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Divisive, Negative, and Populist?! An Empirical Analysis of European Populist and Mainstream Parties' Use of Digital Political Advertisements

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For digital political advertising (DPA) on Facebook, parties can complement their organic communication by targeting users with sponsored posts (Facebook-sponsored posts) and advertising campaigns (Facebook ads). Based on the theoretical framework of dissonant public spheres in the digital age, this article provides the first empirical analysis of how and with what content populist and mainstream parties use DPA on Facebook for divisive, negative, and populist messages. We analyze a data set of approximately 10,000 Facebook organic posts, sponsored posts, and ads published by 53 parties across 10 European countries during the 2019 European parliamentary election. Our findings reveal that populist and mainstream parties do not sponsor more posts or spend more money on ads containing divisive topics, negativity, and populist communication styles. Our article extends the debate on digital public spheres by incorporating parties' use of division, negativity, and populism in DPA, thus offering a better understanding of their implications for shaping dissonant public spheres.

Keywords: dissonant public sphere, digital advertising, Facebook, populism, negativity

Social networking platforms (SNP) offer new opportunities for political campaigns to employ personalized advertising strategies, akin to those routinely practiced by commercial marketers (Kruschinski & Bene, 2022). For this digital political advertising (DPA), Facebook has become a central channel for political parties to draw on the platform's algorithmic advertising system, as it compiles and analyzes unprecedented amounts of user data (e.g., social demographics, interests, and behavior) to find receptive audiences for their messages (Andreou et al., 2019). Thus, they can complement organic communication on public Facebook pages by targeting audiences with sponsored organic posts (Facebook sponsored posts) and advertising campaigns (Facebook ads).

Through their use of divisive, negative, and populist messages in DPA, scholars argue that parties contribute to the rise of dissonant public spheres (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Habermas, 2022), characterized by public fragmentation and an inability to communicate across differences (Gibson, 2023; Römmele & Gibson, 2020). On Facebook, DPA allows political actors to target divisive issues or promote negative and populist narratives to susceptible voters, ultimately reinforcing existing political divides and shaping a disruptive public sphere. This argument is supported by Facebook's advertising system, which uses "ad auctions" to reward content that triggers user engagement (e.g., clicks, likes, shares, comments) by making highly engaged ads cheaper to buy (Andreou et al., 2019; Facebook, 2020a). As divisive topics, negative

emotions, and populist styles are more likely to drive user engagement (e.g., Bene et al., 2022; Eberl, Tolochko, Jost, Heidenreich, & Boomgaarden, 2020), parties might be encouraged to use these content strategies to maximize return on investment. However, we lack scientific evidence about how DPA is used in parties` election campaigns and how party characteristics shape this use. Thus, questions about DPA as one of the driving forces for dissonant public spheres—especially in different country contexts—remain largely unanswered.

This article aims to provide empirical answers to these questions by drawing on a quantitative content analysis of 6,063 organic posts, 1,027 sponsored posts, and 1,857 ads published by 15 populist and 38 mainstream parties in 10 different countries during the 2019 European Parliamentary (EP) election campaign. Specifically, we explore whether organic posts are more likely to be sponsored and whether Facebook ads receive higher spending based on the divisiveness of political issues, levels of negativity, and populist communication style. Further, we analyze how this use is influenced by parties' populist nature.

Our study advances the literature with the following three contributions: (1) It advances the theoretical framework of (dissonant) digital public spheres by incorporating parties' use of division, negativity, and populism in DPA and by developing a functional model of DPA on Facebook, specifically focusing on disruptive message strategies. This helps to better understand the potential of parties' use of DPA for shaping dissonant public spheres. (2) It provides the first quantitative empirical evidence on how political parties use divisive, negative, and populist content in sponsored posts and ads, since previous research on DPA mainly dealt with normative and legal aspects (e.g., Dommett & Power, 2019; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018) or was based on qualitative data (e.g., Dommett, Kefford, & Kruschinski, 2024; Kruschinski & Haller, 2017). (3) It provides the first international comparative content analysis of Facebook-sponsored posts and ads in a broad range of countries and in a common election contest, which increases the social significance and generalizability of the results. This is needed because extant studies focus on single-country cases, often the U.S. (Fowler, Franz, Martin, Peskowitz, & Ridout, 2021; Kreiss, Lawrence, & McGregor, 2018).

Altogether, this study has the potential to identify the divisive and polarizing nature of political actors' DPA on Facebook and to systematize structural influences across parties in relation to their populist nature. This allows for a more empirically substantiated discussion of how political actors may contribute to a dissonant public sphere.

Digital Political Advertising on Facebook

SNPs and their business models of targeted, personalized message delivery have transformed political advertising, particularly in spending and voter targeting (Dommett & Power, 2019; Votta et al., 2024). By drawing on the platforms' advertising architectures with their unprecedented amounts of user data, DPA is scalable in ad prices, easy to produce, and sophisticated in its targeting capacities (Votta et al., 2024). This enables political actors to detect and reach fine-grained audiences with tailored messages, "[. . .] ranging from high-budget, national adverts, to small budget, localized initiatives" (Dommett & Power, 2019, p. 258). Thus, over the past years, DPA has continued to grow in importance for campaigns, which is also indicated by spending numbers on DPA by U.S. and European parties (Kruschinski & Bene, 2022; Ridout, Fowler, & Franz, 2021; Votta et al., 2024).

