interest: Gender equality is more pronounced in Norway (as shown in Table 1) for both structural indicators (e.g., a smaller gender pay gap, less women working part-time, and more men taking parental leave) and gender norms that people express: The gender social norms index which is calculated based on seven questions from the World Values Survey about gender equality regarding politics, education, economy, and physical integrity shows that 63 per cent of Germans did not show biases in any of these indicators in 2017–2022. In Norway, this share was almost equally high already in 2005–2009 (the last wave from which data are available), and it can be assumed that it has further grown since then. Concerning politics, Norway has both a longer tradition with women heads of government and a higher current proportion of women in various political offices.

**TABLE 1** Indicators of gender equality in Germany and Norway

		Germany	Norway
General: structures	Percentage of Global Gender Gap closed (2023) <sup>a</sup>	81.5%	87.9%
	Statutory parental leave/benefits received by women (2022) <sup>b</sup>	74.8%	56.9%
General: gender norms	Gender social norms index: People with zero biases among seven gender-related indicators (Germany: 2017–2022; Norway: 2005–2009) <sup>c</sup>	63%	59%
	Gender norm: Agreement/disagreement with statement “Men should have more right to job than women when jobs are scarce.” (2016) <sup>d</sup>	Agree: 7% Neither agree nor disagree: 16% Disagree: 77%	Agree: 2% Neither agree nor disagree: 3% Disagree: 95%
	Global Gender Gap Index - subdimension Political Empowerment (2023) <sup>a</sup>	.634	.765
Politics	Women heads of government (until 2021) <sup>e</sup>	Angela Merkel (2005–2021)	Gro Harlem Brundtland (1981; 1986–1989; 1990–1996) Erna Solberg (2013–2021)
	Women cabinet ministers (2023) <sup>f</sup>	50%	50%
	Women in parliament (2023) <sup>f</sup>	35.1%	46.2%
	Frontrunners/party leaders in the 2021 national election	4 out of 5 (80%)	3 out of 9 (34%)
Economy	Gender pay gap (difference in gross hourly earnings between women and men) (2022) <sup>g</sup>	17.7%	14.4%
	Women/men in part-time jobs (2023) <sup>h</sup>	Women: 48.3% Men: 11.4%	Women: 32.9% Men: 15.6%
	Women employed in senior and middle management (2022) <sup>i</sup>	27%	32%

Source: <sup>a</sup> World Economic Forum, 2022; <sup>b</sup> OECD Statistics, 2023; <sup>c</sup> UNDP, 2023; <sup>d</sup> ESS ERIC, 2023 (2016); <sup>e</sup> Government of Norway, 2022; Chancellor of Germany, n.d.; <sup>f</sup> UN Women, 2023; <sup>g</sup> Eurostat, n.d.; <sup>h</sup> Statista, 2024 (based on Eurostat data); <sup>i</sup> World Bank, n.d.



Even though both countries show a high degree of gender equality in international comparison (World Economic Forum, 2022), the differences between them are highly relevant for our research interest since they both reflect and shape gender role expectations. They can also affect politicians' self-presentations since politicians and their campaign teams do not only orient toward voter expectations but are also (consciously or unconsciously) influenced by gender role expectations themselves. However, since these mechanisms are complex and far from monocausal, we formulated the following research question:

**RQ4.** To what degree did the self-presentations of women and men politicians on Facebook and Instagram differ between Norway and Germany?

## Methods

### Sample and data collection

We answer our research questions by means of a standardised content analysis of all posts published on the official public Facebook and Instagram accounts of all party leaders or frontrunners whose parties made it into the parliament after the election (Norway<sup>1</sup>: 4 female, 5 male; Germany: 3 female, 6 male) during the last four weeks before (and including) election day (Germany: 30 August–26 September 2021; Norway: 17 August–13 September 2021). We focus on political leaders since they are widely perceived as prominent politicians by the population, which makes their self-presentation particularly influential, potentially. The sample consists of 1,448 posts (see Table 2). The post content and metadata were collected using the CrowdTangle API. For coding the posts, the coders opened them on the respective platform via the URL.

