Digital Campaigning on the Rise? A Long-term Perspective on German Federal Elections

Michael Angenendt[1]**/Ole Kelm**[2]**/Thomas Poguntke**[3]**/Ulrich Rosar**[4]

Election campaigns are no longer what they used to be. In the old days, they were about mass rallies to reach as many people as possible. Door-to-door canvassing and information stalls in the inner cities manned by the local candidates complemented a campaign logic geared towards contacting and mobilising as many people as possible. With the advent of TV, this campaign style lost much functionality because TV ads could reach potential voters more efficiently. The proliferation of TV channels in the wake of private TV accelerated this trend. Internet-based campaigning, mainly social media campaigning, offered a new level of outreach coupled with the vastly increased possibility of targeting voters more efficiently and directly. At the same time, however, we could notice a countervailing trend, and all larger German parties rediscovered the effectiveness of door-to-door canvassing in the 2017 election campaign (Kruschinksi & Haller, 2018). As the 2021 election campaign was held under severe restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited the possibility for personal interaction (Angenendt & Kinski, 2022), many expected a conspicuous rise of digital campaigning to compensate for the lack of personal interaction. On the one hand, four years are a long time in the digital age, which means that we can expect a 'natural' increase in the use of digital campaign techniques simply because the relevant technology has developed further and related media and communication channels have either proliferated or increased their usage. Such a 'natural' increase is also visible for the Facebook and Twitter use of German MPs (Kelm et al., 2019). On the other hand, the pandemic has worked as an external shock (Harmel & Janda, 1994) on parties and candidates alike, which is likely to have changed their organizational routines such as their campaign styles. The dangers associated with physical presence and close contact should have led parties to intensify their digital campaigns while reducing campaign techniques involving physical presence (Poguntke et al., 2021). Moreover, it is plausible that not only digital campaigning increased in the

[1] Dr. Michael Angenendt is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Düsseldorf Party Research Institute (PRUF), Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf.

[2] Dr. Ole Kelm is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Institute for Social Sciences, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf.

[3] Prof. Dr. Thomas Poguntke is Co-Director of the Düsseldorf Party Research Institute (PRUF) and holds the Chair of Comparative Politics at the Institute for Social Sciences, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf.

[4] Prof. Dr. Ulrich Rosar holds the Chair of Sociology II at the Institute for Social Sciences, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf

past elections, but also its effects on election results. Therefore, this research note asks: *To what extent has the digital campaigning of Bundestag candidates increased in the past federal elections and what influence do the activities have on the election results in 2021?*

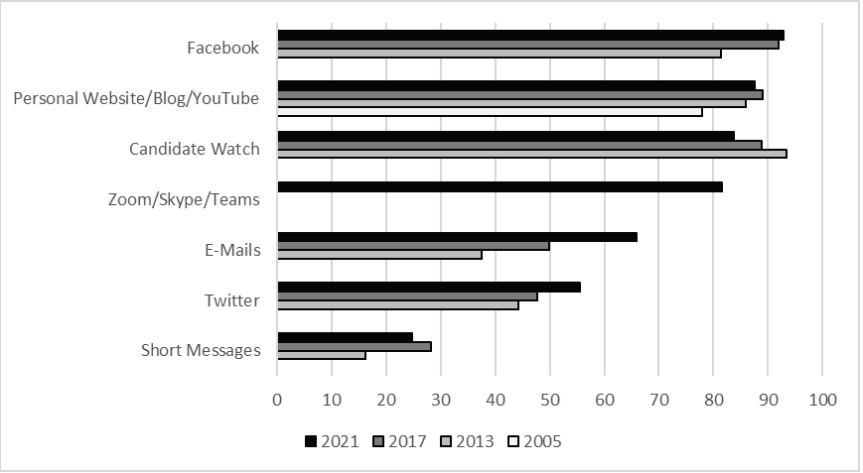
To this end, we have used data from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) candidate survey, where candidates for the *Bundestag* elections have been asked about their campaign methods. Our analysis includes constituency candidates of those parties that were either represented in the German federal parliament (*Bundestag*) with a parliamentary group before the respective election or had a realistic chance of being represented in parliament after the election.[5] This procedure allows us also to gauge the extent of personalization of campaigning. To the extent that constituency candidates run personal websites, Facebook accounts, or Twitter campaigns, their political profile becomes somewhat more independent of their respective party (Bukow & Angenendt, 2019; Cross et al., 2018; Zittel & Gschwend, 2008).

Everything Different in the 2021 German Federal Election? Digital Campaigning in a Long-term Perspective

We use a broad definition of digital campaigning, including all kinds of digital communication and advertising tools ranging from early methods such as simple text messages or email campaigns to interactive social media devices like Facebook and Twitter. This allows us to cover the federal election campaigns between 2005 and 2021. However, as with all-time series data, there are limitations. As digital campaign techniques have changed profoundly since 2005, the survey items had to follow suit. To be sure, this is evidence of the rapidly changing nature of election campaigns but it means that it is difficult to construct meaningful time series data. The solution was to combine items that are, to a degree, functionally equivalent (van Deth, 1998). Following this logic, personal websites, blogs and YouTube videos were grouped, as were the usage of Skype, Zoom, and Teams (see Figure 1). Even with such a pragmatic approach, the 2009 survey could not be added to the time series because the question formats were too different.

[5] For example, the Free Democratic Party (FDP/ *Freie Demokratische Partei*) was not represented in the *Bundestag* from 2013 to 2017. Nevertheless, their candidates were invited to participate in the survey.