Facebook is seen as the most relevant SNP for political campaigning because of its huge user base and platform affordances for DPA—"real and perceived functionalities of what platforms do" (Kreiss et al., 2018, p. 13). Facebook offers two types of paid media messages, which are the first cornerstone of our functional model for DPA use on Facebook (see Figure 1, unbroken lines). First, through payment, sponsored posts build on organic posts, which are delivered to news feeds of target audiences based on certain criteria like location, age, gender, or language. Sponsored posts can be used to enhance user engagement and reach broader audiences (Kruschinski & Bene, 2022). Second, ads are paid advertisements delivered solely into the newsfeeds of selected users; they are not published on the public Facebook pages of political parties. Like sponsored posts, ads can target audiences but allow for sophisticated and customized targeting campaigns by defining targets based on contact information (e.g., e-mails, names), creating new audiences based on users' shared characteristics (e.g., people who liked the political advertiser's Facebook page or visited their website), or fine-tuning the ad performance by evaluative analytics (Kruschinski & Bene, 2022; Votta et al., 2024).

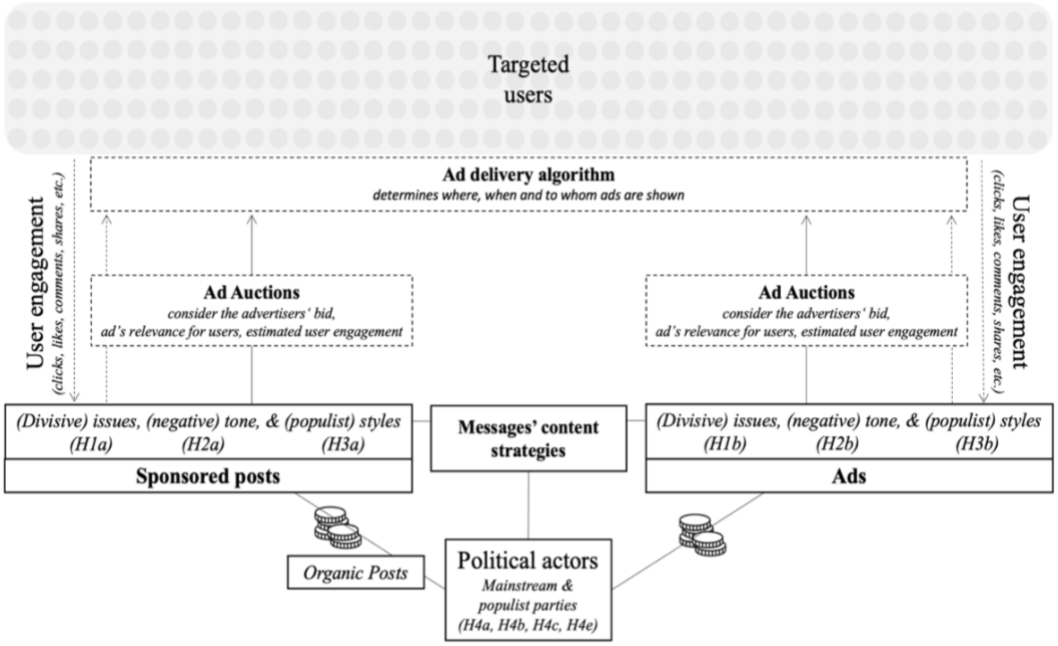

Figure 1. Functional model for the use of digital political advertising on Facebook with a focus on divisive, negative, and populist message strategies.

Dissonant Public Spheres and the Use of Divisive, Negative, and Populist Advertising

The concept of dissonant public spheres has gained traction in recent years to characterize the changing nature of political communication in the digital age (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Habermas, 2022). Unlike the idealized version of a deliberative democratic public sphere envisioned by theorists like Habermas

(2022), where rational-critical debate leads to consensus, dissonant public spheres are characterized by a multitude of voices, fragmented actor constellations, parallel issue agendas, contradictory opinions, and conflicting interests (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Habermas, 2022). This dissonance can be attributed to several interconnected factors, including social and political divisions, the proliferation of information sources, or the decline of traditional media gatekeepers (see Koc-Michalska, Klinger, Bennett, & Römmele, 2023).

Many scholars see the rise of SNPs with their algorithmic personalization, amplification, and targeting mechanisms as one of the main reasons for dissonant public spheres as they often create echo chambers, reinforcing existing beliefs and limiting exposure to opposing viewpoints (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Habermas, 2022; Römmele & Gibson, 2020). This is especially because of SNP's algorithms determining the visibility and reach of content based on its potential to attract user engagement (e.g., clicks, likes, shares, comments; Bene et al., 2022). This shift has implications for political communication as divisive topics, negative emotions, and populist styles are more likely to drive user engagement (e.g., Bene et al., 2022; Eberl et al., 2020). Consequently, we argue that political parties are increasingly adopting strategies that capitalize on these incentives, leading to an increase in the use of disruptive message strategies (Klinger, Koc-Michalska, & Russmann, 2023).