**TABLE 2** Overview of the sample (number of coded posts)

Candidates		Party Ideology <sup>a</sup>	Facebook (n)	Instagram (n)	Both platforms (n)
Germany: female candidates (n = 3)	Alice Weidel (AfD)	Right-wing populist	54	10	64
	Annalena Baerbock (Greens)	Green	42	47	89
	Janine Wissler (Die Linke)	Socialist	51	48	99
	Total	–	147	105	252
Germany: male candidates (n = 6)	Alexander Dobrindt (CSU)	Conservative	37	n.a. <sup>b</sup>	37
	Armin Laschet (CDU)	Conservative	76	54	130
	Christian Lindner (FDP)	Liberal	39	50	89
	Dietmar Bartsch (Die Linke)	Socialist	67	n.a. <sup>b</sup>	67
	Olaf Scholz (SPD)	Social democratic	75	68	143
	Tino Chrupalla (AfD)	Right-wing populist	62	28	90
Total	–	356	200	556	
Germany: all candidates (n = 9)		–	503	305	808
Norway: female candidates (n = 4)	Erna Solberg (H)	Conservative-liberal	37	18	76
	Guri Melby (V)	Liberal	45	15	98
	Sylvi Listhaug (FrP)	Right-wing (populist)	47	43	90
	Une Bastholm (MDG)	Green	20	17	47
	Total	–	149	93	311
Norway: male candidates (n = 5)	Audun Lysbakken (SV)	Socialist	60	99	291
	Bjørnar Moxnes (R)	Socialist	108	50	200
	Jonas Gahr Støre (AP)	Social democratic	35	7	46
	Kjell Ingolf Ropstad (KrF)	Christian	13	7	20
	Trygve Slagsvold Vedum (SP)	Rural	19	–	19
	Total	–	235	163	576
Norway: all candidates (n = 9)		–	384	256	887
Germany + Norway: all female candidates (n = 7)			296	198	494
Germany + Norway: all male candidates (n = 11)			591	363	954
Germany + Norway: all candidates (n = 18)			887	561	1,448

<sup>a</sup> The Norwegian parties elude easy classification along the traditional left–right spectrum but are rather organised in two overarching blocs.

<sup>b</sup> Alexander Dobrindt and Dietmar Bartsch did not use an Instagram page.

This study builds on the larger, comparative project “Digital Election Campaigning Worldwide (DigiWorld)”, which investigates the use of social media in election campaigns in more than 30 countries using a joint English codebook.<sup>2</sup> Due to reasons of practicability, our coding included the entire text of each post and the first image or the (first minute of the) first video included in it. While other studies in this field employed automated methods (e.g., Enders et al., 2022; Sandberg, 2022), we coded the materials manually, which entails one decisive advantage: Automated procedures such as topic modelling and natural language processing are based only on text but neglect visual materials, even though the latter are central to fully understanding the meaning of social media posts. For example, they often contain content elements not covered in the text. Moreover, visuals are important for catching user attention and being favoured by the social media algorithms, which increases posts’ visibility on the platform. That only 2 per cent of all posts in our sample did not include any visuals reflects their centrality.

## Measurement

All categories were coded independent of one another. Thus, as many categories as present could be coded per post (for category descriptions, see Table A2 in the Appendix):

- **Politicians:** The 18 political leaders as owners of the sites from which the post originated were coded automatically when collecting the data. For our analyses, we recoded this category into a binary category differentiating between women and men politicians.
- **Personalisation:** We coded four indicators derived from Van Aelst and colleagues (2012), each of which was coded binary as present (1) or not (0). *Professional competence*, an indicator of individualisation, comprised references to the politician’s career as an indication of their performance and competence (e.g., official positions, political achievements, education) in the post text. The other three indicators measured privatisation: *Home and family* measured whether the post text comprised references to the politician’s personal relationships or life at home (e.g., children, spouse, pets, relaxing); *personal preferences* addressed references in the text to politician’s non-work-related inclinations (e.g., culture, sports, hobbies, food); and for images and videos, we coded if they contained a *private background story* (Haßler et al., 2023), that is, if they showed politicians in a private context (e.g., with their family), discussed personal interests, and/or depicted their childhood or development with so-called “throwback” images.
- **Gender issue ownership:** For each post, we coded whether eleven issues were addressed in it (1) or not (0). Our analysis focuses on how far issues that have been described as either “female” (social policy, environment, health, children/families, education/research, cultural policy, civil rights/gender policy) or “male” (economy/finance, domestic policy, energy

policy, defence policy, foreign policy) in the literature (Brands et al., 2021; Lee & Lim, 2016; Winfrey & Schoebelen, 2019) were addressed on the sites of both women and men politicians.

## Reliability

Separate national coder teams (Germany: 6 coders; Norway: 3 coders) were intensively trained on the joint English codebook, allowing for cross-country comparability. Since the coding in both countries took place at different points in time, and the materials were in different languages, we could not perform cross-country reliability tests, but we performed inter-coder reliability tests within each country (Germany: 150; Norway: 140 – randomly selected posts). The researchers from both countries were closely involved in the development of the codebook. In addition, to ensure cross-country comparability, they exchanged views regularly during the coder training. The codebook builds strongly on a codebook we used in the previous project “Campaigning for Strasbourg (CamforS)”, which achieved satisfactory cross-country reliability for the issue categories (the other categories used here were not included in that codebook).

We calculated reliability indicators using Holsti’s formula and Brennan & Prediger’s kappa. Since we relied on binary codings and many categories appeared sparsely, Brennan & Prediger’s kappa provided a robust result. Among the chance corrected indicators for reliability, Brennan & Prediger’s kappa appears to be better suited than Krippendorff’s alpha for evaluating the reliability of skewed variables like ours (Quarfoot & Levine, 2016). Reliability was satisfactory for all variables used in our analyses (see Table A2 in the Appendix).

