

# All You Need is Love? An Analysis of the Election Campaign of the Green Party in 2021 on Facebook

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**Abstract:** The 2021 federal election in Germany was very different from previous elections. For the first time, the environmental party, The Greens, ran a candidate for chancellor. In addition, the election campaign was increasingly digital due to the Corona pandemic. Citizens increasingly turned to the internet for information. In this context, Facebook was the most used social network for reading, sharing, and discussing political news. This paper examines the Green Party's use of Facebook during the election campaign to identify characteristics of their communication behaviour and user reactions. The empirical investigation is carried out by means of a qualitative content analysis according to Mayring. In the period from 01/04 to 26/09/2021 a total of 251 posts of the Green Party were analysed. The tool Fanpage Karma was used for this purpose. Based on the number of posts, relevant topics of the online election campaign were identified. We also looked at how often and with which reactions users responded to the party's posts. The results of the study show that the 2021 chancellor candidate Annalena Baerbock plays a prominent role. She is mentioned in 30.68% of all posts. In addition, environmental policy, the party's core issue, takes up a comparatively large amount of space with a total of 111 posts (44.22%). Of these, 39.84% deal with climate-related issues. The results of the analysis also show that the party has a broader range of topics. Social issues are mentioned in 38.65% of the posts and the image of being a 'single-issue party' is being shed to some extent. It can also be seen that The Greens, who are among the winners of the 2021 election, publish a comparatively low number of posts. At the same time, they receive the second-most 'Love' reactions, and the most 'Loves' per post. The study shows Facebook's status in the online election campaign of the German environmental party in the 2021 federal election. It provides information about the scope of use and topic setting on the social platform. At the same time, the results show to what extent and with what reactions the posts have been addressed.

**Keywords:** Online Federal Election, Digital Campaign, Facebook, Green Party, Reactions

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## 1. German Federal Election 2021, The Greens and Facebook

Germany's 2021 federal election was different. After sixteen years as Chancellor, Angela Merkel decided not to stand for re-election. For her party, the CDU/CSU, this meant that they would have to fight harder than before to regain voters' trust and get re-elected. In addition, for the first time in their history, Alliance 90/The Greens (hereafter: 'The Greens') have put forward a candidate for chancellor in 2021. The big issue of 2017, the refugee crisis, did not continue to drive public debate. Instead, the election was overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic, its measures, and consequences. For the political parties, this meant a rethinking of the 2021 election campaign and an even greater shift to the internet (Hirndorf 2022:15). At the same time, people increasingly turned to the internet and social media to keep up with political events (Hölig & Hasebrink 2020:5-6, 22-24, 43, Hirndorf 2022:15-18). These developments provided an exciting starting point for exploring the social media activities of political parties and their supporters.

This paper focuses on Facebook, the most widely used social network for reading, sharing and discussing political news, and the Green Party's use of Facebook during the election campaign. The aim is to identify the behaviour of the party and that of Facebook users. With Facebook's user numbers falling, particularly among the under-30s who are increasingly turning to other platforms, the question is whether Facebook will still be a relevant network in 2021 (Beisch & Koch 2021:499, Hirndorf 2022:20). 54% of under-20s still claim to use the network regularly (Brandt 2021). Furthermore, Facebook is still the leading network for reading, sharing, and discussing political news in 2021 (Beisch & Koch 2021:499, Hirndorf 2022:20). Only a third of respondents who use the network to read political content also use interactive features such as liking, sharing, and commenting (Hirndorf 2022:17-18). On this basis, it can be assumed that Facebook remains a relevant social network and is also relevant to the election campaign.