To advance the theoretical framework of dissonant digital public spheres, we argue that political actors use DPA to drive divisive issues and/or negative and populist narratives to susceptible voters, ultimately reinforcing existing political divides and shaping disruptive public spheres. The incentivization for doing so lies in Facebook's advertising system, which uses "ad auctions"[2] to reward content that triggers user engagement by making highly engaged ads cheaper to buy (Andreou et al., 2019; Facebook, 2020a). In other words, if Facebook's advertising system calculates a paid message by a party to be 10 times more likely to engage targeted users than other paid ads, the bid at auction is considered 10 times higher than that of other political actors who are willing to pay the same amount. Furthermore, user engagement, such as sharing or liking content, can make political actors' sponsored posts and ads visible to the Facebook friends of targeted users (Kruschinski & Bene, 2022). Therefore, Facebook subsidizes the most relevant and engagement-driving advertisements since it wants "each person to see relevant ads" (Facebook, 2020a, para. 3).

These mechanics are the second cornerstone of our functional DPA model (see Figure 1, dotted lines), and they alter political actors' advertising usage, content production, and spending to maximize return on investment (Kreiss et al., 2018; Ridout et al., 2021). Thus, we hypothesize that political parties—especially populists—will sponsor posts and create ads on Facebook that are more likely to trigger engagement from users, such as divisive topics, negative emotions, and populist styles (e.g., Bene et al., 2022; Eberl et al., 2020). In the following section, we introduce the reasoning and hypotheses—based on our functional DPA framework—in the context of the 2019 EP election.

[2] Algorithmic advertising delivery processes are run with "ad auctions" to determine which paid content is shown in which order for a specific search, user timeline or feed from among all the created paid media content that includes the respective user in the target audience (Andreou et al., 2019; Facebook, 2020a).

Divisive Issues

A strategic decision for DPA involves emphasizing issues in campaign messages to attract broad public attention (Sides, Shaw, Grossmann, & Lipsitz, 2018). *Facebook posts* enable parties to autonomously communicate their issue priorities to a wide and partisan audience and influence political discourse more broadly (Stier, Bleier, Lietz, & Strohmaier, 2018). Research shows that people are more willing to engage with posts that deal with issues important to them (Eberl et al., 2020). In the months preceding the 2019 EP elections, immigration and climate change were named the most important issues by Europeans (Zalc, Becuwe, & Buruian, 2019). For the public, both issues were "wedge issues" (Hillygus & Shields, 2009) or divisive issues that evoked strong emotions and were morally conflicting (Wiant, 2002). From a party strategy perspective, divisive issues can be used "to divide party voters and polarize the public to gain political advantage" (Wiant, 2002, p. 276). Parties use them to pull voters away from opposing parties by weakening their positions. Furthermore—and of particular importance within the context of EP elections—they are also used to persuade uncertain voters of the party's preferences (Ash, Morelli, & Van Weelden, 2017) or to convince swing voters (Hillygus & Shields, 2009).

Facebook's *paid media* affordances enable parties to target narrow audiences with issue-related sponsored posts and ads that are congruent with their presumed interests. Given that targeting strengthens partisan identities (Lavigne, 2021) and that congruent ads have a greater persuasion effect than incongruent ones (Zarouali, Dobber, De Pauw, & de Vreese, 2022), parties might target specific issues to receptive audiences and thus trigger user engagement. This especially favors DPA campaigns with a strong focus on wedge issues, such as immigration and the environment (Hillygus & Shields, 2009).

Hence, we hypothesize that posts on the divisive topics of immigration and environment are more likely to be sponsored than organic posts on other issues (H1a) and receive larger amounts of spending than ads on other issues (H1b).

Negativity

Another strategic decision for DPA is whether to launch negative attacks against competitors (negative campaigning) or promote their records and achievements (Kruschinski, Haßler, Jost, & Sülflow, 2022). Some researchers (Haselmayer, 2019; Nai, 2021) say this decision is context dependent. However, there are also broader reasons for going negative, such as the assumed effects of negativity in mobilizing party supporters (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Haselmayer, 2019), demobilizing and depressing opposition voters (Fridkin & Kenney, 2004), and gaining media attention (Geer, 2006). The mobilizing power of negative campaigning seems particularly stronger on SNP, where heuristic information processing is prevalent because of information abundance, which may generally favor emotional cues (Eberl et al., 2020), including negativity.

With *Facebook posts*, negative campaigning has proved effective in triggering user engagement, especially in terms of comments and shares (Bene et al., 2022). However, negative campaigning is not a costless strategy. It can backfire, as proven in several studies that have investigated possible backlash effects (Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007). Thus, parties may use *Facebook's sponsored posts and ads* to

target negative messages only to highly receptive users, such as partisans or politically disenchanted people (Fridkin & Kenney, 2004). Furthermore, opponents' voters can be targeted with negative content to limit or discourage them from voting (Walter & van der Eijk, 2019). It is likely that parties will exploit Facebook's advertising affordances to target negative messages precisely to those citizens who will be most receptive to them, limiting the potential for a backlash effect and advancing engagement (Lau et al., 2007).

Thus, we hypothesize that posts with negative content are more likely to be sponsored than nonnegative content (H2a), and negative ads are run with larger amounts of spending than nonnegative ads (H2b).

Populist Styles

Political parties face a choice between ideology-driven and voter-driven strategies for DPA (Reeves, de Chernatony, & Carrigan, 2006). The latter, which focuses on delivering voter satisfaction, can lead to a populist style that manifests in the content of messages (de Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann, & Stanyer, 2018). The strategic use of populist messaging by parties has significant traction on SNPs (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017). This may be because populist communication represents the truth as people see it, offering views that traditional media avoid but are perceived as inherently truthful by the audience (Lilleker, 2018).