## Findings

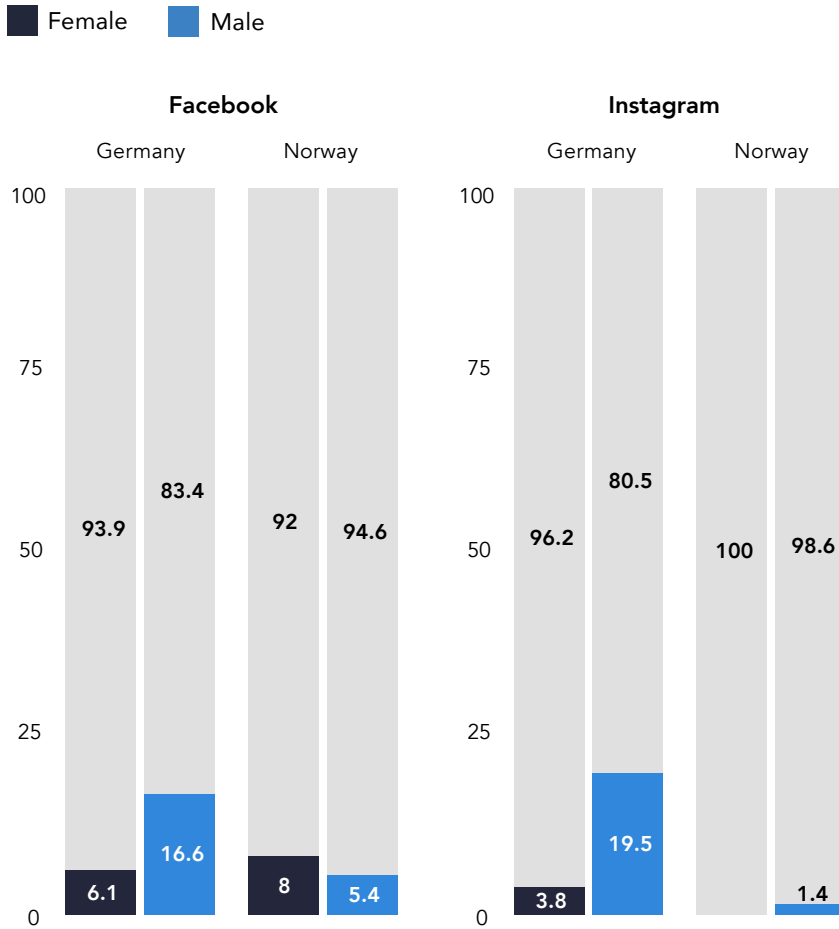
Below, we first present our findings on personalisation (see Figures 1–4). Afterwards, we analyse if the topics covered by women and men politicians are in line with the assumptions of gender issue ownership (see Figure 5). All figures include all three comparative dimensions we investigate: 1) women versus men politicians, 2) Facebook versus Instagram, and 3) Germany versus Norway. Since we show results from a “full sample” during the “hot phase” before the election in two specific countries without generalising, we did not run any statistical tests.

### Personalisation

For Figures 1–4, grey indicates the degree to which a specific condition was not found for each variable investigated below. We start with individualisation as measured by references to professional competencies. Figure 1 shows that these were more common in Germany than in Norway on both platforms. As indicated by percentages, a stronger effect of gender can be discerned in Germany than in Norway: In Germany, men referred to professional competencies more often than women on both platforms, in line with gender stereotypes – more than 2.5

times as often on Facebook and 5 times as often on Instagram. In Norway, by contrast, we found only slight differences between women and men politicians in this regard.

**FIGURE 1** Referrals to professional competence (per cent)



Moving from individualisation to privatisation, Figure 2 details the percentages of posts that featured at least one referral to home and family. We hardly found any differences between women and men politicians in this respect for Facebook in both countries, as well as for Instagram in Germany. However, the reported percentages indicate that Norwegian women politicians referred clearly more often to home and family on Instagram than the men.