## 2. Theoretical background to the use of social media in election campaigns

Since the beginning of the 2010s, research interest in the use of social media in election campaigns has increased. Klinger (2013) examined how Swiss parties use social media, including Facebook. Staender, Ernst and Steppat (2019) investigated the contributions of the seven largest parties in the Swiss parliament three months before the election. Bene (2016, 2017) examined the use of Facebook in the Hungarian parliamentary elections

by exploring what kind of political content triggers Facebook reactions (likes, comments, shares). Heiss, Schmuck and Matthes (2019) explore the aspects that trigger user engagement in the form of comments, shares and likes. They also examine the reasons that motivate political actors to respond to user comments. The analysis refers to the Facebook pages of the most important political actors in Austria. Eberl et al (2020) focus on the Austrian federal elections of 2017. The study focuses on the connection between the sentiment of posts, issue relevance and user reactions. The Austrian elections of 2017 are also investigated by Ennser-Jedenastik et al (2021). A new perspective is taken by analysing the parties' reactions to user engagement. The research shows that parties are more likely to address issues that receive a lot of attention from Facebook users. Consequently, social media can improve the parties' ability to address popular issues. Gerbaudo, Margona and Alzetta (2019) focus on the importance of social media in the UK general elections. The focus is on the relationship between topics, emotions, and user engagement. The finding of this study is that positive content performs better than negative and controversial topics.

There is also academic interest in the use of Facebook by German political parties. In the early 2010s, Siri, Melchner and Wolff (2012) explore the question of how the network is used by parties and politicians. They also look at the effects that the use of digital networks has on political communication. Evers (2019) examines the Facebook campaigns of the German parties and considering user reactions. The researcher finds that especially the use of traditional strategy components such as the top-down approach, self-praise, and self-promotion and the bashing of competing parties meet with a high level of engagement. The focus of Margin et al (2016) is also on the 2013 federal election. The central question is how the Austrian and German parties use Facebook as an election campaign tool. Finally, Haller (2019) examines online campaigns in the 2017 federal election campaign, focusing on the communication of top candidates and parties on Facebook.

### 3. Research subject and methodology

The analysis of Facebook posts and user reactions is carried out using qualitative content analysis, based on Mayring's (2016) suggestions for carrying out the methodology. It is characterised by the fact that the content to be analysed comes from communication and has communication as its subject. However, communication is not limited to linguistic content, but also includes 'pictures, music and the like'. It is essential that the communication is 'fixed communication', so it has to be recorded in some way (Mayring 2016:11-12). The systematic approach according to fixed rules contributes to the scientific character and distinguishes it from hermeneutics. The specification and disclosure of the individual research steps enables strict methodological control and contributes to the comprehensibility of the analysis (ibid.:13). While the results of quantitative studies often fall short of a number, it is possible in qualitative analysis to add further aspects. These can be, for example, the conditions of origin, the wider context, or the impact of the communication (ibid.:50).

The core of qualitative content analysis is the category system (ibid.:51, 65). The system is created in detail and thus guarantees the comprehensibility and comparability of the study. Furthermore, the analytical framework contributes to intersubjectivity and reliability (ibid. 2016:51-52). Frequency analysis is a basic technique of the content analysis process (ibid.:13), which, like so many others, is based on the category system. On this basis, the data to be analysed are examined, and the pre-defined aspects are filtered out (ibid.:13, 65). The material components are compared and weighted based on frequencies (ibid:13). For the election analysed, we created a system consisting of the main themes and sub-themes of the posts, with 90 sub-categories belonging to 15 categories (Table 1).

**Table 1: Category system for political parties' Facebook activities during the 2021 German federal election**

Categories	Sub-categories
<b>Labour and social affairs</b>	Labour market, Pensions, Poverty, Marriage for all, Childcare, Family, Child poverty, Women's rights, Care, Justice, Housing and construction, Solidarity, Social inequality
<b>Education and research</b>	Education, Research
<b>Health, Nutrition, Agriculture</b>	Animal welfare, Healthcare, Agriculture, Corona pandemic
<b>Environment</b>	Climate, G20, Power plants, Renewable energy, Marine protection, Species protection, Nature conservation, Circular economy
<b>Finance</b>	Banks, Taxes, National debt, Burden on local governments
<b>Justice and consumer protection</b>	Justice, Consumer protection