Research on *Facebook posts* shows that the presence of specific "populist" features, such as references to "the people" and "dangerous others," are positively correlated with posts' popularity (Bobba, 2019)—independent of whether the politician is characterized as populist or not (Carrella, 2018). Hopster (2021) suggests that SNPs not only provide affordances for populist actors but also encourage other parties to produce content that will prove attractive to users. This is supported by research showing that political actors adopt a populist style to gain public attention and political influence (Wettstein et al., 2019). The use of *sponsored posts and ads* enables parties to target populist messages at users who might feel attached to this content and may engage with it. Research shows that people who have feelings of discontent with politics and society are susceptible to populist narratives (Voogd & Dassonneville, 2020). Furthermore, Arendt, Marquart, and Matthes (2015) explored the effects of populist anti-foreigner advertisements and found that they implicitly influence critical recipients who negate the stereotypical content.

Based on this, we hypothesize that posts with populist content are more likely to be sponsored than posts with non-populist content (H3a), and that ads are run with larger amounts of spending than ads with non-populist content (H3b).

Digital Political Advertising by Populist Parties

Although Facebook offers uniform DPA affordances for all parties according to our functional DPA model (see Figure 1), we assume that its use is not uniform across parties and that populist parties may benefit from its divisive, negative, and populist use. SNPs offer populist actors opportunity structures—such as disintermediation, immediacy, and interactivity (Bobba, 2019)—to forge a more direct relationship with their followers without journalistic interference and to communicate their rather controversial and

exclusionary messages. First, populist parties prefer to focus on divisive topics such as immigration (Stier, Posch, Bleier, & Strohmaier, 2017) and climate change (Kulin, Johansson Sevä, & Dunlap, 2021). Second, they campaign more negatively than their non-populist competitors (Nai, 2021). Third, they heavily rely on populist communication elements, such as criticisms of the elite, references to the people, and depictions of "dangerous others" (de Vreese et al., 2018). In this sense, populist actors are often associated with a 'successful' use of Facebook, as they generally have a large following on Facebook and generate more user engagement than their non-populist counterparts (Larsson, 2022).

Although the above-mentioned studies confirm the success of populists' use of *Facebook posts*, research about their DPA on Facebook is lacking. Nonetheless, we hypothesize that populists use DPA extensively because they can reach susceptible users who show populist attitudes or are receptive to populist stances beyond their already established audiences without fearing possible backlash effects (Schmuck & Matthes, 2017). Further indications for reliance on DPA can be found in the 2020 U.S. presidential campaign in which populist candidate Donald Trump outspent non-populist competitor Joe Biden by $63 million on digital campaigning (Ridout et al., 2021). Further evidence was witnessed in the Netherlands where the populist FvD party became the leader in Facebook ad spending ahead of the 2021 Dutch general election. However, populist actors might also be an outlier in using DPA on Facebook because of their often-low campaign budgets and strong organic user networks on the platform.

Taken together, we hypothesize that populist parties (H4a) are more likely to sponsor posts (H4b) with divisive topics (H4c), negative, and populist content (H4d), and run these in ads with larger amounts of spending than non-populist parties (H4e).

Data and Methods

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a multicountry content analysis of parties' Facebook posts, sponsored posts, and ads during the 2019 EP election campaign across 10 European countries (Austria, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain, and the United Kingdom). These 10 countries cover 78% of the European population, and their parties represented a majority of the EP's seats before the 2019 EP Election. They offer a balanced selection across several dimensions, such as political and media systems, social media distribution, influence at the European level, geographic positioning within Europe (Northern, Western, Southern, Eastern, Central Europe), and citizens' attitudes toward the European Union (Zalc et al., 2019). Finally, Facebook is the most popular SNP in all 10 countries (Newman et al., 2021). Therefore, the sample allows for a comprehensive overview of the 2019 EP election campaign.

We collected all Facebook posts, sponsored posts, and ads published during the last 28 days[3] of the 2019 EP election campaign by 15 populist and 38 mainstream parties that reached at least 3% of the votes (N = 53) in the 10 countries. The posts were centrally collected every day by scraping all available posts from each party's Facebook page, using the tool "Facepager" (Jünger & Keyling, 2019).[4] Sponsored posts, ads, and their metadata, such as spending and publication time, were scraped through the Facebook

[3] As Election Day is not the same in each country, there are variations in the specific timeframe we covered.
[4] The data sets for Romania and Denmark were accessed via CrowdTangle.

Ad Library's API using a self-developed software application (Facebook, 2020b). Corresponding to the coding capacities, an appropriate sample of posts, sponsored posts, and ads was drawn for each country, ensuring a proportional distribution of days and parties. After data cleaning and sampling, our data set comprised 6,063 posts, 1,027 sponsored posts[5], and 1,857 ads published by 53 parties.