**FIGURE 2** Referral to home and family (per cent)

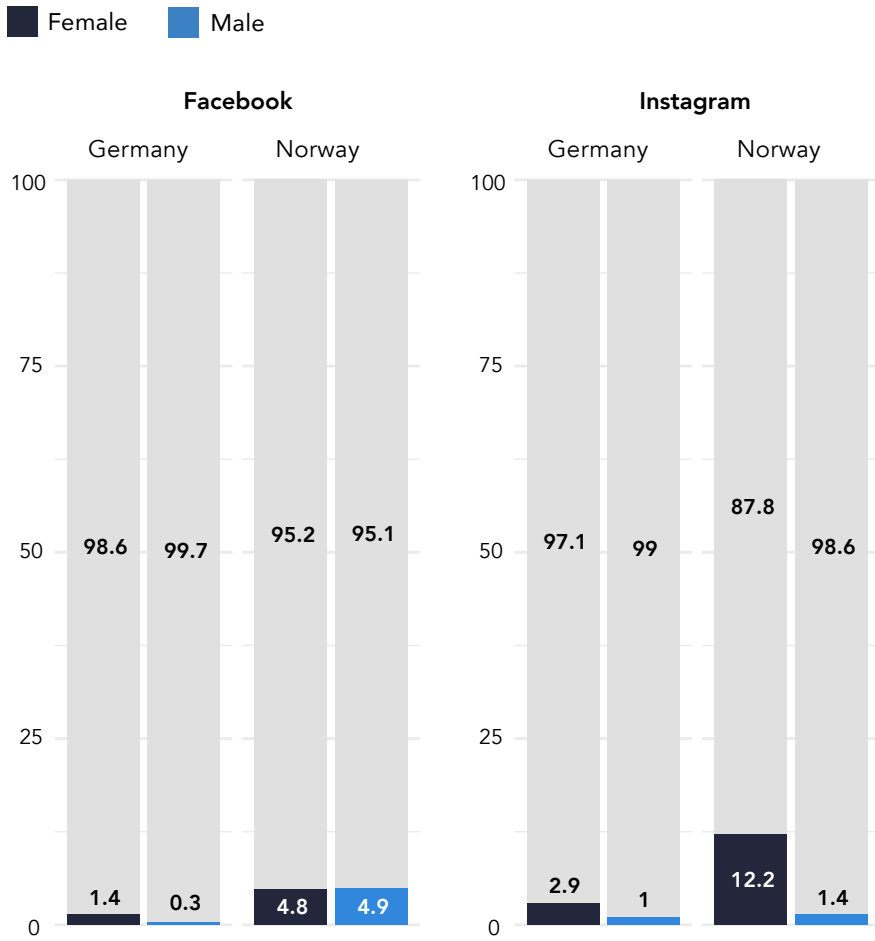
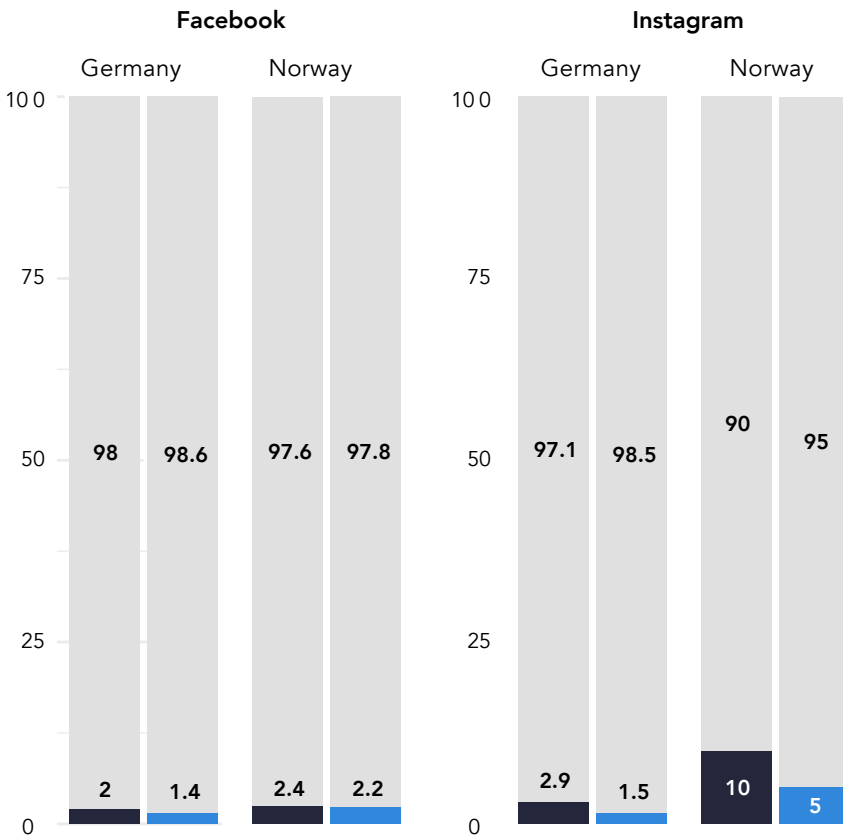


Figure 3 shows the results for referrals to personal preferences. For Facebook in both countries and Instagram in Germany, we found similarly low percentages for both women and men politicians. In Norway, however, women politicians referred to personal preferences twice as often as male politicians – a clear difference.

