

Do German parties care about Europe? A Twitter study

The political paralysis in Germany has become a [central issue](#) in today's European politics. Negotiations to form a government coalition follow inconclusive elections in September in which the **CDU/CSU** alliance suffered a severe hit and the far-right, anti-immigration Alternative for Germany became the third largest force in German politics by scooping up nearly **13 %** of the vote. Differences over key issues – such as immigrants, climate, or the European integration process - run deep and prevent an agreement being reached between the possible coalition partners. Although the **EU** is not the (only) apple of discord, commentators and analysts throughout Europe underlined the importance of the composition of the new German parliament for the future of the EU. We looked at Twitter data of candidates running in the *Bundestag* election on **24 September 2017** to better understand if and to what extent the discussion over the EU shaped the electoral campaign.

#BTW2017, the Bundestag election on Twitter

Starting **30 August 2017**, and up to the day of the vote, we followed Germany's election campaign on Twitter. We tracked Twitter activity of the six major parties according to the polls: **Alternative for Germany (AfD)**; the **Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU)** and **Christian Social Union in Bavaria (CSU)**; **Die Grünen (GRÜNEN)**; **Free Democratic Party (FDP)**; the **Left (Die Linke)**; and the **Social Democratic Party (SPD)**. For each party, we collected all tweets sent by the candidates to the *Bundestag* as well as Twitter users' reaction to such messages, either in form of retweets (RTs) or replies.

If we were to judge from Twitter activity, Germany's political landscape would look much different than the reality

While preparing the study, we were struck by the relatively poor penetration of **Twitter** between German candidates, especially [when compared to other elections we followed](#). Out of **2,516 candidates**, we were able to retrieve **only 722 active Twitter profiles (28.7%)**; this resonates with an [overall low social media penetration in Germany](#). Interestingly, we found that the share of Twitter users is higher - almost double - among 'direct' candidates (those who run in a constituency) than among candidates who run in a Land list. This seems to indicate a higher propensity of direct candidates to engage actively in communication with the electoral base, as suggested by Zittel ([2009](#), [2015](#)).

We collected **59,257 tweets** sent by the **721 candidates** and the reactions to those tweets, thus obtaining **377,797 tweets** sent by **55,779 users**.

An Eurosceptic party dominates the Twitter campaign

As we showed in a [preliminary analysis](#), **social media use is not equally widespread across**

political parties. Also, if we were to judge from Twitter activity, Germany's political landscape would look much different than the reality (or than the image offered by the polls before the vote). Political parties, in fact, differ greatly in the use they make of social media, and in their ability to trigger participation and engagement in the campaign. In the development of the Twitter campaign, [the far-right party Alternative for Germany \(AfD\) emerged as the leading actor](#), thanks to an effective use of social media strategies by their candidates.

AfD candidates were by far the most prolific: on average, they **tweeted 4.73 times per day** (against an average of 2.16 tweets sent by other candidates). Furthermore, messages from AfD candidates generated a wider reaction; the average tweet from an AfD candidate got retweeted **8.5 times**, compared to an average of about **1.7 times** for other parties' tweets. This latter result reflects the fact that AfD supporters on Twitter outnumbered those who interacted with other parties' candidates. Also, they tended to disseminate AfD content more actively (in terms of average number of retweets) than other parties' supporters (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Twitter activity of German political parties

Do German candidates talk about the EU?

The AfD [was born](#) in **2013** out of opposition to Merkel's support for the repeated bailouts for struggling Eurozone countries. With the migration crisis reaching its peak, the AfD added **anti-**

immigrant messages to their original Eurosceptic core. With the AfD showing a higher capacity to exploit digital arenas to influence the political agenda, we expected a high degree of attention accorded to the European Union during the German campaign.