All visual elements of the messages (text, pictures, and the first minute of the videos) were manually coded. We faced several methodological challenges in conducting the cross-national coding, which we approached with the following steps (for a comprehensive discussion, see Peter & Lauf, 2002; Rössler, 2012): First, to reduce coder bias because of language skills, 29 coders (1 to 5 in each country) were trained on a joint English coding scheme. Second, to test for reliability, a random sample of 50 English posts and 100 ads for which no country-specific background knowledge was necessary was drawn to allow for a coding comparison. Holsti's *CR values* of all categories used in the analysis show a common understanding (all Holsti $CR \geq 0.8$[6]). Since the Holsti coefficient is often considered too liberal in single-country studies (Rössler, 2012) we calculated a robustness check by excluding total zero cases to base the calculation only on true positives so that all values still show a common understanding (robustness check: all Holsti $CR \geq 0.7$).

Measurements

Each of the following categories were coded for their presence (= 1) or absence (= 0) in each post.[7] Each variable was considered independently from the others, meaning that several topics could be coded for each post.

For the *topic*, we coded whether a policy issue was discussed and differentiated among 11 subtopics, including immigration and the environment. Concerning *negativity,* we coded whether a message contained negative content of a refusing, hostile, disliking, or hating nature. *Populist styles* refer to the semantic constructs of populist ideology (Mudde, 2004) measured as (1) criticism of the elite (e.g., blaming the elite for problems or questioning the elite's legitimacy as decision makers), (2) reference to the people

[5] Since Facebook's Ad Library does not indicate sponsored posts, we identified them by matching the textual content of Facebook posts to the text of all ad content. If a post contained the exact same content as the ad content by the same party, it was regarded as a sponsored post. If more posts contained the same textual information and were related to ad content, the post with the highest number of reactions was considered a sponsored post. All other paid content was classified as ads.

[6] Holsti reliability values in detail: Issues: Immigration policy (0.99); Environmental/energy policy (0.92); Economy/finance (0.87); Labor/social issues (0.89); Domestic policy (0.96); Criminality/crime rate (0,99); Political radicalism/religious fanaticism (0.96); Transport/infrastructure (0,96); Crimes of asylum seekers, refugees or other immigrants (1,00); Brexit (0.99); Measures against refugees (0.99); "Leave the EU" policy in other countries (1.00); Negativity (0.83); Populism: Blaming the elite (0.91), Questioning the elite's legitimacy to take decisions (0.98), Calling for resistance against the elite (0.97), Accusing the elite of betraying the people (0.95), reference to the people (0.86), Reference to ethnic or cultural "other" (0.99), Reference to political "others" (0.96), Reference to other segments (0.99).

[7] Detailed conceptualization of our variables can be found here: https://osf.io/5fy48/?view_only=51216ace078640448f38d3adb8aa172c

(representing the political sovereign, that is, a homogeneous social entity distinct from other minorities), and (3) reference to "dangerous others" (as antagonists of the people like ethnic minorities or political opponents). The differentiation between *populists and mainstream parties* was based on the categorization of "The PopuList" (Rooduijn et al., 2019).

Additional variables for DPA come from the metadata provided by Facebook's Ad Library. First, as an aggregated variable, we considered the number of sponsored posts and ads published by parties during the campaign. Second, for spending on sponsored posts and ads, the Ad Library provided the price at a range of lower and upper intervals. For instance, if a DPA costs EUR 243, its price is shown as "EUR 100–EUR 500" (lower and upper intervals). As parties can pay with different currencies, we converted the price of each paid content into euros based on the exchange rate of the European Central Bank on the 24th of May 2019.

Finally, we used the following control variables to obtain valid findings: At the post-level, the inclusion of an image, video, or link was controlled. At the page level, the number of followers and the overall number of posts published during the campaign were included. At the party level, parties' EP-group affiliation, their governmental position, and their country were controlled for.

Results

In the first step, we present results from a descriptive analysis, which allow for a better understanding of our data set and reveals initial findings about the general use of DPA by populist and mainstream parties. Contrary to our theoretical argumentation, the descriptives show that populist parties spend less money on sponsored posts than mainstream parties. Based on the upper spending interval, the analyzed 15 populist parties had a total expenditure of 250,529 euros on sponsored posts (16,701 euros on average per party) and 358,435 euros on ads (23,895 euros on average per party). Meanwhile, the 38 mainstream parties spent 880,666 euros on sponsored posts (23,175 euros on average per party), and more than six times as much on Facebook ads (5,391,417 euros; 141,879 euros on average per party). However, these descriptive numbers must be read with caution as there are large country and interparty variations for populist and mainstream parties. On the one hand, there were remarkable differences in spending activity across countries with mainstream parties in Germany and the United Kingdom spending by far the largest amounts of all analyzed parties. On the other hand, larger parties (in terms of their electoral results in the EP election) generally spent more on ads (*Pearson's R* = 0.30, $p < 0.05$); however, there were exceptions, such as *Ciudadanos* or *Podemos* in Spain, *PO* in Poland, *Fratelli d'Italia* in Italy, and *Fidesz* in Hungary.

In the second step, we test our hypotheses by reporting results from two multilevel regressions with random intercepts on the party and country levels as fixed effects. The first logistic model examines the factors that explain whether a post was sponsored by mainstream or populist parties (see Table 1). The second linear model explores the factors that explain how much mainstream and populist parties spend on ads (see Table 2).

