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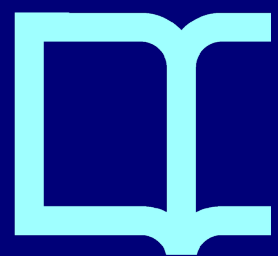
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Do politicians connect with young people? Analysis of Twitter use by candidates in the 2019 European Parliament election campaign

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ABSTRACT

The use of social media, especially Twitter, has become part of the political communication strategies of parties and candidates. Reaching young voters and reducing their historical abstention has become a challenge, even more for candidates standing for the European Parliament, elections that have traditionally witnessed a much smaller turnout. To find out if the main six candidates in the 2019 European Parliament election campaign (10-26 May), called to occupy the presidency of the European Commission, connected with younger voters, this research applies the multiple-case study based on the analysis of their Twitter posts. The results show that candidates (*Spitzenkandidaten*) preferred to talk about topics such as territory, vote appeal, and their parties' alliances above the topics that most interest young people: climate change and environment, education, poverty and inequalities, unemployment, human rights and democracy and health. Better political social media communication is needed to make candidates' communication strategies more consistent and to promote voters' participation, especially among youth.

KEYWORDS: digital communication, political communication, European Parliament election, social media, Twitter, youth vote

INTRODUCTION

Politicians' use of social media has become standard in recent years, as digital communication is incorporated into candidates' political communication strategy in election campaigns. Candidates have adopted digital communication as a complementary strategy to the traditional one. Digital communication offers new tools for political communication to attract the interest of voters. Moreover, to combat the lack of interest in politics shown by citizens (Barber 1984; Castells 2006; Davis 2005; Lilleker and Vedel 2013; Persily 2017) and to establish a more direct channel of contact between candidates and voters (Nulty et al. 2016).

The new information and communication technologies have become tools to improve democratic quality (Ali 2020) and the new digital environment, despite the digital divide (Norris 2001; Okunola et al. 2017), it has also been identified as an opportunity to reverse the disaffection of society towards political issues (Davis 2005; Enli 2017a).

Some authors point out the little interest of young people for the civic and political issues (Bayram Özdemir et al. 2016), which translates into less participation. In the elections to the European Parliament youth abstention is traditionally high (Fieldhouse, Tranmer and Russell 2007; Norris 2003; Spanning, Ogris and Gaiser 2008; Pini 2009; Sloam 2016). Thus, reaching out to young voters and combating their abstention is a further goal of contemporary political communication.

Numerous studies analyze Twitter use by election candidates in the USA (Bossetta, 2018; Jungherr 2016; Nadler, Crain and Donovan 2018) and in European states (Copeland and Römmele 2014; Kalsnes et al. 2014). It is worth highlighting a study by Schneider and Foot (2002) in which they explored the web pages of the presidential elections in the United States in 2000 and another study of Vergeer, Hermans and Cunha (2013), in which they investigated web campaigning in the 2009 parliamentary elections. The two studies were a starting point for further research in the field of the use of digital platforms in electoral campaigns, such as the Nulty et al. (2016), in which the contents of Twitter were analyzed to know the frameworks from which the candidates work.

Fewer studies look at how Twitter has been used in European Parliament elections (Daniel and Obholzer 2020; Meganck et al. 2019), while even fewer focus on how young people are targeted and whether messaging is adapted to their interests. Nor are there many studies specifically analyzing content in terms of targeting younger voters (Prosser et al. 2020), thus raising another question: do candidates use microtargeting in their campaigns (Endres and Kelly 2017)?

Just before the European Parliament elections in 2019, the issues that most concerned the young Europeans (15-30 years old) according to the Flash Eurobarometer (European Commission 2019) were: 'protecting the environment and climate change (67 per cent), improving education and training (56 per cent), fighting poverty, economic and social inequalities (56 per cent), boosting employment and tackling unemployment (49 per cent), improving health and well-being (44 per cent) and promoting human rights, democracy and common values (44 per cent)'.

Taking this into consideration, the objective of this research is to determine whether the *Spitzenkandidaten* (refers to candidates running for the presidency of the European Commission) in the 2019 European Parliament election targeted young voters on Twitter during the last period of the election campaign (from 10 to 26 May) and whether they talked about these topics [Objective 1, O1]. A more in-depth analysis of tweets posted by these candidates was also carried out to determine the most frequent topics [O2], the type of content that was most widely shared (text, image, video or podcast), hashtags used, and the number of likes and comments received to determine whether Twitter's full potential was used to connect with the electorate [O3].

Previous studies on politicians' social media use fail to look specifically at content topics, focusing more on metadata such as number of likes, retweets and hashtags (Stier et al. 2018). The relevance of this research lies specifically in its study of tweet content to ascertain whether *Spitzenkandidaten* were talking about the issues of most interest to young people. Hence, the results are relevant not only scientifically – furthering knowledge on political and digital communication – but also in practice, as they facilitate the design of digital communication strategies for future election campaigns, especially those they intended to aim at a young audience. Furthermore, analysis of the engagement obtained by candidates' posts is particularly relevant, as it helps determine the extent to which they connected with different publics.

The article is structured as follows: the first section reviews the most significant research into youth participation in European elections and into European elections in general, specifically highlighting

studies into political communication and European elections on Twitter. Next, the methodological system used to compile and analyze data is presented, leading to a description of the results and ending with the academic discussion and conclusions.

European Parliament elections and youth participation

The European Union holds elections to the European Parliament every five years. The last elections took place from 23 to 26 May 2019. The purpose was to choose the new presidency of the European Commission, which would have to face the imminent departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union (Brexit) and the rise of populism. The interest of the European elections lies in the fact that not only is it decided who defends the interests of citizens in the European framework, but also the environment in which new laws, treaties and agreements that affect the global European Union are decided.

One of the main characteristics of the European elections, whose parliament is chosen by universal suffrage, is that each country can establish the day on which citizens are called to vote, within a period of four days apart: from Thursday (for example, United Kingdom and Netherlands) to Sunday (the majority of the countries). In addition, each country, depending on the number of inhabitants, has more or fewer seats, which can range from six in Malta, Luxembourg and Cyprus to 96 in Germany (European Parliament 2019).

More than 500 million citizens of the 28 member states of the European Union were called to vote in transnational elections - the most important in the world - in which participation has always been lower than for national elections. One of the reasons for this has been identified by voters' consideration of them as 'second-order elections' (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Remer-Bollow, Bernhagen and Rose 2018; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996). Reif and Schmitt (1980) consider that supranational elections, such as those of the European Parliament, do not stimulate voting and propose six variables between first-order and second-order national elections, in which: participation is lower; the governing and larger parties lose votes while the smaller parties gain votes; extremist and protest parties increase their support; the government parties tend to lose support as they find themselves in the middle of a government period. These elements offer clues on how to analyze and interpret electoral behavior in the European Parliament elections.

Schmitt et al. (2020), who have analyzed some fifty elections in different contexts and years, have identified different voting patterns between first-order elections and second-order elections. They have taken into account elements such as mobilization, strategy or sincerity in relation to the decision to vote or not, concluding that 'the decision to participate in an EP election is a more multi-layered phenomenon than often portrayed, combining both motivations from the national (domestic) and the European political arena' (p.15).

This research takes into account the academic debate on whether the European elections are still defined as second-order elections and looks at the electoral results to see if there is a change in trend. Also, it goes deeper into the analysis of the electoral behavior of a specific target of voters: young people.