It was Angela Merkel's CDU - arguably the most mainstream party in German politics - who emerged as the most concerned about the EU in the electoral campaign

We analysed tweets of AfD candidates and compared them to tweets sent by candidates of other parties in order to extrapolate the most distinctive features and "topics" of the AfD campaign and to disentangle the possible elements of a Eurosceptic discourse. According to the scholarly literature ([Hooghe & Marks 2009](#) amongst many others) and to prior observation, Eurosceptic, extremist parties (at the far right or the far-left) are more likely to politicize the European Union and to accord it a greater salience in the debate than mainstream ones. We used an algorithm to highlight words and hashtags that are frequently used by AfD candidates but are less common (or absent) in other parties' discourse. We have plotted the results in Figure 2. At a first glance, AfD tweets seem to be peculiar in that they focus mostly on immigration and on negative campaigning towards other candidates; on the other hand, **we did not find clear signs of EU politicisation.**

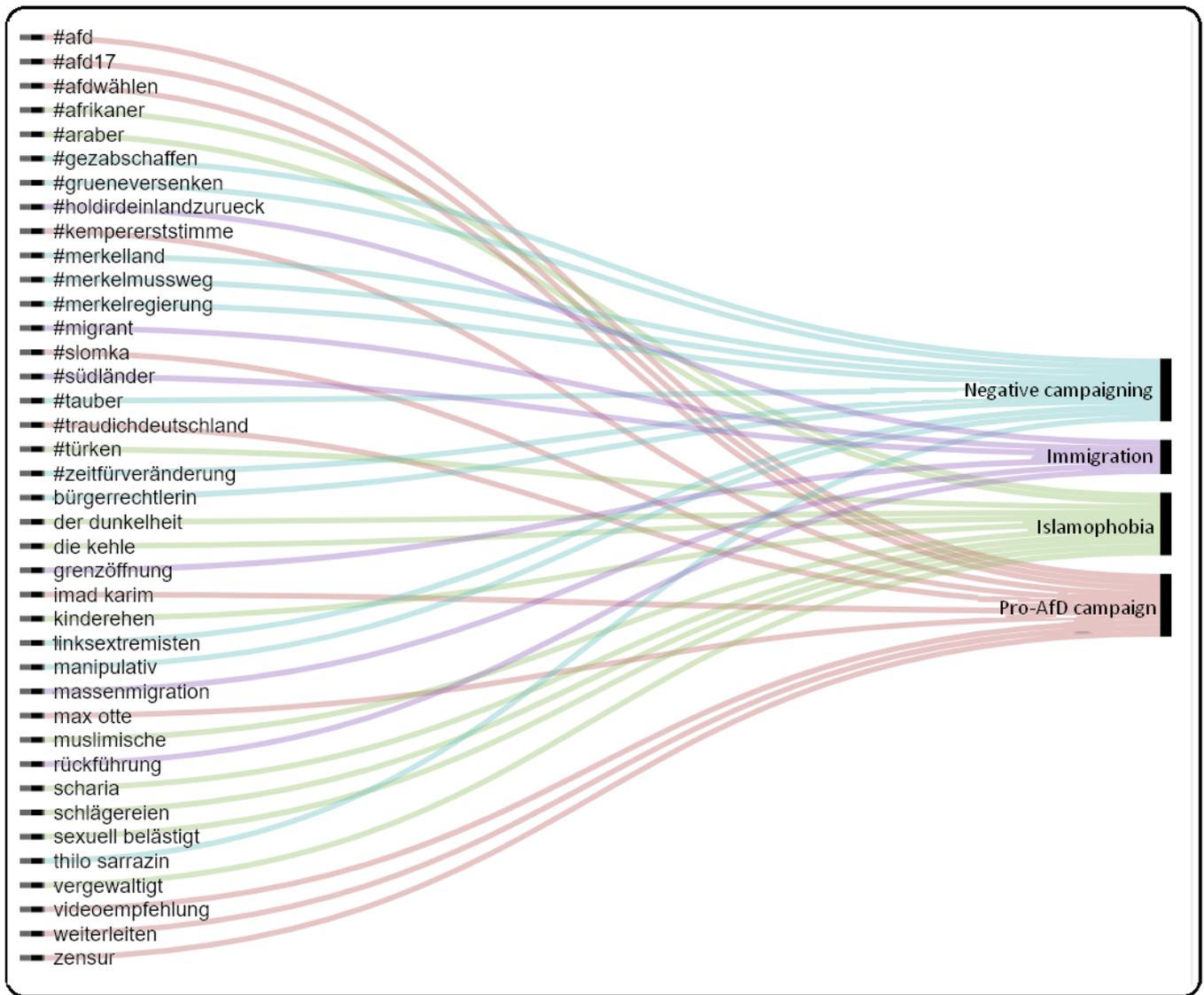


Figure 2. Distinctive features, tweets by AfD candidates

To better understand the traction of EU-related topics in the electoral debate, **we used a combination of thematic dictionaries and machine learning classifiers** to separate conversations on European matters from the rest of the data. We scraped all tweets sent by the candidates and by citizens, and in so doing were able to **highlight interesting patterns in the attention given to the EU or to EU-related issues.**