Considering DPA related to *divisive issues*, we were interested in whether posts about immigration and environmental policy were often sponsored (H1a) and whether parties spent more money distributing

ads containing the two policy issues (H1b). Table 1 reveals that posts containing environmental issues were more frequently sponsored than posts on other policy issues (p = 0.000). However, our results show that posts focusing on immigration were not as frequently sponsored as posts on other topics. Additionally, as can be seen in Table 2, parties did not spend more money on Facebook ads related to the divisive issues of immigration or environmental policy. Thus, H1a and H1b need to be rejected.

We also assumed that divisive and polarizing content would more likely to be delivered via a *negative tone* in European parties' DPA. Thus, testing H2a, we analyzed whether negative posts were sponsored more often and whether negativity could explain the amount of money spent on an ad (H2b). Looking at the results in Table 1, H2a can be supported. If the overall tone of a post is negative, it significantly explains the likelihood of getting sponsored by a party. However, parties did not spend more money on ads containing negativity, which resulted in the rejection of H2b (see Table 2).

Furthermore, we examined populist communication style as a vehicle for divisive and polarizing DPA. Thus, we analyzed whether posts containing criticism of the elite and references to "the pure people" and "dangerous others" could explain their sponsoring (H3a) or how much money was spent on Facebook ads with these content features (H3b). In this broader specification, both hypotheses must be rejected. While posts appealing to "the people" were more often sponsored, the two other forms of populist communication were not (see Table 1). Moreover, Table 2 reveals that none of the analyzed characteristics of populist communication explained the amount of money spent on Facebook ads, pointing to the fact that European parties did not spend more money on populist Facebook ads.

Table 1. Multilevel Logistic Regression for Sponsored Posts (Random Intercepts on the Level of Parties and Country as Fixed Effect).

	β (SE)	Odds ratio
(Intercept)	- 1.73 (1.28)	.179
Immigration	.39 (.33)	1.477
Environment	**.77 (.18)*** **	2.150
Negativity	**.56 (.13)*** **	1.758
Populism elite	.03 (.16)	1.032
Populism people	**.43 (.16)** **	1.536
Populism others	-.29 (.17)	.750
Populist party	1.74 (1.10)	5.724
Image	.38 (.35)	1.455
Number of posts	.00 (.00)	1.000
Video	.42 (.35)	1.519
Link	.07 (.15)	1.073
Number Followers	.00 (.00)	1.000
Government party	-1.10 (.64)	.334
Group Independents	-3.40 (1.72)	.035
Group ECR	-.16 (1.36)	.851

Group Greens/EFA	-.85 (.93)	.429
Group GUE/NGL	**-3.18 (1.27)***	.042
Group ID	**-4.68 (1.44)****	.009
Group RE	-1.00 (0.74)	.368
Group S&D	-.98 (.69)	.377
Country Denmark	1.51 (.87)	4.528
Country Germany	.99 (.93)	2.692
Country Hungary	.01 (.97)	1.014
Country Ireland	-.37 (1.02)	.688
Country Italy	-18.60 (319.03)	8.378
Country Poland	-.85 (1.06)	.426
Country Romania	.05 (.88)	1.055
Country Spain	**-5.07 (1.5)*****	.006
Country UK	-1.63 (1.19)	.196
Immigration*populist party	.33 (.40)	1.384
Environment*populist party	-.31 (.63)	.730
Negativity*populist party	-.40 (.34)	.668
Populism elite*populist party	.15 (.33)	1.167
Populism people*populist party	.38 (.30)	1.450
Populism others*populist party	0.01 (.31)	1.010
Variance of random intercept	1.581 (1.258)	
Log-likelihood	-1780.8	
AIC	3635.7	
BIC	3889.6	

Note. SE = standard error
*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

Table 2. Multilevel Linear Regression for Price of Ads (Random Intercepts on the Level of Parties and Country as Fixed Effect).

	β (SE)	Odds ratio
(Intercept)	2.99 (.30)	19.816
Immigration	.14 (.08)	1.147
Environment	.04 (.04)	1.040
Negativity	-.02 (.04)	.984
Populism elite	-.07 (.04)	.932
Populism people	.04 (.05)	1.041
Populism others	-.06 (.04)	.943
Populist party	.33 (.23)	1.388
Image	-.26 (.12)	.768
Number of posts	-.00 (.00)	.990

Video	-.02 (.13)	.977
Link	-.12 (.06)	.889
Number Followers	.00 (.00)	1.00
Government party	.40 (.13)	1.486
Group Independents	-.02 (.37)	.984
Group ECR	-.59 (.27)	.555
Group Greens/EFA	.04 (.22)	1.036
Group GUE/NGL	-.27 (.29)	.760
Group ID	-.44 (.32)	.642
Group RE	-.06 (.18)	.941
Group S&D	-.08 (.16)	.924
Country Denmark	-.27 (.22)	.767
Country Germany	.37 (.23)	1.453
Country Hungary	-.30 (.25)	.740
Country Ireland	-.40 (.26)	.670
Country Italy	.78 (.32)	2.154
Country Poland	-.19 (.29)	.829
Country Romania	-.16 (.23)	.851
Country Spain	-.08 (.26)	.926
Country UK	.44 (.29)	1.549
Immigration*populist party	.00 (.10)	1.003
Environment*populist party	-.04 (.09)	.959
Negativity*populist party	-.01 (.08)	.987
Populism elite*populist party	.00 (.09)	1.000
Populism people*populist party	.04 (.09)	1.044
Populism others*populist party	.07 (.09)	1.077
Variance of random intercept	.313 (.543)	
Log-likelihood	-2306.9	
AIC	4689.8	
BIC	4915.2	