Electoral participation has also traditionally been lower among a certain population group: young people (Dahl et al. 2018; Fraga and Holbein 2020). In fact, Fraga and Holbein (2020: 1) points out that age has been a key to predict participation in different electoral contests and they suggest that young people do not exercise their right to vote as often as adult voters, but they also ensure that participation increases according to educational levels and voting habits. Other studies, such as that by Sevi (2021: 1) highlight that voters tend to vote for candidates who resemble their socio demographic profile 'because they believe those candidates are more likely to promote their preferences and interests', so young people prefer young candidates.

In the case of the youth vote, in the context of the European Union, numerous studies analyze the causes of low youth participation in elections (see Fieldhouse, Tranmer and Russell 2007; Norris 2003; Pini 2009; Sloam 2016; Spannring, Ogris and Gaiser 2008). Of particular note is the study by Pini (2009), which analyzes participation in European elections from 1979 to 2004, identifying the following causes for low participation: election fatigue (e.g. when they coincide with national or regional elections); the day of the week (participation increases if they are held on a Sunday); and the characteristics of European politics, which voters find harder to understand, while considering the elections to be secondary. The author also claims that European electoral campaigns should be adapted to new means of communication, since young people do not consume traditional media, but rather inform themselves through the internet, blogs and social media.

Sloam (2016) warns about the lack of commitment in voting in Europe, a trend which also applies to younger voters. However, the author highlights that low voter turnout among young people does not mean that they are not interested in political action: ‘These forms of participation are often ‘non-electoral’ and ‘non-institutionalized’, and are sometimes categorized as ‘protest activities’ (Sloam 2016: 522). A case in point is the international climate movement Fridays For Future.

Among younger voters, there is a degree of indifference or hostility that translates into abstention or protest: many young people still do not feel motivated to vote (Almlund 2018; Pickard 2019). In the 2014 European Parliament elections, only 28 per cent of voters aged 18-24 voted, compared to 51 per cent of those aged over 55 (Debating Europe 2019). However, in 2019 EU Parliament elections participation rose by 42 per cent among under-25s and by 47 per cent among voters aged 25-39, according to the European Union post-election study (European Parliament 2019). According to Dodi and Butnaru-Troncota (2019) some of the reasons were: the power of first-time voters, the fear of EU disintegration and the climate change activism.

Although the European Parliament has traditionally been considered as second-order elections, we detect a change of trend in the elections under analysis. Electoral participation was 50.66 per cent of the population with the right to vote in 2019, a higher number than the last fifteen years and after three contests: 45.47 per cent (2004), 42.97 per cent (2009) and 42.61 per cent (2014) (European Parliament 2019).

Schmitt et al. (2020: 15) ask whether a change in trend could have occurred in the 2019 European Parliament elections: ‘It is often said that the EU is a moving target; no other SOE-specific arena undergoes as rapid and profound institutional and procedural changes as the EU does. Will future EP elections with perhaps even starker changes in this “specific arena dimension” [...] still fit that picture?’ and they answer themselves: ‘We claim that they will, provided that citizens still perceive that there is ‘less at stake’ in the EU electoral arena’.

This research also takes into account other studies which incorporate the debate on whether the European elections are proposed from a territorial and local level, rather than thinking about what European citizens have in common (Suárez 2021; Schulte-Cloos 2018; Nulty et al. 2016; Hobolt and De Vries 2016). Suárez (2021: 6) states that, although the Lisbon Treaty could make it easier for the elections to the European Parliament to be considered of the first order, the truth is that shows ‘the little interest shown by the main actors of the electoral process, the national political parties, more concerned with testing their voters in a local key than with developing true European elections of the first order’. It should be noted that national political parties compete in the European elections, although most of them are affiliated with a transnational political group.

Thus, the elections to the European Parliament were not considered first-order elections but would focus on transferring to Europe issues related to domestic politics. Shulte-Cloos (2018: 410), basing his research on the theory that the elections to the European Parliament are considered second-order,

points out that the representatives of the European political arena ‘do not decide about government formation and no immediate policy-implications accrue out of the EP result’.

Nevertheless, it must be taken into account that authors as Hooghe and Marks (2017) highlight the growing politicization of the European Union pointing out a new transnational cleavage: the political reaction against European integration and immigration. Hutter and Kriesi (2019) also consider conflicts about national identity, sovereignty and solidarity, as for example, the Eurocrisis and so-called refugee crisis. The authors point out that these two crises ‘constitute such critical moments in the integration process that contribute to its politicization [...]’ (p. 998). In the same way, Börzel and Risse (2017) point out the politicization of the European Union from the euro to the Schengen crises. The authors consider that both were about identity politics and, consequently, led to a more politicization. Thus, the debate focuses on whether an European voter is being formed, as Maarek and Pelissier (2020) suggest.

In the European Parliament elections of 2019, the mobilization campaign 'This time I'm voting' was promoted to encourage participation -especially of young voters-, to reverse the continued decline in participation. The mobilization campaign also encouraged citizens to reconnect with a European community project that, currently, citizens feel distant. That is due to different political cultures and the great diversity of languages (Herkman and Harjuniemi 2015), which make a common public sphere impossible (Trenz 2004) and that consequently leads to Euroscepticism.

The European Union, already committed to institutional and public communication (such as the fight against disinformation), tries to be recognized by all citizens. And it is in this context that the 'This time I'm voting' campaign was also launched. One of the main communication channels was social media, with the focus on Twitter, promoting the hashtag #ThisTimeImVoting (and its versions in the different EU languages). It was, above all, a campaign built on volunteering, in an attempt to involve the public in political affairs.

Precisely, this research considers the issues that most interest citizens, specifically, the youngest public (in the European Union), and if these motivated them to vote: climate change and environment, education, poverty and inequalities, unemployment, and health (Flash Eurobarometer April 2019). Consequently, this research asks if the *Spitzenkandidaten* spoke about these issues to get closer to the interests of the young electorate.

Social Media: a challenge for democracies and political communication

Social media offer new forms of communication (Enli 2017; Freelon and Karpf 2015; Nulty et al. 2016; Vergeer 2016) to reach the electorate directly and establish two-way communication, betting on dialogue and mobilization (Lilleker and Vedel 2013).

According to numerous studies, a process of political delegitimization (Barber 1984; Castells 2006) has been underway, as has a decrease in political engagement, a trend that also exists among the youngest voters, who are not motivated to vote (Almlund 2018; Pickard 2019). Thus, it is investigated whether social media can contribute to improving democratic systems (Norris 2004; Persily 2017), considering that the good health of democratic societies depends on the social and political engagement of citizens (Metzger et al. 2018), whose identity is formed during adolescence.

Authors such as Castells (2006), Davis (2005), Enli (2017a), Hong and Kim (2021), Ignazi (2020), Margolis and Resnick (2000) and Norris (2004) investigate whether the internet can be used as a tool to reverse civil society's disengagement from political issues and improve democratic systems. The fact of the matter is that social media allows for more direct, two-way communication and faster information dissemination.

The introduction of social media in politics has led candidates to use new tools to communicate with the electorate which, according to Nulty et al. (2016: 2), has involved a process of modernization and professionalization of electoral contests that also 'have forced political elites to adopt and integrate in their campaigns increasingly sophisticated digital communication practices'. Meanwhile, citizens are aware that they can actively engage in politics through digital platforms. The most recent studies ask whether candidates communicate differently with the electorate by having a more proactive presence on social media (Enli 2017b; Enli and Skogerbø 2013; Graham, Jackson and Broersma 2017; Vergeer 2016). In fact, according to Enli (2017b: 7): 'Rather than using social media as a way to interact with voters or encourage dialogue which might empower the citizens and in turn create an arena for participation, the political campaigns primarily use social media as a channel for political marketing'.