Categories	Sub-categories
<b>Domestic policy</b>	Internal security, Police, Cannabis, Rent control, Business, Economy, Bureaucracy, Voting over 16, Religion (except Islamisation), Freedom of the press, Border controls, Lobbying, Direct democracy, Counter-extremism, Public service broadcasting, Discrimination against minorities, LGBTQ+, Technology & innovation, Urban/rural, Sports/culture
<b>Foreign policy</b>	Europe and the EU, Worldwide, Partner countries, Arms exports, Terrorism, Turkey's EU accession, Foreign policy
<b>Asylum policy</b>	Migration and integration, Refugees, Islamisation, Upper limit, Guiding culture
<b>Defence</b>	Bundeswehr, Culture of remembrance, NATO, Disarmament
<b>Traffic</b>	Traffic infrastructure, Cars and their use, Car companies, Public transport & railways
<b>Digital infrastructure</b>	Digitalisation, Broadband internet, Computer games
<b>Electoral appeal</b>	'Vote for us', 'Go vote'
<b>Bashing</b>	Against parties, Against politicians, Against media, Against gender, Against rich/corporations
<b>Party internal</b>	Party members, Party events, Election, Party members live chat, General information, TV appearance, Other elections

The study period starts on 01/04/2021 and ends on election day, 26/09/2021. The Facebook posts are displayed on the fan pages of the parties and can be accessed by any Facebook user. The posts can contain text, image and video material, whereby a combination is also possible. Since the posts were made in the context of the federal elections, it can be assumed that they were intended to reach and address potential voters. The analysis has two objectives: Firstly, to examine the parties' campaign communication on Facebook, by determining the extent to which the parties are active on the social network and the issues they address. Second, the mood of Facebook users, including potential voters, will be assessed. The main question is how and to what extent they react to the posts. The focus is on 'Like', 'Love' and 'Angry' as primary reactions. The Facebook posts are analysed based on the category system. Each post is assigned to at least one category; multiple assignments are possible. The research project will be carried out using the analysis tool Fanpage Karma. All posts shown are from the Facebook pages of the parties. The number of posts published in 2021 is 3,660. Of these, 242 are no longer accessible during the analysis due to deletion or restriction, so that only 3,418 posts can be analysed.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Election results, fan growth and general Facebook activity

Comparing the 2021 and 2017 elections in terms of fan growth, a positive development can be seen for all parties, with the most pronounced for the AfD (Table 1). This is followed by the CDU, The Greens and the SPD. The lowest growth can be seen in the CSU, FDP and The Left. However, the growth of Facebook fans from election day 2017 to 2021 does not seem to be related to election results. While AfD and CDU are among the three parties with the highest growth in fans, they are also among the three biggest election losers. The absolute number of fans does not reflect the distribution of seats either. Here the AfD and The Left are the frontrunners.

**Table 1: Bundestag seats vs Facebook fan growth from election day 2017 to 2021**

Party	Bundestag seats	Facebook fans	Seat growth	Fan growth
<b>The Greens</b>	118	208,809	176%	123%
<b>SPD</b>	206	194,291	135%	111%
<b>FDP</b>	92	152,054	115%	109%
<b>CSU</b>	45	214,966	98%	107%
<b>AfD</b>	83	515,374	88%	137%
<b>CDU</b>	152	196,876	76%	122%
<b>The Left</b>	39	248,521	57%	105%

Instead of comparing the growth of Facebook fans between the 2017 and 2021 election days, limiting the period under consideration to the 2021 campaign period yields a different result.

Figure 1 shows the percentage growth in fans between the first and the last day of a selected period. The difference between each day and the first day of the selected period is shown (Fanpage Karma 2022). Fans are users who have marked a page with a ‘Like’. In the newer version of the social network, however, the term ‘follower’ is also used at this point. In addition, users who have subscribed to a page's notifications are also referred to as followers (Fanpage Karma 2022). The follower metric has only recently been made available by Facebook.