Note. SE = standard error
*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

Lastly, we analyzed whether populist parties are more divisive in their issue positioning (H4a), more negative (H4b), or more populist (H4c) in their sponsored posts and whether they spend more money on Facebook ads containing these content characteristics (H4d–H4e) compared with mainstream parties. Table 1 reveals that there are no significant differences between populist and mainstream parties about the content of the posts they are more likely to sponsor. Therefore, populist parties do not sponsor posts of a divisive or polarizing nature more often than their non-populist competitors in the 2019 EP election. Furthermore, there are no significant differences between European populist and mainstream parties in terms of spending on ads related to immigration, environmental issues, negativity, and populist styles. We

conclude that all hypotheses concerning the influence of a European party's categorization as populist or not based on the patterns of postsponsorship or spending on divisive or polarizing ads need to be rejected.

Discussion

Our results provide the first empirical insights into which posts are more likely to be sponsored by parties and which Facebook ads receive higher spending from them based on the divisive nature of the topics, negativity, and populist communication style. These findings advance our understanding of how political actors use DPA and contribute to the theoretical framework of dissonant public spheres in the digital age (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Habermas, 2022). Contrary to our expectations, our results challenge simplistic notions of DPA as a driver of political polarization and fragmentation online.

First, our finding that only posts concerning environmental issues were more likely to be sponsored, while immigration-related content was not, partially confirms H1a but contradicts previous research emphasizing immigration as a key political advertising focus (Hillygus & Shields, 2009). This suggests that not all divisive topics are equally leveraged in targeted advertising, indicating a more selective approach by political actors in their use of DPA. Scholars investigating issue salience in digital campaigning should note this differentiation, as it implies that the mechanics of SNPs may not uniformly amplify all contentious issues.

Second, the confirmation of H2a, showing that negative posts were more likely to be sponsored, aligns with the theoretical expectation that DPA can contribute to a more polarized discourse. However, this finding should be interpreted in light of the targeting capabilities of Facebook's advertising system. Political actors appear to be strategically directing negative content to specific audiences where it may be most effective, potentially minimizing broader public exposure to divisive rhetoric (Lau et al., 2007). This targeted approach to negativity in DPA suggests a more sophisticated use of platform affordances than previously theorized, with implications for how we understand the spread of negative campaigning in digital environments.

Regarding populist rhetoric, the results reveal that not all types of populist messages have the same relevance when it comes to sponsoring a post (H3a). Thus, messages with references to people are more likely to be sponsored than those with non-populist content. Despite the potential benefits of increasing the popularity of exclusionary populist content (Bobba, 2019), it seems that political actors prefer to use more subtle populist rhetoric in their sponsored posts and do not risk boosting the dissemination of more compelling attacks using exclusionary or anti-elite messages. This finding challenges assumptions about the uniform amplification of populist rhetoric online and indicates a more nuanced approach by political actors in navigating the potential risks and benefits of populist messaging in DPA.

Fourth, in terms of ad spending, neither of the post characteristics analyzed could be identified as a factor influencing the amount of money spent on Facebook ads (rejecting H1b, H2b, and H3b). This shows a disconnect between content sponsorship decisions and spending intensity, suggesting that the mechanisms driving engagement on SNPs, which we theorized would incentivize greater spending on divisive content, may operate differently in the context of political advertising than in organic social media interactions.

Finally, the lack of significant differences between populist and mainstream parties in their DPA strategies (rejecting H4) is particularly noteworthy. This finding challenges the assumption that populist actors would more readily exploit the divisive potential of DPA. Instead, it suggests a convergence of digital campaign strategies across the political spectrum, possibly driven by the constraints and opportunities inherent in Facebook's advertising platform. This convergence has important implications for our understanding of how digital media environments may be shaping political communication more broadly, potentially leading to a homogenization of campaign tactics regardless of ideological positioning.

In conclusion, our findings challenge several of our initial hypotheses and prompt a reevaluation of how we conceptualize DPA in the context of dissonant public spheres. There may be fundamental differences between DPA and organic social media, but the conflation of the two in research—which formed the basis of many of our initial hypotheses—should be revisited. While organic communication has been associated with increased negativity, divisiveness, and the amplification of populist rhetoric (Bene et al., 2022; Eberl et al., 2020), our findings suggest that these dynamics may not translate directly to the realm of DPA on SNPs. One reason for this might be that political actors exercise greater caution and strategic consideration in their paid messaging compared with organic posts. The financial investment in DPA might lead to more carefully curated content that aims to appeal to broader audiences rather than solely energizing existing supporters. Another reason could be that Facebook's advertising policies and the increased scrutiny of political ads may constrain the types of content that can be promoted through paid channels, potentially limiting more extreme or divisive messaging. Finally, the pan-European context of our study might reveal a convergence in DPA strategies that transcends national political cultures, suggesting a more universal approach to paid political communication in digital spaces.

