How German political parties feel about the EU - A Twitter study

A lot of has changed since the **German elections in September 2017**. The political paralysis that followed the vote was recently resolved after **Angela Merkel** finally agreed to a suitable coalition on the 14th of March this year. This new, "grand coalition" of Merkel's Conservatives and the Social Democrats, was hailed by European observers and politicians as a **good news for the EU**. Still, Merkel's new government is facing crucial political decisions concerning the future of the European project, including a possible reform of the Eurozone, something **French President Emmanuel Macron is also considering**.

Looking back at how EU-related issues have been discussed by German candidates during the electoral campaign last year tells us a lot about how the political elite of a country with an undisputed leading role in the EU sees the future of the Union.

From August 30th 2017 up to election day, **EuVisions tracked the Twitter activity of candidates belonging to the major German parties**: Alternative for Germany (**AfD**), the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (**CDU**) and Christian Social Union in Bavaria (**CSU**), Die Grünen (**GRÜNEN**), the Free Democratic Party (**FDP**), the Left (**Die Linke**) and the Social Democratic Party (**SPD**). We collected **59,257 tweets** sent by the 721 candidates who had a Twitter account during the campaign period, and we collected all the reactions to those tweets – either in form or retweets or replies – **for a total amount of 377,797 tweets sent by 55,779 users**.

> Discussions about the EU are almost evenly split between negative and positive tweets, with a slight majority of 50.99% for negative content. More interestingly, at the party level, different patterns of politicization of the EU emerge

In a previous article, we explored how prevalent (the **'salience'**) the European Union was in candidates' tweets during the electoral campaign in Germany. As it turned out, **the European Union was not at the core of the debate at the time of the German electoral campaign**. We manually classified the tweets to identify a subset of EU-relevant discussions and found that 1,382 tweets dealt with EU-related issues, either expressing opinions or simply sharing news about it. Furthermore, we broke down the salience of EU-related topics at a party level, and we found that **'mainstream' parties such as Merkel's CDU and the SPD led by Martin Schulz were the ones fueling the discussions on Europe**, **overtaking the more Eurosceptic groups**. This result seems to contradict the academic literature (Hooghe & Marks 2009 amongst others), according to which Eurosceptic parties are more likely to politicize the EU in the debate than mainstream ones.

In the following article, we try to shed some light on the content and the meaning of the engagement that emerged in online discussions about the EU. To do so, we investigated the

'contentiousness' of EU-related issues – the degree to which discussions about the EU are controversial – and looked at the pattern that emerged in candidates' and citizens' reactions.

How do German candidates talk about the EU?

In order to understand what kind of opinions about the EU were expressed by German candidates on Twitter, **we started by manually classifying tweets posted by German candidates that were previously identified as EU-relevant**. We then separated those expressing opinions about the EU from neutral or non-partisan content. This classification resulted in a subset of **910 attitudinal tweets** (**65.8% of the EU-relevant subset**).

We then proceeded by making the distinction between 'negative' and 'positive' content. We considered tweets as "EU-negative" when candidates expressed a negative stance on the current *status quo* of the European Union. It is important to underline that such messages do not necessarily express a Eurosceptic perspective. We considered tweets to be "negative" even if they were constructively critical, or in cases where the EU was only indirectly criticized – namely, while attacking a leader or a party that for particular reasons is strongly tied to EU policies or institutions. An emblematic case in this sense is the role of German Chancellor Angela Merkel as one of Europe's leading figures. On the other hand, we considered tweets to be "EU-positive" when candidates expressed positive views about current EU policies or institutions.

We found that discussions about the EU are almost evenly split between negative and positive tweets, with a slight majority of 50.99% for negative content. More interestingly, at the party level, different patterns of politicization of the EU emerge, as Figure 1 shows.

Figure 1: Distribution of EU-positive and EU-negative tweets per parties

Eurosceptic political forces like the AfD and Die Linke tweeted 'negative' stances towards the EU most of the time. These parties are positioned at the two extremes of the German political spectrum, on the right and the left respectively. On the other hand, the Social Democrats and the Greens showed the highest rate of positive tweets. As shown in the graph, even long-standing pro-EU parties presented significant amounts of EU-negative tweets. **Surprisingly enough, CDU's and CSU's Conservatives show a higher share of negative tweets about the EU (52.29%) than positive ones**.