In the case of the European elections, studies such as the one by Seoane (2013) indicates the disconnection between the European institutions and the citizens, a communication gap that has been generated by the little interest of the national elites in talking about the importance of Europe. Eriksen (2005) also points to the fact that there is no European public sphere because there is no collective identity in the European Union. In this investigation we will see if *Spitzenkandidaten* try to approach younger voters, the future of the European Union.

Twitter has become the preferred platform for candidates to spread their message, according to Enli (2017), Enli and Skogerbø (2013), Freelon and Karpf (2015), Jungherr (2016), Larsson and Moe (2014), and Vergeer (2016), which allows them to increase their presence at a very low cost, while providing citizens with a direct communication channel with the candidates (Nulty et al. 2016) to establish conversation.

Thus, this research focuses on communication via Twitter, a microblogging network created in 2006 which allows posts of up to 280 characters. Today, Twitter has 386 million active accounts worldwide (Statista 2020) and 25-to-34-year-olds are its biggest user group, representing 28 per cent of the total. Social media such as Twitter permit greater interaction between candidates and their voters, becoming a real-time platform for political communication which political actors ignore at their own risk (Elo 2019; Jungherr 2016; Meganck et al. 2019; Daniel and Obholzer 2020).

Conversation as a new form of relationship with the target is related to the users' engagement with the publications of the institution or company. Engagement is a measure of the success of posts. Although there are different formulas to calculate it, according to the criteria of the companies that offer measurement services, some principles and metrics are common. It is considered an effect of users' acceptance and evaluation, an emotional involvement manifested by likes, comments, and shares. On Twitter, likes, mentions, replies, and RTs are considered (Raso 2016; Ure 2018).

European Parliament elections on Twitter

Twitter use by candidates in European Parliament elections has been previously studied by Meganck et al. (2019), who analyze Twitter engagement by the leading candidates in the 2014 EU Parliament elections: Jean-Claude Juncker and Martin Schulz. The results reveal that in the previous elections, conservative candidate Juncker was more likely to tweet about immigration, which was an important topic in the election overall, and about specific EU countries. His social-democratic opponent Schulz, on the other hand, put more emphasis on civil rights as well as campaign and party affairs. The authors point out that the 2014 election was different from previous EU elections because never before had an EU Parliament election been as personalized, with two major candidates campaigning across Europe. The study concludes that in the 2014 campaign, the candidates did not tap into the full potential of Twitter as a multinational platform, especially regarding the use of the different languages spoken by EU citizens.

Also focused on the 2014 European elections, Vaccari (2017: 69) states that ‘respondents who received an invitation to vote for a party or candidate via email or social media engaged in a significantly higher number of political activities than those who did not’.

Another study, this time by Daniel, Obholzer and Hurka (2019: 779), focused on the use of Twitter by Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) during the fall and winter of 2015-2016, revealing that ‘MEPs tweet more frequently, all else equal, when they represent larger groups of citizens, are elected on shorter lists, and represent voters that are, themselves, more predisposed to the use of social media’. The study also points out that ‘MEPs are sensitive to a demand for social media communication, with MEPs from parties with younger voters making more frequent use of Twitter’ (Daniel, Obholzer and Hurka 2019: 580). The results suggest that politicians use Twitter not only to reach voters, but also to reach journalists and convey a broader audience.

The most recent study is by Elo (2019), who focused on the 2019 campaign, as does the research presented here. However, his work did not focus on candidates’ tweets but on those by all Twitter users using the hashtags in English #Elections2019, #EUElections2019, #EP2019, #ThisTimeImVoting. His results show that the main topics were: the refugee crisis, used above all by the far right; Brexit; and, finally, climate change, especially among young people who organized on Twitter around the ‘Fridays for Future’ movement, headed by the activist Greta Thunberg.

METHODOLOGY

The research applies a multiple-case study analysis for Twitter posts by the six main candidates in the 2019 European Parliament election, called to occupy the presidency of the European Commission. The approach of collecting tweets has been used before to analyze MEPs communication by authors such as Daniel, Obholzer and Hurka (2019), and Daniel and Obholzer (2020). Case studies have also been carried out to analyze *Twitter* use by electoral candidates in elections (Fraia and Missaglia 2014; Miller and Ko 2015). In our research the focus is on the 2019 EU Parliament campaign candidates and on determining if these candidates posted on the topics that most interest young voters.

The research took into consideration that although there are some common rules regarding the EU Parliament election campaign, some aspects can vary by country. For instance, in Spain, the campaign could just last the final fifteen days before the election day, but there is not a time frame for the campaign at the EU level. The period analyzed in this study is composed of the sixteen last days of the campaign (10-26 May 2019), which is considered the final period (*T-2 weeks*), the moment when most communication is posted regarding the campaign. Sample selection was, therefore, based on time-frame, as suggested by authors such as Percastre-Mendizábal, Pont-Sorribes, and Codina (2017), focusing on the period that concentrated the largest volume of tweets.

Data were collected after the election, on 2 April 2020, which was the date set for compiling the information to analyze all candidates’ tweets, which totaled 303. Although the sample can seem small, it includes all the tweets posted by the six main candidates (*Spitzenkandidaten*) during the *T-2 weeks* period, actually showing that Twitter is still not very used by the politicians at this level.

Comparative methodology was used (Graham, Jackson and Broersma 2017; Hallin and Mancini 2004; Jürgens and Jungherr 2016; Lijphart 1971; Sartori 1970; Vergeer 2016), based on an analysis of the posts by: Nico Cué, European United Left party, (@AvecNico); Ska Keller, Greens, (@SkaKeller); Jan Zahradil, European Conservatives and Reformists Party, (@ZahradilJan); Margrethe Vestager, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, (@vestager); Manfred Weber,

European People's Party (@ManfredWebwe); and Frans Timmermans, Socialists and Democrats (@TimmermansEU), to determine whether the candidates were talking about the topics of greatest interest to young voters and if they were directing their posts at this group. Candidates and not the political parties they represent were chosen because electoral campaigns tend to be personalized (Enli 2017), and the profiles of the candidates take more relevance and not those of the parties they represent. Candidates with lower representation in the European Parliament were excluded in order to limit the sample. It is also important to point out that the European United Left/Nordic Green Left chose two candidates, but it was Nico Cué who participated in the televised electoral debate, which is why his tweets have been analyzed.

An analysis template was developed including considering quantifiable variables such as the number of candidates' tweets and retweets and the number of likes, comments and retweets they received. The core variables were the topics that young people (aged 15-30) in the EU think should be prioritized in the coming years, according to the Flash Eurobarometer (European Commission 2019): climate change, education, social policies, employment, health, and human rights and democracy.