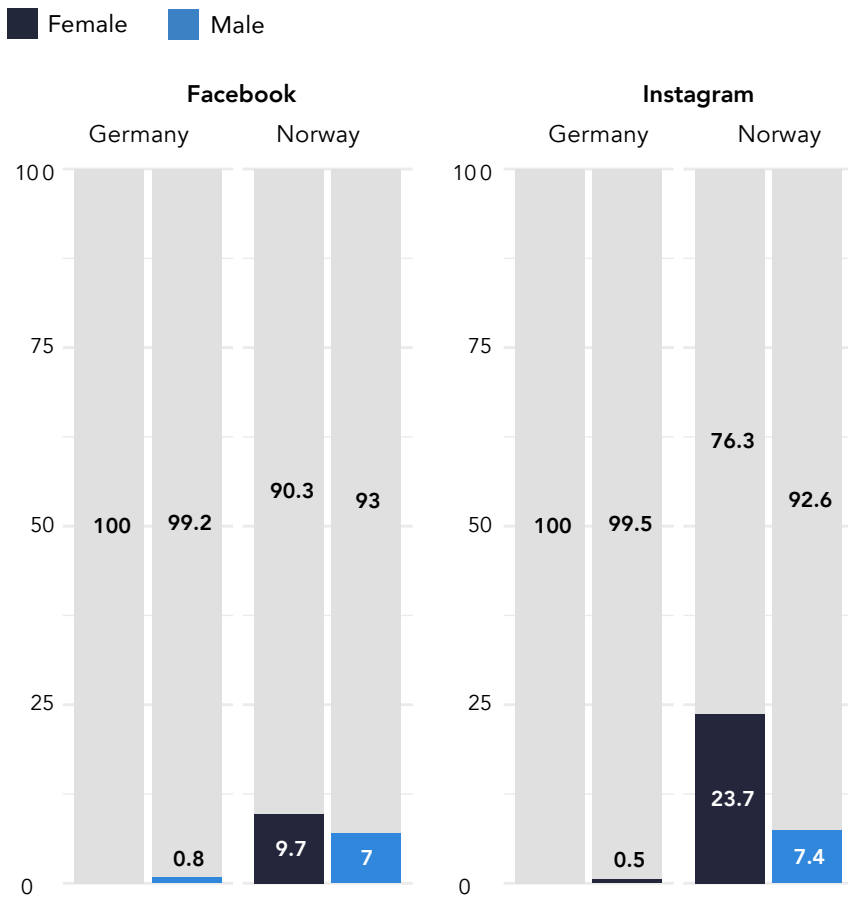
**FIGURE 3** Referral to personal preferences (per cent)

■ Female ■ Male



When it comes to private background stories, Figure 4 shows that these were hardly used in Germany at all, independent of gender. In Norway, the candidates used them more often, particularly on Instagram. The clearest gender difference we found is that Norwegian women politicians used private background stories on Instagram more than three times as often as men politicians.

**FIGURE 4** Display of image type “private background story” (per cent)



### Gender issue ownership

Now we turn to the topics addressed by women and men politicians. Figure 5 shows the percentage of the posts by women and men politicians from both countries on the two platforms which addressed the policy issues we look at. Referring to gender issue ownership, the upper panels show the “female issues” and the lower panels show the “male issues”. Figure 5 bundles all three comparative dimensions we look at:

- Gender: Women politicians are represented by triangles, men politicians by squares.
- Platforms: Black triangles/squares represent Facebook, orange triangles/squares represent Instagram.
- Countries: The left panels show the results for Germany, the right panels show the results for Norway.

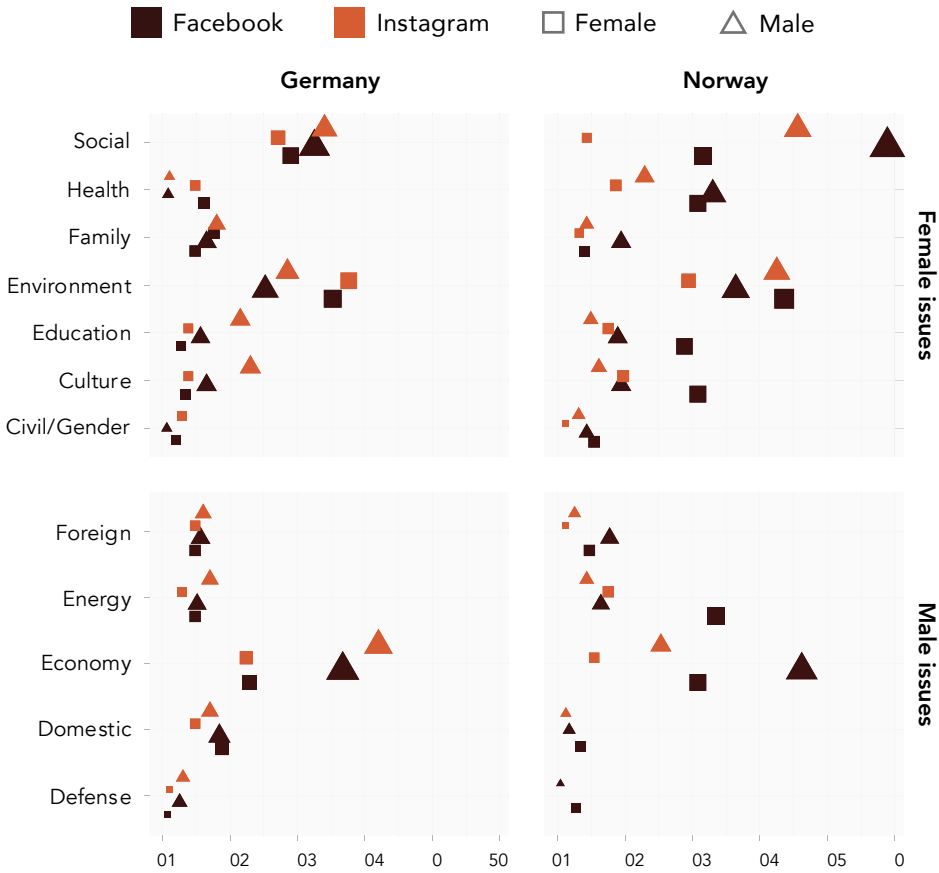


The larger the triangles and squares, the higher the number of posts containing the respective issue. Where on the x-axis a triangle or square is located indicates the percentage of posts containing the respective issue.