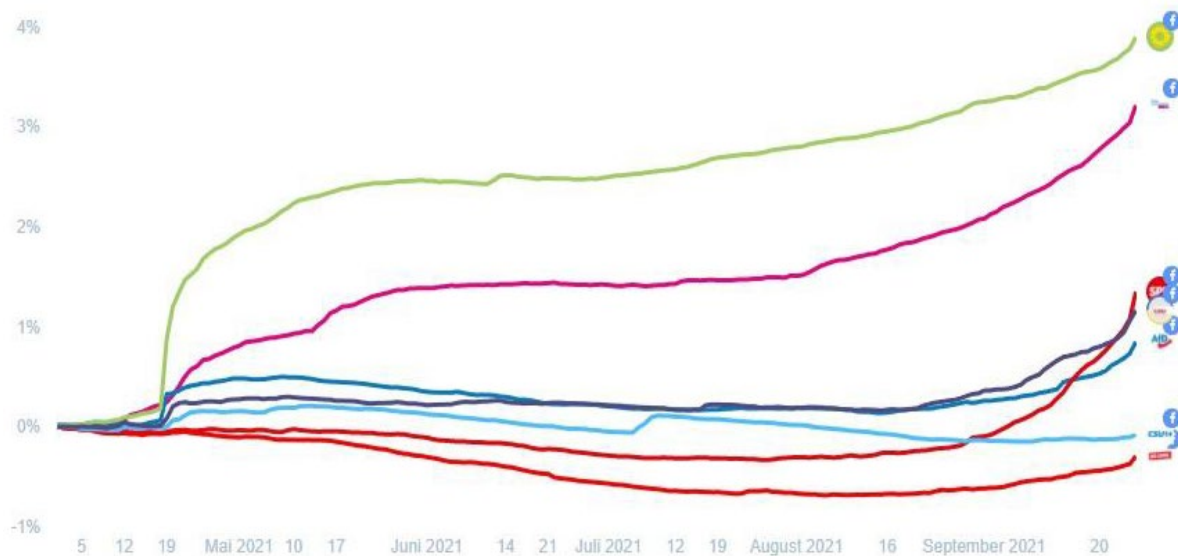


Figure 1: Percentage fan growth (Fanpage Karma 2022)

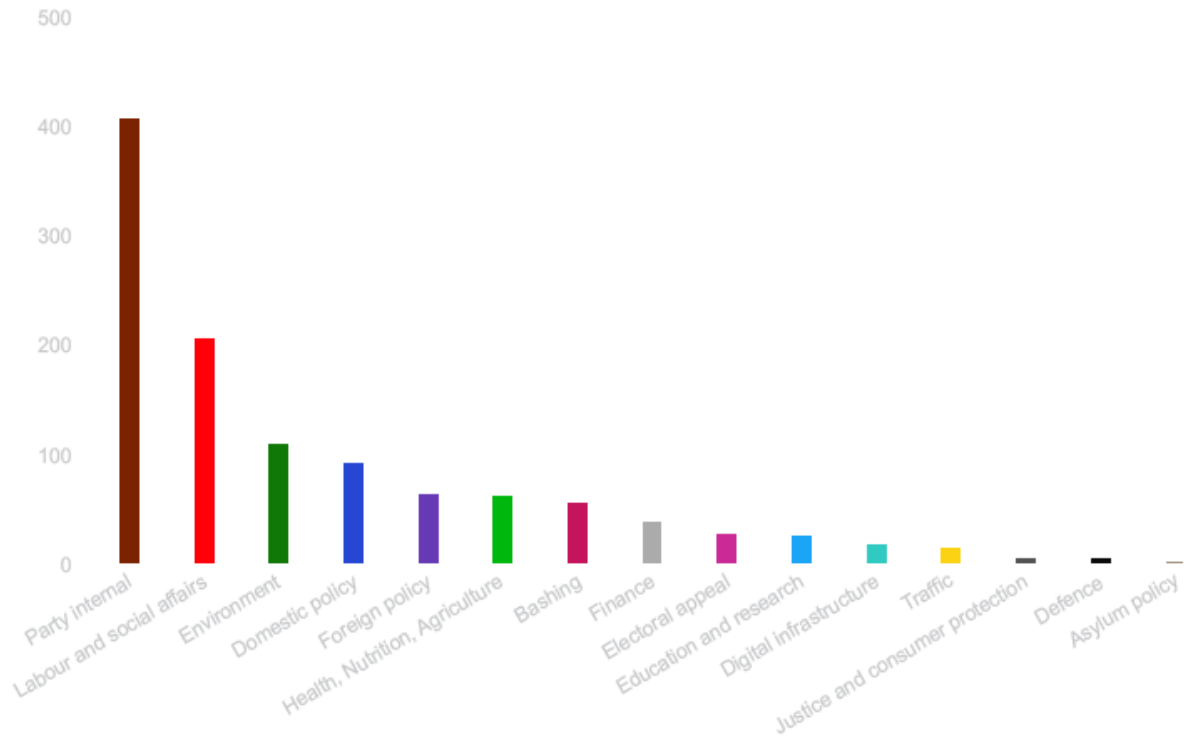
As can be seen in Table 2 The Greens and the FDP achieved the greatest growth in the number of followers. Of the 3,445 posts, 747 are attributable to the CSU, 678 to the AfD, 680 to the CDU, 462 to the SPD, 417 to the FDP, 251 to The Greens and 210 to the Left. The following analyses focus mainly on the ratio of indicators to the number of posts. Although absolute numbers have also been recorded and compared and should also be taken into account for a better comparability of the actors, the primary insights are gained from the indicators per post. Table 2 also includes the number of posts published per day during the selected period. Most parties publish rather few posts per day. The CSU and the AfD are the only exceptions. The Greens and The Left post particularly little. Furthermore, many parties increase the number of posts per day shortly before the election. This is particularly true of the CDU. However, the FDP, The Left and the AfD do not show a strong increase. For the FDP and The Left the number of posts remains at a constant low level. The AfD has maintained the number of posts it has had since the beginning of the survey period.