Tweets were classified in order to determine what candidates talked about during the election campaign and whether they targeted young voters with their posts. The classification was complemented by other topics candidates mentioned which were identified during the analysis: European alliances; interviews or articles about the candidate; campaign visits and events; election debates; asking citizens to vote and asking them to vote for their party; refugees and immigration; personal hobbies; animal rights; feminism; territory; culture, and others. We defined the variables and assigned attributes (indicators) to them to measure the variables empirically and answer the research questions (Appendix I provides the description of the categories for the manual coding). We used a nominal measurement method, counting whether and how many times a sample appears (yes=1, no=0). Also codified were the groups most frequently targeted by the candidates' messages (C1=youth, C2=women, C3=general, C4=other specific target), the language candidates' tweeted in, the hashtags used, and the material attached to posts (F=Photo, V=Video, N=News, 0=nothing). We applied a filtering method in order to conduct the frequency analysis.

Reliability was verified while extracting the results, whereby the three researchers analyzed tweets from four candidates, so that each candidates' Twitter content was always analyzed twice. Once this process was complete, the researchers were assigned to verify two further candidates previously analyzed by another researcher, which translated into a reliability level of 96.4 per cent.

RESULTS

The results of the data analysis provided a snapshot of the topics in candidates' Twitter posts during the 2019 European Parliament election campaign and established whether – and to what extent – they matched young people's interests. It became clear that candidates differed in their use of Twitter in terms of topics, frequency of posts and the addressees of their messages.

What the candidates talked about and for whom

The results show that candidates did not prioritize talking on Twitter about the topics that most interest young people. Most of their posts were related to their campaign events and visits, 26.07 per cent (79 tweets); topics related to territory, 24.7 per cent (75 tweets); general appeals to vote, 21.7

per cent (66 tweets); and mentions of their party’s European alliances, 19.8 per cent (60 tweets) (see Figure 1).

Indeed, only 44 tweets (14.5 per cent) of the candidates’ tweets referred to climate change and environmental protection, which is the top issue that young people aged 15 to 30 think requires EU action (European Commission 2019). In addition, education – the second most frequently mentioned priority among young people – received only one tweet (0.33 per cent) from the candidates. The economy was mentioned by all candidates, although there were only 37 tweets (12.2 per cent) on combating poverty and inequality (social policy), the third-placed priority for young people; and only eighteen (5.9 per cent) mentioning jobs and reducing unemployment, the fourth-placed topic. The candidates posted a total of 36 tweets on human rights and democracy (11.9 per cent), the sixth topic of most interest to young people, but made no mention of health, the fifth topic of most interest to this group. In addition, tweets related to the issues of most interest to young people amounted to a total of 136, representing 44.8 per cent of the total.

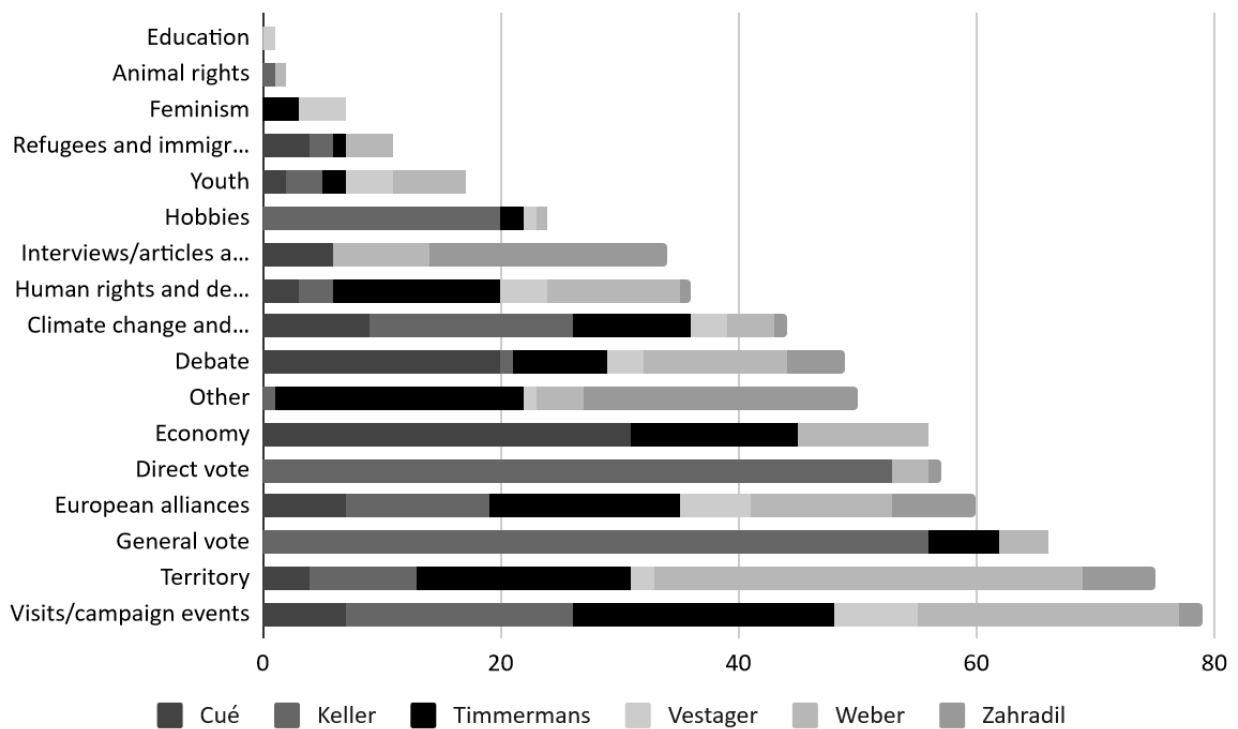


Figure 1: Distribution of tweets by topic and candidate. Source: the authors.

The analysis of each candidate shows that Ska Keller (Greens) was the one who posted most frequently about the environment and climate change (seventeen tweets), followed by Frans Timmermans (Socialists and Democrats), who posted ten tweets related to this topic, and Nico Cué (European United Left), who also showed interest in this topic (nine tweets), although his main interests were social policy and employment. Jan Zahradil (European Conservatives and Reformists Party) was the candidate who posted the fewest tweets on the environment and climate change, with just one, preceded by Margrethe Vestager (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe), who posted three tweets on this topic, and Manfred Weber (European People’s Party), who posted four tweets.

With regard to the second topic of most interest to young voters – education – only Margrethe Vestager (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe) posted a related tweet.

Nico Cué (European United Left) was the candidate with the most tweets on social policies related to poverty and social inequalities, the third topic of most interest to young voters (nineteen tweets), followed by Frans Timmermans (Socialists and Democrats), who posted eleven tweets. Ska Keller (Greens) and Manfred Weber (European People’s Party) posted three tweets, while Margrethe Vestager (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe) and Jan Zahradil (European Conservatives and Reformists Party) posted just one. In total, 37 tweets were posted on the topic of social policies (12.2 per cent).

The candidates posted on various issues related to the economy. On looking at this in detail (see Figure 2), the fourth topic of most interest to young people – employment – accounted for just eighteen tweets (5.9 per cent) and was mentioned by Nico Cué (European United Left) in twelve tweets, and by Frans Timmermans (Socialists and Democrats) and Manfred Weber (European People’s Party) with three tweets each.