When it comes to the results, Figure 5 shows that the campaigns in both countries focused relatively strongly on certain issues while neglecting many others, as shown by the larger squares and triangles for these issues. Among the three most addressed issues were one “male” issue (economy/finance) and two “female” issues (environment, social policy), which might seem surprising against the background that “female” issues are traditionally considered least important in politics. However, which topics are addressed in election campaigns also depends on the current situation, and in both countries, environmental issues were high on the agenda at the time of the election campaigns (GLES, 2023; Institute for Social Research, n.d.). Thus, politicians of both genders seem to have set on this “hot issue”, following the “riding the wave strategy” (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994). The finding on social policy might have methodological reasons: Our social policy category included, among others, “labour”, in which case the gender-specific assignment is less clear.

To find out how far the politicians’ posts were shaped by gender issue ownership, we compare how often women and men politicians addressed female and male issues. However, Figure 5 does not show any clear, continuous patterns. The only issue which was completely in line with the expectations of gender issue ownership was economy/finance: Men addressed this issue clearly more often than women in both countries on both platforms. For four topics – two “female” (families/children, civil rights/gender) and two “male” (domestic policy, defence policy) – we find hardly any gender differences. One probable reason is the very low number of posts addressing these issues at all.

**FIGURE 5** Gender issue ownership (per cent)



*Comments:* The size of the squares and triangles indicates the number of posts, with the smallest representing approx. 30, mid-sized representing approx. 60, and the largest representing approx. 90. Reading example: The “male” issue economy/finance (to be found in the two lower panels) was addressed more often by men (represented by squares) than by women (represented by triangles) politicians on both Facebook (represented by black squares/triangles) and Instagram (represented by orange squares/triangles). This applies to both Germany (left panel) and Norway (right panel).

For most issues, however, we find mixed results. Some differences between women and men politicians are in line with the expectations of gender issue ownership: The “female” issue of environmental policy was addressed more often by women than men on Facebook in Germany. Norwegian women politicians addressed educational policy and cultural policy more often than men politicians. Concerning “male” issues, the only clear gender-specific difference besides economy/finance is that Norwegian men politicians addressed foreign policy on Instagram more often than women politicians.

In contrast, we also find clear differences that run counter to what gender issue ownership expects: Concerning “female” issues, German men politicians

addressed education and cultural policy more often than women politicians on Instagram. In Norway, social policy (on both platforms) and environmental policy (on Instagram) were addressed more often by men than by women politicians. Concerning “male” issues, Norwegian women politicians addressed energy policy more often than men politicians on Facebook. Overall, however, we find only low to moderate indication of gender issue ownership.

## Discussion

Altogether, our analysis revealed only weak indications of gendered self-presentations of women and men political leaders during the 2021 German and Norwegian national election campaigns on Facebook and Instagram, which is consistent with the findings of most previous studies in this field (e.g., Brands et al., 2021; Farkas & Bene, 2021; Hrbková & Macková, 2021). Concerning personalisation (RQ1), we found only few gender-specific differences, and the degree of privatisation was generally very low (see also Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Haßler et al., 2023). The politicians’ self-presentations, independent of gender, seemed to be strongly political in nature, including on social media. Concerning gender issue ownership (RQ2), we found differences between women and men politicians both corresponding to and contradicting gender stereotypes, but no overarching, consistent pattern. Noticeably, men politicians seemed to feel more responsible for economy and finance, one of the most central policy fields traditionally occupied by men. Environmental policy – the most central issue in both national election campaigns – was strongly addressed by both women and men despite being regarded as female. Thus, it seems plausible that “hot issues” can contribute to the fluidisation of traditional gender responsibilities.

Moreover, politicians’ gender is only one of many factors shaping campaign strategies (Mattan & Small, 2021). The strategic decision of which issues to address might have been more strongly dependent on the party a politician belongs to than their gender (Meeks & Domke, 2016). This is particularly so in two strong party democracies where political leaders are first and foremost representatives of their parties, and their election campaigns are organised by their parties. Put differently, party issue ownership may have widely beaten gender issue ownership in Germany and Norway in 2021, which would be in line with Cardo’s (2021) findings but would contradict those of Fridkin and Kenney (2014) and McGregor and colleagues (2017) in the US. Future studies should take a closer, systematic look at the interaction effect of party and gender issue ownership to explore under which conditions which of these plays a greater role.