Table 2: Facebook follower growth, number of posts and posts per day

Party	The Greens	FDP	SPD	CDU	AfD	CSU	The Left
Follower growth	3.9 %	3.2 %	1.3 %	1.2%	0.8%	-0.1%	-0.3%
Total posts	251	417	462	680	678	747	210
Posts per day	1.4	2.3	2.6	3.8	3.8	4.2	1.2

#### 4.2 Posts and engagement by category

Most of the Greens' posts deal with internal party matters (see Figure 2). But ‘labour and social affairs’ and ‘environment’ were also covered in more than 100 posts.



**Figure 2: Number of posts per category by The Greens**

The sub-categories 'Party members', 'Election' and the typical party topic 'Climate' were particularly popular (see Table 3). In addition to the sub-categories already mentioned, a strong reference to the chancellor candidate Annalena Baerbock can be observed. With 77 posts, the candidate has the fourth most posts.

**Table 3: Posts and engagement per sub-category by The Greens**

Sub-category	Number of posts	Percentage of posts	Engagement rate
Party members	123	49.00%	0.87%
Election	109	43.43%	0.7%
Climate	100	39.84%	0.8%
Annalena Baerbock	77	30.68%	0.63%
Election calls	54	21.51%	0.39%

The sub-categories 'Party members', 'Election' and the typical party topic 'Climate' also show the highest engagement. Posts featuring Annalena Baerbock generated 0.63% engagement. **Figure 3** shows that the candidate was successfully brought into the focus of activities, especially at the beginning of the election. The top four posts address topics that fall into the categories 'Party internal' and 'Election appeal', two of them featuring Annalena Baerbock.



Figure 3: Engagement and top posts of The Greens (Fanpage Karma 2022)

### 4.3 Reactions and comments

When analysing engagement with social media posts, other reaction options ('Like', 'Angry', 'Wow', 'Haha' and 'Sad') as well as comments may be relevant in addition to the 'Loves' focused on in this paper. 'Haha', 'Wow' and 'Sad' are less relevant due to lower usage. The difficulty with the comments, 'Angry' and 'Like' metrics is that they do not indicate agreement or disagreement with the content of the posts. It is debatable whether 'liking' a post means that one agrees with it, or whether one is simply trying to improve the distribution of the post by pointing out a grievance. For example, about plane crashes receive 'Likes', but certainly not 'Loves'. 'Angry' is also open to interpretation. The AfD triggers a strikingly high number of 'Angry' reactions. While the party may have published the most controversial content, which met with considerable opposition, it is also realistic that supporters of the 'protest party' use the reaction to show their agreement with the grievances propagated by the party. In addition to the AfD, the CDU and CSU have increasingly provoked 'angry' reactions. Posts from the SPD, FDP, The Greens and The Left rarely received 'Angry' reactions. A similar pattern can be seen for comments. The AfD posts are the most commented on, the CDU also published posts that generated many comments. The posts of the other parties receive comparatively few comments.