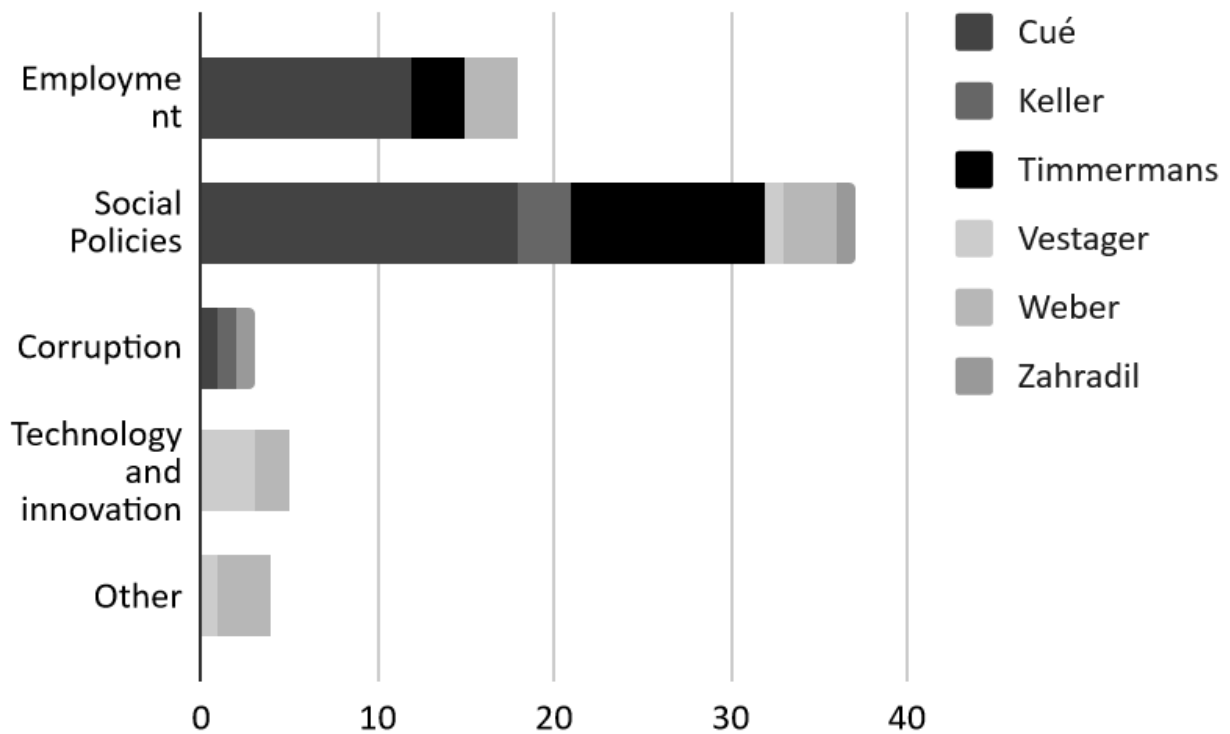


Figure 2: Distribution of tweets on economy-related topics. Source: the authors.

None of the candidates spoke on issues related to health and welfare, even though this was the fifth topic of most interest to young people.

Finally, in relation to the sixth topic of most interest to young people – human rights and democracy – the candidates posted a total of 36 tweets (11.9 per cent), most of them by Frans Timmermans (Socialists and Democrats) with fourteen tweets, followed by Manfred Weber (European People’s Party) with eleven tweets, Margrethe Vestager (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe) with

four tweets, Ska Keller (Greens) and Nico Cué (European United Left) with three tweets each, and Jan Zahradil (European Conservatives and Reformists Party) with one tweet.

However, the candidates mostly tweeted about issues not of interest to young people, such as: territory, campaign visits and events, European alliances, or articles and interviews. The data also show that most of the candidates' tweets were aimed at the general public (87.8 per cent) and only 5.3 per cent of posts targeted younger voters. Indeed, there were only sixteen tweets specifically aimed at these voters, generating 1,853 likes, 553 retweets and an average 115.8 likes per tweet, a higher total than for posts aimed at the general public.

Engagement

According to the sample analyzed, the main six candidates in the European Parliament election posted a total of 303 tweets during the campaign period (see Table 1). Their tweets received 27.243 likes and were retweeted 8.099 times. The candidate who posted the most tweets during the period was Manfred Weber (European People's Party), with a total of 64 tweets, closely followed by Frans Timmermans (Socialists and Democrats) and Ska Keller (Greens), with 60 and 59 tweets, respectively. However, the candidate obtaining the best engagement was Timmermans, whose tweets generated a total of 12,196 likes (average 297.5). By contrast, Margrethe Vestager (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe), posted the fewest tweets during the period: only 23 tweets were recorded, with a total of 2,022 likes, at an average of 49.3 likes per tweet. The candidate who obtained the most dissemination for his tweets was Frans Timmerman: his posts were retweeted 4,029 times, at an average of 67.2 retweets per tweet.

With regard to the issues of most interest to young people, posts on the environment and climate change obtained the most likes (94.4 per tweet), followed by tweets on economic inequality (58.6 per tweet) and education (57 per tweet). The tweets with the fewest likes were on employment (46.7 per tweet).

Overall, the tweets with the most likes were ones directly calling on citizens to vote (average 291.5), followed by tweets on refugees and immigration (average 132.7) and territory (average 132.2) (see Table 1). The posts that generated the most retweets were ones calling on people to vote (average 77.5), feminism (average 66.6) and human rights and democracy (average 45.9).

With regard to engagement with the groups targeted by posts, it is striking that the best engagement was with posts aimed at younger voters, with an average 35 retweets for each tweet, above the median of 27 retweets per tweet, followed by messages targeting the general public, which received an average 27 retweets per tweet. Nevertheless, although only one tweet was posted aimed specifically at women, receiving 21 retweets, it received 139 likes, much higher than posts aimed at the other publics.

Topic	No. tweets	No. likes	Average likes/tweet	No. Retweets	Average retweets/tweet
General vote	66	2,853	219.5	1,007	77.5
Refugees and immigration	11	1,460	132.7	379	34.5

Territory	75	9,913	132.2	2,669	35.6
Visits/campaign events	79	9,729	123.2	2,164	27.4
Human rights and democracy	36	4,374	121.5	1,653	45.9
Direct vote	9	1,048	116.4	274	30.4
Youth	17	1,901	111.8	583	34.3
Climate change and environment	44	4,152	94.4	1,446	32.9
Other	50	4,544	90.9	1,147	22.9
European alliances	60	5,449	90.8	1,422	23.7
Debate	49	4,312	88.0	1,485	30.3
Animal rights	2	172	86.0	31	15.5
Feminism	7	546	78.0	466	66.6
Economy	67	4,014	59.9	1,630	24.3
Education	1	57	57.0	23	23.0
Hobbies: music	24	1,205	50.2	210	8.8
Interviews/articles about the candidate	34	1,178	34.6	429	12.6

Table 1: Engagement per topic (total candidates). Source: the authors.

Tweet format

Most of the tweets shared by the candidates (73.5 per cent) had some form of audio-visual support in addition to the text content (see Figure 3). Images were the format most commonly used by candidates: 109 posts (35.9 per cent) while video was the second most frequent format, appearing in 46 posts (15.1 per cent); followed by tweets accompanied by news items, in a total of 46 (10.2 per cent); retweets, a total of 28 (9.2 per cent), and posters, a total of eight (2.6 per cent). The least used format was the podcast, while 96 tweets (31.6 per cent) were posts with no format other than text.

The candidate who accompanied his tweets with the most audiovisual content was Manfred Weber (European People's Party), who posted 27 photos, eleven videos, eight posters and six news items. Next in line was Nico Cué (Party of the European Left), who posted 21 photos, fifteen videos and retweeted the content of seven tweets. Ska Keller (Greens) was the third most frequent user of a wide variety of audiovisual content: 21 retweets, sixteen photos, and four videos; followed by Frans Timmermans (Socialists and Democrats), who posted 23 photos, sixteen videos and one tweet with a news item. Jan Zahradil (European Conservatives and Reformists Party) posted nineteen tweets with a news item and nine with photos, while Margrethe Vestager (Alliance of Liberals and

Democrats of Europe) was the candidate who was least concerned about posting tweets with audiovisual content; specifically, she published thirteen photos and five news items.