On both platforms (RQ3), there were few gender-specific differences in the politicians’ self-presentation, perhaps caused by the parties’ overarching campaign strategies that often included re-using content across platforms. Concerning the difference between the two countries (RQ4), our main finding was that there were slightly more gendered self-presentations in Norway with regard to gender issue ownership. This might be surprising given the higher degree of gender equality compared with Germany. However, this finding might simply be due to the

methodological fact that some topics were addressed more often in Norway in general, which makes it more likely to find clear differences.

Overall, our findings indicated that the politicians we investigated did not follow rigid gender stereotypes, but that there seems to be a continuum between female and male gender roles (Sullivan, 2023) on which politicians of both genders can position themselves differently (see also Schneider, 2014). There are several possible explanations for that. First, it could be an indication that gender role expectations have become more fluid, at least in the countries we studied, which would be a good sign in terms of gender equality. It is, however, also conceivable that this finding was caused by the fact that we focused on politicians who are successful in their political careers, which is also the case for the vast majority of other studies in this field (e.g., Bast et al., 2022; Lee & Lim, 2016). Getting there might have required women politicians to learn to walk the line of the double bind skilfully and adapt to male stereotypes. Our empirical findings could be the result of these adaptation processes. The fact that other authors arrived at the same result – even for some European countries with far lower gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2022) than Norway and Germany – could point in this direction (Hungary: Farkas & Bene, 2021; Czech Republic: Hrbková & Machová, 2021). Tschla and colleagues (2023), however, found rather clear signs of gendered self-presentations in Greece. To explore this further, future research should investigate the self-presentation of women and men politicians on social media who are not in top political positions, for example, at the local level (e.g., Sullivan, 2023). To better understand the relationship between gender equality and politicians' self-portrayals on social media, we need systematic comparisons between a larger number of countries with different levels of gender equality (e.g., Jungblut & Haim, 2023), including beyond the Western context. This can, however, be a challenging endeavour, given that many more traditional countries have only few women political leaders. Such studies should also consider more potential influencing factors other than countries and platforms, such as, for example, party or candidate characteristics.

As with any investigation, our study has some limitations. We investigated only posts published on the official Facebook and Instagram pages of the national political leaders. Since these pages address a broader public, politicians might use gender stereotypes in a somewhat reserved manner due to strategic reasons. However, social media provide opportunities for addressing specific target groups by means of ads and microtargeting. Employing the Meta Ad Library (Facebook Help Centre, n.d.), future research should investigate if targeted ads differ in their use of gender stereotypes.

Another limitation is that even though our sample comprised 18 politicians, this number was still limited, and the findings could have been affected by potential idiosyncrasies of these politicians. We can therefore not generalise our results to politicians in general (or even to women and men politicians in Germany and Norway more generally). Future research should include a higher number of individual politicians from different countries, as well as at other

political levels than the national level (e.g., Jungblut & Haim, 2023; Sullivan, 2023), in order to investigate how far the patterns we found are context-specific. Moreover, concerning gender issue ownership, we only investigated which issues the politicians referred to but not how the issues were addressed, which can happen in quite gender-specific ways (Brands et al., 2021). Future studies should, in addition to quantitative investigations, use more qualitative approaches to study the content of the posts more closely.

Finally, we only looked at the content of the posts. It would, however, also be important to conduct observations of and interviews with politicians (for an example, see Sullivan, 2023) and campaign teams to investigate whether gender stereotypes are consciously addressed or rather unreflectively applied or counteracted in campaign communication. It should also be studied how users are affected by politicians' self-presentation in line with and countering gender stereotypes, thus boosting or diminishing the visibility of the respective content on social media. Such studies can, for example, relate social media content with user engagement on social media (e.g., Brands et al., 2021; Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018) or conduct experiments (e.g., Meeks & Domke, 2016), interviews, or surveys with users to find out how they are affected by and evaluate certain (gendered) self-presentations of politicians. Such studies are urgently needed since politicians' self-presentations do not only affect their own and their parties' election chances (Mechkova & Wilson, 2021; Meeks & Domke, 2016), but they also influence which political issues are included on the political agenda – and to which degree these take the interests of both women and men into account.

Of course, it is neither necessary nor useful that all politicians present themselves in the same way, whether they contradict or conform to gender stereotypes. However, highly regarded public figures such as politicians can serve as examples and provide orientation for both women and men. Their gendered self-presentations can become problematic if they show systematic biases that repeat and thus further reinforce existing gender stereotypes – not only in politicians' self-presentations but also in society as a whole. Even though we did not find such systematic biases in our study, politics is not the only social sphere where the double bind poses a problem for equal opportunity. If top women politicians find successful ways of walking the double bind, they can become examples for women at lower (political) levels and in other societal spheres, such as, for example, economics or sports. This can further drive the changes in consciousness that are already taking place in society and contribute to further growing gender equality.