### 4.4 'Love' reactions

Table 4 shows the number of 'Love' reactions by party. While the AfD received more 'Loves' in total, this is achieved through a high number of posts. With 109 'Loves' per post, posts of The Greens are much more frequently marked with the reaction.

Table 4: Number of total 'Love' reactions and 'Loves' per post

	The Greens	CDU	CSU	SPD	FDP	The Left	AfD
<b>Total Loves</b>	27,404	6,448	4,870	9,833	10,197	6,261	32,769
<b>Loves per post</b>	109.2	9.5	6.5	21.3	24.5	29.8	48.3

Considering the developed category system, The Greens achieve the highest total number of 'Love' reactions (Table 5). This is due to the fact that the posts of The Greens covered more content categories per post than those of the AfD. The Greens received a particularly high number of 'Loves' in the categories 'Party internal', 'Environment', 'Labour and social affairs' and 'Domestic policy'.

**Table 5: Numbers of ‘Love’ reactions per category**

Category	The Greens	AfD	SPD	FDP	CDU	The Left	CSU
Labour and social affairs	10,503	3,943	3,545	1,113	1,193	1,985	366
Education and Research	3,220	893	226	1,535	457	26	91
Environment	14,029	1,909	2,150	743	863	758	324
Health, Food, Agriculture	2,718	6,026	727	1,188	815	502	408
Finance	1,183	1,646	714	1,124	593	852	277
Domestic Policy	8,927	5,621	1,625	6,451	1,805	1,226	941
Foreign Policy	3,522	2,669	844	232	886	634	559
Asylum policy	753	4,262	17	31	159	53	110
Defence	464	368	29	56	393	968	413
Traffic	2,185	1,032	157	338	102	413	385
Digital Infrastructure	1,921	29	182	1,476	376	0	18
Election appeal	7,465	1,662	615	276	782	735	309
Bashing	1,993	11,490	1,750	796	484	1,545	916
Party internal	18,781	20,632	8,846	2,899	5,159	3,201	3,534
Justice and Consumer Protection	1,965	1,704	69	437	234	12	110
Total Loves	79,629	63,886	21,496	18,695	14,301	12,910	8,761

In terms of the number of ‘Loves’ per day (N=179), it can be seen that the Green Party has the second-highest mean value (Table 6). The difference to almost all other parties is considerable.

**Table 6: Comparison of ‘Love’ reactions per day: means, standard deviations and standard error of mean**

Political party	N	Mean	SD	SEM
The Greens	179	153.09	313.825	23.456
CDU	179	36.02	71.754	5.363
CSU	179	27.21	31.105	2.325
FDP	179	56.97	332.301	24.837
The Left	179	34.98	67.114	5.016
SPD	179	54.93	134.268	10.036
AfD	179	183.07	226.765	16.949
Non-Greens	179	65.61	86.736	6.483

To test the significance of these results, an independent samples t-test was performed. Levene's test for equality of variances was also performed to determine whether there was homogeneity of variance in the samples. Levene's test showed unequal variances for all datasets except The Greens vs. AfD. As the standard t-test

assumes that the means of the compared samples are normally distributed with equal variance, Welch's t-test was performed to address this issue. Welch's t-test is designed for unequal variance of the sample distribution, but the assumption of sample distribution normality is maintained. **Table 7** shows the results of Levene's test and the t-test, with the necessary adjustments for scales with unequal variances by using Welch's t-test.