In Figure 3 we divided tweets sent by candidates and political leaders based on their party and ordered them by salience of EU-related tweets. As can be seen, **a relatively low importance is accorded to the EU**; on average, only **2.3 %** of the messages sent by the candidates is EU-related. Also, the differences we observed across parties are not very high, ranging from **1.73%** of **DIE LINKE** tweets to **2.65%** of tweets sent by **CDU/CSU** candidates. It is worth noting

that **contrary to our expectations, it was Angela Merkel's CDU - arguably the most mainstream party in German politics - who emerged as the most concerned about the EU in the electoral campaign.**

Figure 3. Share of EU-related tweets

What about citizens?

In an *online* campaign, supporters' attitudes and reactions matter, hence candidates' ability to set the agenda of the public debate can only go so far. As social networking platforms provide a two-way interaction between candidates and voters, **we tried to shed some light on the relationship between elites and masses in EU online politicisation.** After all, by looking at only the candidates' side, we might have missed relevant conversations and underestimated overall EU politicisation.

Surprisingly enough, mainstream parties and politicians turn out to be the most likely to fuel discussions on Europe

As a first step, **we compared the shares of EU-related tweets sent by the citizens with the salience of the EU in tweets sent by the candidates**: as it turns out, citizens are only slightly more interested in the topic (**3.29 vs 2.33 %** of EU-related content). However, since we collected citizens' tweets only insofar as they were replying to (or retweeting) candidates' messages, we wanted to rule out the possibility of our results being driven by the candidates setting the agenda of online conversation.

We cross-checked our results against a different set of tweets, collected in comparable conditions based on the presence of a set of keywords and hashtags related to the German *Bundestag* election. Here too, **a mild interest towards the EU is confirmed**, as only 2.5% of such tweets is dedicated to the EU.

Resonance

We have attempted to **outline differences across parties in the role played by political elites in activating online discussion on European matters**. We have built a standardised "index of reaction" indicating how much more/less EU-related tweets resonate compared to generic ones –so that a value of 1 means that EU tweets generate the same amount of retweets as generic ones. As we show in Figure 4, Twitter users tended to retweet EU-related content more actively than they did other topics; all parties feature values higher than 1, indicating that EU-related content resonates more than other subjects.

Differences between the parties were again significant. As Figure 4 shows, supporters of 'extreme' parties were blandly interested, whilst mainstream party's candidates seem to create a higher engagement around European issues. **An EU-related tweet was retweeted twice as much as a general tweet amongst Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), and more than three times as much amongst Socialists (SPD). The FDP turns out to be the party with the highest level of resonance**: its supporters retweeted an EU-related tweet six times more than a generic one. This is interesting if compared to the low number of EU-related tweets sent by the FDP candidates, that is only the 2,07% of the overall FDP dataset. We can say that in response to a limited engagement of the candidates in tweeting about the EU, its supporters proved to be widely interested in the issue.

Figure 4. Engagement around EU issues measured through a "standardised index of reaction"

Conclusions

As of today, it is still unclear what the implications will be of the German political instability [for the future of European politics](#). **Judging from the political debate on Twitter, the discussion about the European Union was not at the core of the German electoral campaign.** This is despite the fact that the force that was most vocal on social media turned out to be the Eurosceptic AfD; although its original focus was to promote an anti-European agenda, the party gave main emphasis to immigration and Islam. Surprisingly, mainstream parties demonstrated to be more capable of leading discussions on Europe.

In the next article, we will try to understand the content of the engagement in EU-related discussions of both candidates and public, investigating the contentiousness generated by EU-

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related issues in our Twitter dataset.

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