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## Appendix

**TABLE A1** Use of Facebook and Instagram in Germany and Norway by gender and age (per cent)

		Germany		Norway	
		Facebook	Instagram	Facebook	Instagram
Gender	Female	46	32	81	58
	Male	42	27	69	37
Age	18–24	30	67	69	66
	25–34	50	51	70	57
	35–44	49	34	78	54
	45–54	42	23	79	48
	55+	44	15	77	35
Total		44	29	75	48

Source: Newman et al., 2021

**TABLE A2** Category descriptions and reliability

Category name	Description	Examples				
			BP kappa (Germany)	Holsti (Germany)	BP kappa (Norway)	Holsti (Norway)
personal_ procomp	Professional competence: Here, we code if the text in the post includes referrals to the candidate's career as an indication of his/her performance and competence.	description of political career; official positions of politicians; political achievements; education.	.784	.894	.897	.949
personal_ home	Home and family: Here, we code if the text in the post deals with the candidate's personal relationships or life at home.	mentions of the parental or marital role, children, spouse, parents; relaxing or cooking dinner at home or at a holiday home; walking a dog.	NA	1.00	.949	.974
personal_ pref	Personal preferences: The text discloses a candidate's personal inclinations regarding cultural and other phenomena such as literature, television, sports or by portraying the politician as a 'passionate music lover'.	referrals to recreational activities (e.g., skiing), sporting events, cultural events, the weather, nature, birthdays or holidays, food preferences (e.g., being a vegetarian).	.968	.986	.889	.944

image190	Private background story: The image/video shows politicians in a private context (e.g., with their partner or children), discusses their interests and hobbies or depicts their childhood/development with so-called “throwback” images. The image/video is about the person in the private context or private things of the person.	Coffee cup on a table	.920	.964	.893	.946
topic310	Economy and finance	the European crisis, austerity measures, trade agreements, protectionism, customs duties, taxes, tax system, national debt, budget, budgetary policy, agriculture and forestry, enterprise policy, consumer protection	.752	.887	.810	.905
topic321	Health	health insurance, lack of personnel in the care sector, pandemic	.960	.981	.829	.914
topic325	Policy for families and children	childcare, youth policy, policies such as child-care allowance, parental allowance, protection against dismissal for expectant mothers, child-care places, tax incentives for parents	.984	.992	.943	.971
topic320	Labour and social issues	pensions, rents, wages, working hours, labour market, skilled workers, social policy, pension policy, welfare state	.800	.906	.867	.933
topic331	Criminality/crime rate in general	other internal security issues such as crime, police operations, video surveillance, etc. are addressed. NOT: crimes of asylum seekers, refugees, or other immigrants. These should be coded under topic340	.896	.953	.981	.990
topic332	Political radicalism/religious fanaticism	policy measures against right/left-wing extremism, Islamism, National Socialism	.888	.948	.990	.995

topic333	Corruption	policy measures against corruption, corruption problem in general *accusations of corruption against a public authority of the state should be classified into "type of attack"	.968	.985	NA	1.00
topic330	Domestic policy	public safety and order, internal security, legal policy	.808	.908	.981	.990
topic361	Environmental policy	climate change, safety of endangered species, policy to save forests, animal rights	.832	.920	.800	.900
topic362	Energy policy	energy system transformation, electricity prices	.936	.969	.962	9.81
topic371	Education and research policy	curriculum, school system, job training, universities, financial support for students, early childhood education, graduate and professional education, school size, class size, school/university choice, school/university privatisation, tracking, teacher selection, teacher pay, teaching methods, curricular content, graduation requirements, school/university/research infrastructure, funding, and the values that schools and universities are expected to uphold and model	.912	.959	.905	.952
topic372	Sport policy	politics related to sport and leisure, state support for young athletes, state training programs, state-sponsored building of sports facilities, corona-related measures in sports stadiums	.992	.997	.990	.995
topic370	Cultural policy	regulations for cultural events in times of the Covid-pandemic; funding of theatres; public funding of movies	.952	.979	.981	.990
topic380	Defence policy	national security, military, external security, policy of peace, policy of détente	.936	.971	.990	.995

topic410	War and military conflicts between countries	UN peacekeeping, operations of the national army abroad	Not coded as separate topic	Not coded as separate topic	1.00	1.00
topic400	Foreign policy, international relations The post addresses foreign policy issues related or not related to the country under investigation.	relations between individual EU member states, relations with other states, relations with international organisations (e.g., UN, NATO), development policy, arms trades, sanctions, etc.	.928	.936	.962	.981

*Comments:* Some topics were merged in our analyses due to small numbers of cases: topic400-410; topic330-333; topic 370-372.

## Endnotes

1. In Norway, a tenth group (Patient Focus) received one seat in the national parliament but is excluded from the sample since its leader did not run any Facebook or Instagram accounts.
2. For more information about the project, visit the website (<https://digidemo.ifkw.lmu.de/digiworld/>). The codebook covers a broad range of aspects of election campaigns, besides the categories used in this analysis for example calls to action, negative campaigning, populism, actors, and visual elements.

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