Weber was the candidate who posted the most photos, a total of 27 (24.8 per cent), while Zahradil posted the least, with just nine (8.3 per cent). Vestager and Zahradil did not post any videos, while Timmermans posted the most, a total of sixteen (34.8 per cent). Zahradil sent the most tweets containing news items, a total of nineteen (61.3 per cent), while Keller and Cué did not post any content of this kind, although they were the only two candidates to have retweeted content, with 21 and seven respectively (75 per cent and 25 per cent). Weber was the only one to post content with a poster, and Zahradil the only one to post a podcast.

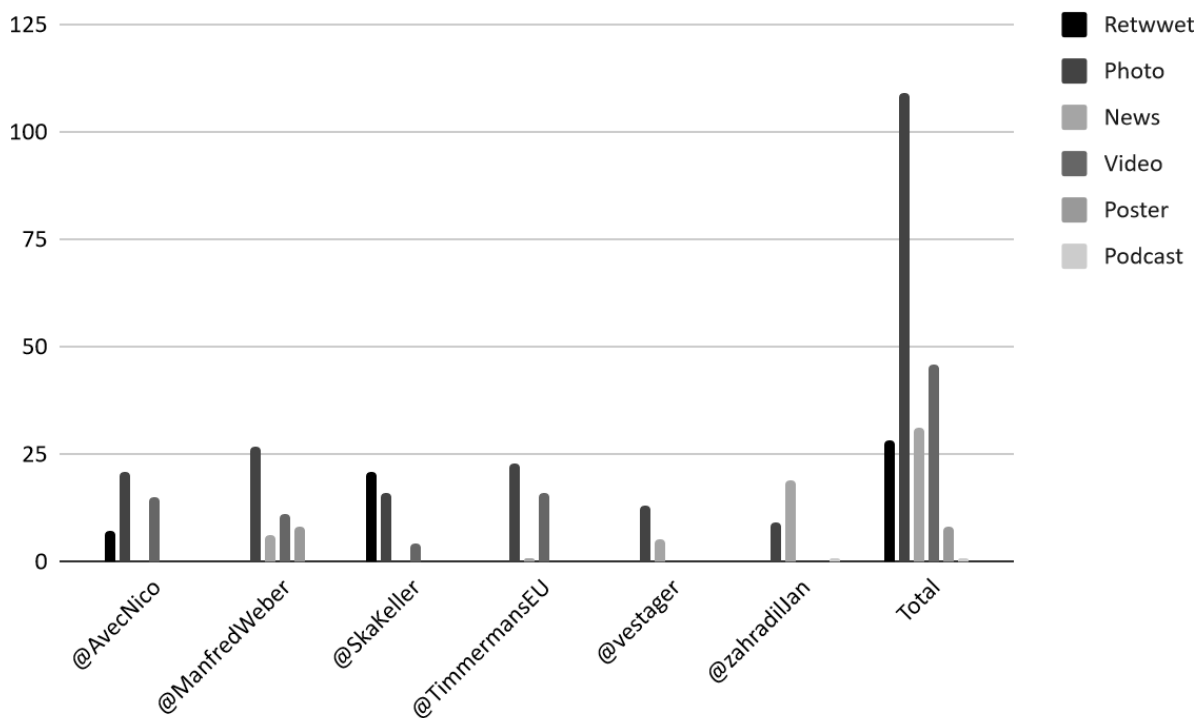


Figure 3: Tweet format. Source: the authors.

Tweets accompanied by photos were the ones with the most likes and retweets: 10,975 (an average of 100.7 likes per tweet) and 2,631 (an average of 24.1 retweets per tweet), respectively; while content with video obtained 5,738 likes (an average of 124.7 likes per tweet) and 2,307 retweets (50.2 retweets per tweet). Content with a retweet obtained 2,391 likes (an average of 85.4 likes per tweet) and 519 retweets (an average of 18.5 retweets per tweet). Content with news items obtained 1,556 likes (an average of 50.2 likes per tweet) and 835 retweets (an average of 26.9 retweets per tweet). The podcast received nine likes (an average of nine likes per tweet) and eight retweets (an average of eight retweets per tweet). Finally, the content with posters obtained 554 likes (an average of 69.3 likes per tweet) and 171 retweets (an average of 21.4 retweets per tweet).

Languages used

The data show that during the electoral campaign the candidates tweeted in nine different languages (see Figure 4). Less than half the tweets, a total of 143 (47.2 per cent) were posted in English, the most common language in the European Union. German was the second most widely-used language

for tweets with a total of 77 (25.4 per cent), followed by Czech, with 44 tweets (14.5 per cent); Spanish, with fifteen (5 per cent); French, with thirteen (4.3 per cent); Polish, with four (1.3 per cent); Danish, with three (1 per cent); and Catalan and Italian, with one tweet each, representing 0.3 per cent.

The data also show that candidates preferred to tweet in their mother tongue (See Figure 4). Thus, Jan Zahradil (European Conservatives and Reformists Party) used his mother tongue, (Czech, most frequently) in a total of 44 of the 54 tweets he posted (78.57 per cent); while Nico Cué (European United Left) was the most frequent user of other languages, these being Spanish, French and English.

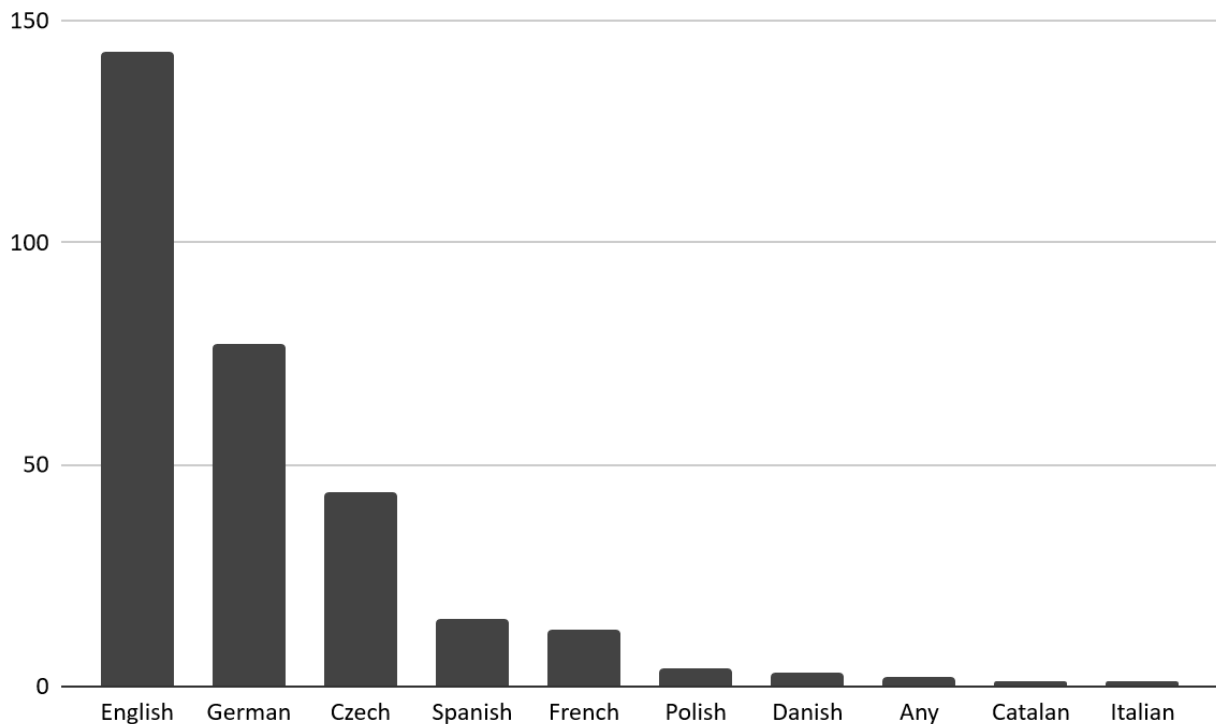


Figure 4: Language of tweets. Source: the authors.