> In the past, the Free Democratic Party expressed a positive attitude towards the EU integration process, but recently its stances about EU-related issues are increasingly changing, and it seems like this trend was already emerging during the candidates' online campaign

To better understand the different patterns of politicization of EU discussions, **we added a further level of classification of 'negative' content, distinguished on the basis of the intensity of criticism towards EU-related issues** (see Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008). We sorted tweets into messages featuring "**hard criticism**" towards the EU, its founding principles and institutions, mostly from a eurosceptic perspective; and messages expressing "**soft criticism**", namely those conversations that call for reforms, further integration, or a change in position on the part of EU institutions towards different matters. **Overall, candidates' tweets are split into a majority of 'soft' negative tweets (70.3%) and a minority (29.7%) of 'hard' negative tweets**.

Figure 3: Distribution of EU-hard negative and EU-soft negative tweets per parties

As Figure 3 shows, **the anti-EU Alternative for Germany leads the way as far as 'hard' criticisms are concerned, showing a slight majority (50.3%) of these kinds of messages**. **For every other party, 'soft' criticism prevails**. Mainstream traditional parties such as the CDU/CSU and the SPD present a broad majority of 'soft' negative conversations about the EU. Surprisingly, the FDP had the same level of 'hard' negative tweets as Die Linke (33.3%). In the past, the Free Democratic Party expressed a positive attitude towards the EU integration process, but recently its stances about EU-related issues are increasingly changing, and it seems like this trend was already emerging during the candidates' online campaign.

> Topics that emerged as distinctively EU-negative happened to be strongly tied to the online campaigning strategy of the Eurosceptic party Alternative for Germany

Furthermore, we tried highlighting the content of the criticism expressed towards the EU by German candidates. In order to do so, **by means of topic modelling techniques, we detected the most distinctive features of EU-negative tweets** when compared to all other EU-relevant conversations.

Figure 2: Distinctive features, EU-negative tweets by all candidates

Topics that emerged as distinctively EU-negative happened to be strongly tied to the online campaigning strategy of the Eurosceptic party Alternative for Germany. This is reflected by the presence, among our topical terms, of many words and hashtags related to the AfD campaign,

such as *#afdwahlen* (#voteafd) and *#gauland*. **As far as the main issues are concerned, immigration has a key role**. This topic is the most peculiar and often referred to with words such as *grenzen* (borders) and *#flüchtlingskrise* (#refugeecrisis). It is worth noting that the AfD has made the fight against immigration the war horse of their campaign (as shown in our [previous study](#)). **The economic and political dimensions of European integration are present as well**. In many conversations – often fueled by the AfD – the EU, despite being criticised, is not the primary target. For example, AfD candidates blame Merkel for the *eurorettungspolitik* (as in Merkel's efforts to "save the Eurozone"), and accused her of protecting EU interests over German interests, placing *unangemessene Lasten* (heavy financial burdens) on the country.

How do German citizens talk about the EU?

As mentioned earlier, we were not only able to track the Twitter activity of German candidates but also citizens' reactions to their tweets in the form of retweets and replies. **By means of Natural Language Processing (NLP), we broke down citizens' conversations along the same categories we used for the candidates' tweets, eventually sorting them into 'positive' and 'negative' EU-related opinions**. As it turns out, German citizens took to Twitter to discuss the EU with their candidates mostly in negative terms (59.9% of tweets). Citizens seem to show a stronger negative orientation towards the EU than the candidates themselves (the share of negative tweets is 9 percentage points higher in the citizens' subset than it is in the candidates one).

> Followers of Eurosceptic parties such as the AfD and Die Linke tend to retweet EU-negative content more actively than they do with both EU-relevant and EU-positive messages. The opposite is true with mainstream pro-EU parties such as SPD and CDU

Again, a clearer picture emerges at the party level. **We have built a standardised "index of reaction", indicating how much more/less EU-negative tweets sent by candidates resonate in other user's conversations, when compared to all the conversations about the EU**. We did the same for the EU-positive tweets, and eventually compared the resonance of EU-negative and the EU-positive messages with each other. A value of 1 indicates that there's no difference in terms of resonance between the compared sets of messages.

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

As we see in Figure 4, **followers of Eurosceptic parties such as the AfD and Die Linke tend to retweet EU-negative content more actively than they do with both EU-relevant and EU-positive messages**. The opposite is true with mainstream pro-EU parties such as SPD and CDU. Citizens not only seem to follow the same prevailing attitude towards the EU as their candidates, but they also amplify their stance in a more pronounced fashion. This seems to be true not only for critical messages (as hypothesized above) but also in the case of a positive stance. Following this pattern, **the FDP emerged as a borderline case: negative tweets by its candidates resonated 8 times more than the positive messages, as a clear sign of critical attitude of FDP followers towards the European Union**.

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