Our results point to a potential "DPA exceptionalism"—a set of characteristics that distinguishes it from other forms of digital political communication. The implications of this for the theoretical understanding of dissonant public spheres are significant. While the broader digital media ecosystem may indeed contribute to fragmentation and polarization as posited by Bennett and Pfetsch (2018) or Habermas (2022), our findings suggest that DPA might play a more complex and potentially moderating role within this ecosystem. Rather than amplifying divisiveness, DPA may be subject to forces that encourage a degree of moderation and strategic restraint in political messaging.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine how parties use divisive, negative, and populist content in their DPA on Facebook during an EP election campaign. Our study is based on the theoretical framework of dissonant public spheres and a functional model for the use of division, negativity, and populism in DPA. We conducted the first comprehensive international content analysis of Facebook posts, sponsored posts, and ads published by 15 populist and 38 mainstream parties in 10 different European countries during the 2019 EP election campaign.

Our findings disprove our theoretical expectations and are rather surprising since the public and academic debate is often focused on the misuse of DPA for targeting highly contentious issues to specific audiences, or for driving negative and populist narratives to susceptible voters, which ultimately might reinforce political divides and help shape a dissonant public sphere (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Habermas,

2022). If parties do not concentrate on this content in their DPA, these debates need revisiting. Although Facebook´s mechanics of DPA mark a fundamental shift in the use of political advertising, our results suggest that it did not encourage either populist or mainstream parties to sponsor posts and create ads on Facebook, which include divisive and polarizing content in the 2019 EP election. Rather, parties appear to have adopted a balanced approach, optimized for engagement without crossing the threshold into overtly polarizing content. This restraint may reflect an awareness of the potential backlash from such strategies, including alienating moderate voters and the risk of regulatory scrutiny (Schmuck & Matthes, 2017; Walter & van der Eijk, 2019).

While the EP election provides a valuable context for cross-country investigations because of the relative homogeneity of electoral competition—such as uniform rules, stakes, and timing—this specificity also introduces limitations to the generalizability of our findings. The EP election is often characterized as a "second-order election" (Reif & Schmitt, 1980), perceived as less crucial than national elections, which are considered "first-order." As a result, political parties typically allocate fewer personnel, financial, and time resources to EP campaigns (Petithomme, 2012). This lower resource investment could impact the scope and sophistication of DPA strategies on Facebook, potentially leading to less aggressive or innovative uses of the platform compared with what might be observed in national elections where the stakes are higher.

Moreover, reliance on data from the Facebook Ad Library introduces several methodological constraints. The Ad Library lacks critical metrics, such as engagement data for ads or detailed information on targeting objectives (Leerssen, Ausloos, Zarouali, Helberger, & de Vreese, 2019). These limitations hinder a comprehensive analysis of how DPA strategies are executed and their effectiveness. The absence of such data not only constrains our ability to assess the full impact of DPA but also presents challenges for broader academic inquiry and regulatory efforts aimed at understanding and overseeing digital political advertising.

Despite these limitations, our study makes three key contributions to political communication research. First, it introduces a functional model of DPA on Facebook that focuses on disruptive message strategies. This model provides a new analytical framework for understanding how political actors design their messages on SNPs, illuminating the complex decision making process behind message strategies in DPA. Future research can build on and adapt our model to further explore the dynamics of DPA. One promising direction would be to expand the range of communication styles beyond divisive, negative, or populist rhetoric by investigating how other forms of campaign communication, such as positive messaging, policy-focused content, or personalized appeals, are utilized in DPA strategies. Additionally, applying our model to different campaign contexts, such as national elections or issue-based campaigns, might yield different results and reveal context-specific patterns in DPA usage. For instance, in highly polarized national elections, we might see a greater emphasis on divisive content in DPA compared with the EP elections studied here.

Second, our study challenges the simplistic assumption that DPA inherently contributes to the fragmentation and polarization of the public sphere (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Habermas, 2022), suggesting that the relationship is mediated by strategic considerations, platform affordances, and the broader political context. This advances the respective literature that the imperatives of engagement and reach in DPA must be balanced against the potential for public backlash and regulatory consequences. This insight calls for a better understanding of DPA strategies, recognizing the strategic calculus that underpins political parties' use of SNP.

For scholars of political communication, our study underscores the need to differentiate between organic social media content and paid political advertising when analyzing the dynamics of online political discourse.

Finally, our study has important implications for the regulation of political advertising in the digital age. Challenging the assumption that DPA is inherently divisive, regulation should not only focus on restricting harmful content, but also incentivize positive and issue-focused advertising. Our research also highlights the importance of adapting regulations to SNPs` specific affordances, ensuring that algorithmic amplification does not unintentionally favor polarizing content. Given the cross-border nature of these platforms, harmonizing regulations across jurisdictions is essential to prevent inconsistent practices and enforcement challenges.

As DPA continues to evolve and play an increasingly central role in political campaigns, ongoing research and policy discussions will be crucial in navigating the landscape of digital political communication. The rapid advancement of technology, including artificial intelligence, promises to further revolutionize targeting capabilities and content creation in DPA. This evolution may offer unprecedented opportunities for precise voter outreach and personalized political messaging. However, it also raises significant concerns about privacy, manipulation of public opinion, and the potential to deepen political polarization. Future research must explore how these technological advancements impact the strategies employed by political actors and their effects on voter behavior and democratic processes. Additionally, policymakers will need to grapple with crafting regulations that can keep pace with these technological changes, balancing the need for innovation in political communication with the imperative to protect the integrity of democratic discourse.

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