Tweets posted in English accounted for a total of 17,899 likes (an average of 125.2 likes per tweet) and 5,383 retweets, very much ahead of the tweets posted in other languages (see Table 2).

However, it was the tweets posted in other languages that had the biggest impact. The only tweet posted in Catalan obtained 321 likes per tweet and 136 retweets per tweet, more than any other post.

Language	Tweets	% Tweets	No. likes	Likes/tweet	No. retweets	Retweets /tweet
English	143	47.2%	17,899	125.2	5,383	37.6
German	77	25.4%	6,879	89.3	1,764	22.9
Czech	44	14.5%	549	12.5	147	3.3
Spanish	15	5.0%	436	29.1	302	20.1
French	13	4.3%	216	16.6	106	8.2
Polish	4	1.3%	597	149.3	167	41.8
Danish	3	1.0%	200	66.7	24	8.0

Any	2	0.7%	62	31.0	2	1.0
Catalan	1	0.3%	321	321.0	136	136.0
Italian	1	0.3%	84	84.0	68	68.0

Table 2: Engagement of tweets by language. Source: the authors.

Candidates did not use a common hashtag for posts on issues related to the European Parliament election; tweets were published with a total of 198 different hashtags. Although some shared the hashtags, these were not the tags used to share all messages. This means that among the hashtags identified by Elo (2019) as the most widely shared among all Twitter users during the elections (#EPElections2019, #EUElections2019, #EP2019, #ThisTimeImVoting), the candidates only used two (#EUElections2019, #EP2019), and certainly not for all their tweets. Indeed, the most widely-shared hashtag among the candidates was #EurovisionDebate, specifically on 23 occasions: by Nico Cué (Party of the European Left) and Frans Timmermans (Party of European Socialists), a total of eight times each, and seven times by Manfred Weber (European People’s Party) (see Figure 5).

Ska Keller (Greens) was the candidate who used more hashtags during the election campaign period, with a total of 94. Most of the hashtags she used were only used once, and #esc2019 was repeated seventeen times, while #Eurovision was repeated twelve times.

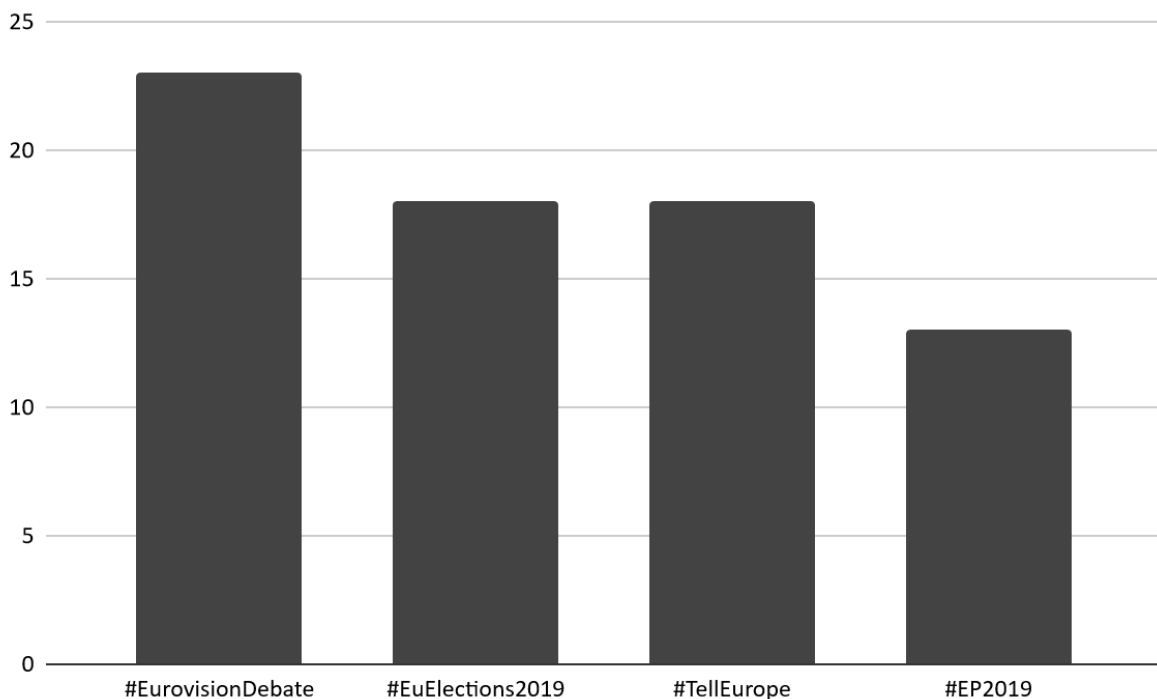


Figure 5: Most frequently-used hashtags. Source: the authors.

Only Margrethe Vestager (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe) used hashtags related to young people: #YoungEuropeIsVoting, #YoungFuture or #YouthIsland, and to climate change, #Klima. Regarding topics of interest to young people, Frans Timmermans (Socialists and Democrats) used hashtags linked to one of their main concerns, climate change, with tweets mentioning #fridaysforfuture or #fightplasticpollution, while Ska Keller (Greens) used the labels #GreenWave,

#climastrike, #climate, #VoteForClimate or #ClimateElections. Manfred Weber (European People's Party) used hashtags such as #Plastic or #Pollution.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The research shows that, during the 2019 European Parliament election campaign period (10-26 May 2019), fewer than half the tweets posted, 44.8 per cent of a total of 303 tweets, were related to the topics of most interest to young people, as identified by the Flash Eurobarometer (European Commission 2019), which, in decreasing order, are: the environment, education, poverty and social inequality, work, health and human rights and democracy. Most of the candidates' posts were campaign events and visits, 26.07 per cent (79 tweets); topics related to territory, 24.7 per cent (75 tweets); general appeals to vote, 21.7 per cent (66 tweets); and mentions of their party's European alliances, 19.8 per cent (60 tweets).

European Parliament elections have long been considered second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Remer-Bollow, Bernhagen and Rose 2018; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996). Nevertheless, recent studies highlight the theory that the European elections are increasingly politicized (Maarek and Pelissier 2020; Hutter and Kriesi 2019; Hooghe and Marks 2017). In fact, in the 2019 European elections, voter turnout rose but *Spitzenkandidaten* didn't talk at all about the issues that interest young people. A more in-depth research is needed to focus the issue on the progressive politicization of the European election campaigns.