**Table 7: Levene test for equality of variances and t-test for independent samples**

The Greens versus	Levene test		t-test							
	F	P	T	Df	P <sub>(1)</sub>	P <sub>(2)</sub>	MD	SED	95% CI	
CDU	35.63	0.000	4.87	196.56	0.000	0.000	117.07	24.06	69.75	164.39
CSU	46.45	0.000	5.31	181.50	0.000	0.000	125.89	23.57	79.38	172.40
FDP	7.71	0.006	2.84	354.84	0.003	0.005	96.13	34.16	28.94	163.32
The Left	35.36	0.000	4.94	194.25	0.000	0.000	118.12	23.99	70.81	165.43
SPD	23.94	0.000	3.85	241.05	0.000	0.000	98.16	25.51	47.91	148.42
AfD	1.13	0.288	-1.04	356.00	0.151	0.301	-29.97	28.94	-86.89	26.94
Non-Greens	31.31	0.000	3.60	205.04	0.000	0.000	87.49	24.34	39.51	135.47

These results show that, overall, The Greens received significantly ( $P(1) < 0.05$ ) more 'Loves' reactions per day than all other political parties except the AfD. There is no significant difference in 'Loves' per day between The Greens and the AfD ( $P(2) = 0.301 > 0.05$ ), even though the AfD received more 'Loves' overall due to a much higher number of posts during the period examined.

## 5. Limitations and future work

The aim of this paper, to find out the usage behaviour of the Green Party's followers on Facebook, was largely achieved. Unfortunately, there was a lack of data for the most prominent finding, the significantly higher number of 'Love' reactions. Only aggregated data on the total number of 'Love' reactions and the number of posts is available. If the data for 'Love' reactions were available for all posts, a significance test for 'Loves' per post could be performed. Alternatively, the number of 'Loves' per day for which a dataset was available was used. This approach ignores the highly varying number of posts per day by political parties. As the Green Party published the second lowest number of posts, the results are even more surprising. While similarities and differences in the parties' use of the platform and users' reactions could be identified, the results do not give any indication as to why and under what circumstances individual reactions were used. While the Love reaction is quite clearly interpretable, it is still possible, for example, that voters of conservative parties are generally more reserved and therefore, may use 'Likes' more often than 'Loves'.

It should be noted that the data ideally would have been collected during the election campaign. The background to this is the observation of deleted posts. While the established parties had a maximum of 24 deleted posts, the AfD had 151 (18%). Therefore, it cannot be excluded that the results were biased. Furthermore, it was not possible to determine whether and which posts were supported by advertising. The lack of stringency in the category system also needs to be addressed. During the editing process, it became clear that the categories were not created in accordance with the stated responsibilities of the federal ministries. For example, 'Economy' was defined as a sub-category of 'Domestic policy'. Given that 'Economy' is a very broad subject area assigned to a separate federal ministry, this seems anything but proportionate. Furthermore, the category system contains misleading terms such as 'Party internal'. Since other content has been assigned to this category, a different term should be chosen in the future.

It is also unclear whether Facebook users are eligible voters who participate in the election at all. It is also unclear whether and to what extent the online campaign has an impact on individual voting decisions and whether social media is used by voters as an information channel. It is therefore conceivable that the topic could be explored with greater involvement of individual voters and Facebook users. If the study is replicated, the existing codebook should be used again for reasons of comparability.

## 6. Practical implications and conclusion

For The Greens, a strong focus on the chancellor candidate can be observed. While this is not unusual for mainstream parties, this was the first time the Greens ran a female candidate for chancellor. In addition to this issue, climate change was the driving force of the campaign. While the Greens are the epitome of this issue, the CDU and SPD have shown a strong turnaround. This may be a reaction to the growing strength of The Greens and their positive election forecasts. As a result, the Greens were increasingly criticised by the AfD and the CSU. While the governing parties increasingly focused on environmental issues, the Greens took on a wider range of issues and, to some extent, shed their image as a 'single-issue party'. While the number of posts obviously did not indicate the outcome of the election, the 'Love' and 'Angry' reactions did. As a result, election winners stand out with many 'Love' and election losers with many 'Angry' reactions. AfD posts seem to polarise Facebook users, who react with a lot of 'Angry' but also 'Love'. The Greens are the winners of the election. Despite a small number of posts, the party achieved the highest follower growth and received an exceptionally high number of 'Loves' per post. The significantly higher number of 'Loves' per day compared to almost all other parties could be shown here. In 2020, Facebook started promoting posts with 'Love' reactions more strongly (Merrill & Oremus 2021), which explains the highest growth in followers. Parties could take this into account in the future and promote content that specifically encourages 'Love' reactions.

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