Rivas-de-Roca and García-Gordillo (2020: 46) studied the European Parliament elections in 2019, specifically, the differences among the transnational and national candidates' thematic agenda on Twitter. The content analysis research points out 'the fact that national issues have an important presence in the tweets of national candidates, which would show that the *Spitzenkandidaten* system has failed to create a European political agenda'. According to these authors, our investigation highlights that the *Spitzenkandidaten* are not interested in talking about the issues that would allow them to connect with the young public. And to go further, although the 'This time I'm voting' campaign pursued to combat abstention, this research shows that *Spitzenkandidaten* -according to the issues they published during the electoral campaign-, did not try to create conversation among young voter, so it is difficult to create a common identity or a feeling of belonging if there is no dialog.

A more in-depth analysis of tweets posted by these candidates was also carried out to determine the most frequent topics. According to our findings, very little reference was made to what Europe could do for young people, being left-wing and green candidates the most concerned about this type of voter, whose vote increased compared to previous elections, changing the trend pointed out by Almlund (2018) and Pickard (2019) who suggest that many young people do not feel motivated to vote and reinforcing the study of Dodi and Butnaru-Troncota (2019), that pointed out that some of the reasons why young people went to vote were: the power of first time voters, the fear of EU disintegration and the climate change activism.

In contrast to the findings of Daniel, Obholzer and Hurka (2019) when they stated that the candidates are sensitive to the demand for more digital communications, not all the candidates made this connection with their target – specifically, the youth audience – through Twitter. These results complement previous studies, such as Elo (2019), on the same election campaign which, based on

use of the hashtags #Elections2019, #EUElections2019, #EP2019 and #ThisTimeImVoting among the whole Twitter community, showed that the main topics on Twitter were: the refugee crisis, used above all by the far right; Brexit; and finally, climate change, especially among young people who organized on Twitter around the Fridays For Future movement, headed by the activist Greta Thunberg. We can see, however, that the candidates made no reference to these topics as a priority, since 55.2 per cent of them focused their Twitter messages on publicizing their campaign actions, their alliances, and direct appeals to vote.

This research also highlights that candidates did not use a common hashtag to tweet on shared topics. These results are similar to Enli (2017), who noted that political actors tend to avoid dialogue with voters on social media, concluding that Twitter is still mainly used as a one-way communication platform and political marketing tool and not as a more direct channel for candidates to connect with voters, as also point out Graham et al. (2013) and Nulty et al. (2016).

The data also show that just 5.3 per cent of the candidates' tweets were directed specifically at a youth audience, even though this is the group that uses social media the most. In fact, it was precisely these tweets that obtained the highest level of engagement (average 35 retweets for each tweet). In the future, candidates should be more responsive to youth' concerns as part of the communication strategy to reach higher levels of political success among this group of voters. The incorporation of young professionals who are experts in social media is proposed for future election campaigns.

The candidates under analysis did manage to include audiovisual elements in the content they shared on Twitter. This is something that does address users' preferences, since social media users' online behavior is changing and they increasingly prefer to consume visual content (Thongmak 2019; Sabaté et al. 2014). The content which is most successful, and thus obtains better engagement, generally contains multiple formats and includes images and videos (Lei, Pratt and Wang 2017). Bearing these studies in mind, one sees that, during the 2019 European Parliament election campaign, candidates' messages containing multimedia material, such as images and video, obtained better engagement: tweets with videos received an average 124.7 likes and 50.2 retweets. In short, content with multiple formats helps generate better engagement, as noted by Thongmak (2019) and Sabaté et al. (2014).

With regard to language, candidates used English in less than half their tweets, hence they did not use the common language to connect to voters globally or to young people in the European Union, the age group that speaks the language most fluently. Thus, candidates mostly used their mother tongue during the campaign, especially Jan Zahradil (European Conservatives and Reformists Party), who published his tweets in Czech. The candidate who used the greatest diversity of languages in his tweets was Nico Cué (European United Left), in line with recommendations from previous research, such as Kim et al. (2014), who analyzed the use of multilingualism on Twitter from the sociolinguistic perspective, noting that the local language has more influence and is used to discuss political topics or information, while English is used to talk about events and leisure. These data contrast with the study by Meganck et al. (2019) on the use of Twitter by candidates Martin Schulz and Jean Claude Juncker in the previous European Parliament elections (2014), which showed that these candidates tweeted mainly in English (34.8 per cent) and did not prioritize their native language.

This research helps highlight a little studied, yet significant, topic in the field of political communication in the European Union: how candidates in European Parliament elections address the younger public on social media. Focusing on Twitter, the results reveal that the candidates in the 2019 election: (1) did not use the network's full potential to address younger voters, as they did not discuss issues of interest to them; (2) the topics they most mentioned were mainly their campaign events; (3) they did not use Twitter's potential for connecting with voters, as (3a) did not take the opportunity to tweet in different languages or communicate mostly in English (thereby limiting their reach, as it is the official European Union language and widely spoken by young people); (3b) did not apply a humanization strategy to reach younger voters (few candidates tweeted about personal matters); and (3c) did not use shared hashtags to establish online dialogues. However, they did (3d) make use of the greater impact of accompanying tweets with audiovisual content.

These results have both theoretical and practical implications, as they contribute to the study of political communication online and to defining future electoral communication strategies on Twitter as a way to contribute to improving the quality of democracies (Ali 2020). In fact, on Twitter candidates' messages have the potential to reach new audiences and to create extended party networks (EPNs) as defined by Yoon et al. (2022). Therefore, some of the recommendations for the future EU candidates Twitter strategy-would be to adopt professional political communication techniques on social media due to their impact on the formation of public opinion; to put topics of interest of youth in their political agenda, to use all the Twitter's potential to interact with young voters -focusing on a two-way communication model based on dialogue through replying and mentioning as proposed by Reveilhac and Morselli (2022)-, and to redefine their digital communication strategy adopting new narratives (more personal and in audiovisual format) in order to promote engagement and boost participation, which could also contribute to the European Parliament elections not being considered a second-order elections, as point out Remer-Bollow, Bernhagen and Rose 2018; Reif and Schmitt 1980; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; and to combat the lack of interest in politics shown by citizens during the last decades (Barber 1984; Castells 2006; Davis 2005; Lilleker and Vedel 2013; Persily 2017). The results of this research also contrast with that of Valera-Ordaz and Sørensen (2019) who studied the Facebook activities of Danish and Spanish members of the European Parliament. The authors conclude that Danish MEPs use of Facebook is more dialogue-oriented than the Spanish MEP's, who rarely engage with voters. Thus, it cannot be affirmed that the candidates have a greater interest in dialoguing with the voters, although there is a certain tendency to do so. According to Valera-Ordaz and Sørensen (2019), the political culture and the political system that political actors depend on can influence this.

The research has limitations above all, it focuses only on content shared by candidates on Twitter and only covers the two last weeks of the election campaign. Hence, we propose future lines of study to analyze other social media networks, especially those most widely used by the younger public (Instagram, YouTube, TikTok or Twitch), and lengthen the period of analysis taking into account that some studies, such as Larsson's (2014), point out that we are in a permanent campaign. Norris (2000) also points out that one of the main characteristics of postmodern campaigns is the permanent campaign. We also propose replicating the study in the next European Parliamentary election (scheduled for 2024), to determine whether there are any changes in the online political communication strategy by future candidates. Another research proposal could take into account the

political culture or political system in which the candidates are subscribed in order to discover if the characteristics of the political system are related to the way they campaign.

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