Figure 1: Constituency Candidates' Digital Campaign Activities 2005 - 2021 in Percent



Notice: all analyses are based on weighted cases, except 2005 (no weight variable available).

Data source: Debus et al., 2022; Gschwend et al., 2006; Rattinger et al., 2010, 2014; Roßteutscher et al., 2018.

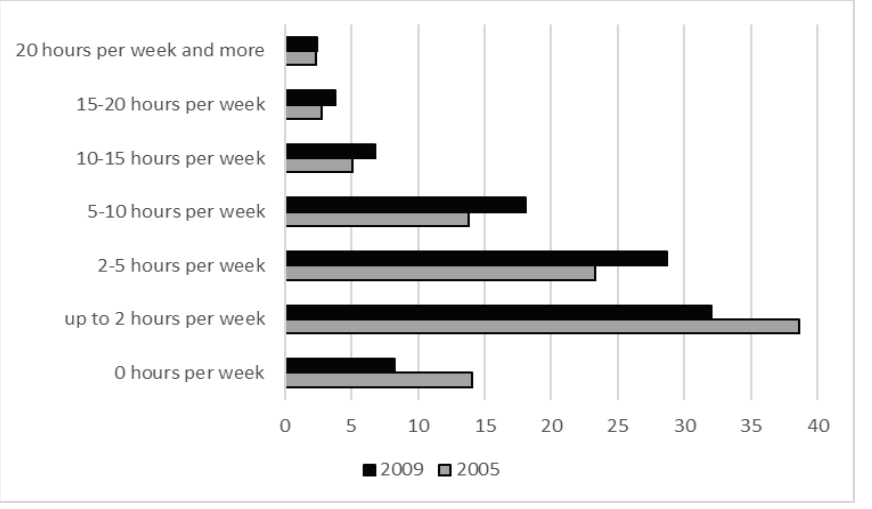
Overall, the data in Figure 1 shows an apparent increase in the usage of different variants of digital campaigning. The only exception is Candidate Watch (*Abgeordnetenwatch.de*), a website that invites candidates to respond to questions by individual voters. Arguably, this is a relatively demanding and sophisticated way of presenting oneself to voters. In addition, it is reactive in that candidates need to respond to whatever questions are raised, which can compel them to take a position on issues they would rather avoid. Therefore, it is not surprising that usage has declined after its initial novelty (and news coverage) had worn off (*Abgeordnetenwatch.de* was founded in 2004). Other, less onerous and (some) more spontaneous and short-term methods of getting in touch with voters have gained importance. Clearly, writing text messages, tweets or emails allow for more flexible campaigning in times of rapidly changing agendas.

In detail, we do not observe a significant increase in candidates' use of Facebook between 2017 and 2021. Since more than nine out of ten candidates already used Facebook in 2017, a ceiling effect is observable, similar to the use of personal websites, blogs and YouTube. In other words, due to the already wide usage of these digital campaign activities, the pandemic leaves little room for a further spread. In contrast, there is a stronger increase in candidates' use of Twitter, even though fewer candidates still use Twitter than Facebook. Although no comparative data is available, it can be assumed that the widespread use of video conferencing platforms (Zoom, Skype, and Teams) in 2021 is a consequence of the necessity to restrict personal social contacts due to the COVID-19 pandemic. But also emails, a traditional digital campaigning technique, were used more

frequently in the 2021 election campaign than in previous ones. Whether this is due to the COVID-19 pandemic or whether an already existing trend is continuing cannot be assessed on the basis of the descriptive analysis.

When looking at personal websites separately, we register a 7.6 percentage point increase between 2005 (77.7 percent) and 2017 (85.3 percent). In 2021, exactly the same proportion of all candidates (85.3 percent) had a personal website or a blog.[6] It is also noticeable that the proportion of those who did not at all engage in digital campaigning nearly halved between 2005 and 2009 (from 14.1 to 8.2 percent). Over the same period, the time candidates spend informing and discussing via the internet increased substantially (see Figure 2). Our comparison ends in 2009 as a result of a different coding of the time candidates spend to inform and discuss via internet in the subsequent candidate surveys. However, the data show that the use of the internet already spread fast in the 2000s; this corresponds to the finding that internet-based campaigning had become established in Germany by the 2009 election campaign (Jungherr & Schoen, 2013: 129).

Figure 2: Time, Constituency Candidates spend to inform and to discuss via internet 2005 and 2009 in Percent



Notice: analyses 2009 based on weighted cases, and 2005 based on unweighted cases (no weight variable available).

Data source: Gschwend et al., 2006; Rattinger et al., 2010.

To sum it up, as we reach the 2020s, digital campaigning has become the norm for individual candidates. Most of them are on Facebook, have a personal website and use video conferencing platforms. In other words, individual candidates run individual campaigns, and there is every reason to assume that they are, to a

[6] For the other types of digital campaigning, no continuous time series exists from 2005 to 2021.

considerable degree, geared towards their personal profile and political priorities (Zittel, 2009). Moreover, this is also done by candidates with no real prospect of winning their seats directly. This reflects how German parties operate: A good constituency performance is often the precondition for a safe position on a future Land list. In other words, candidates engage in constituency campaigning also because this represents an investment into their future political career, even if they run for a hopeless seat.

Does Digital Campaigning Pay Off on Election Day?

Beyond this individual return on investment, however, is there also a party benefit? Does digital campaigning pay off electorally? So far, few studies examined these questions in the German context (Flemming and Marcinkowski, 2014; Marcinkowski and Metag, 2013). The message is relatively modest when we look at the results of our regression analysis for 2021 (see Table 1). A personal website/blog and being on Facebook helps to do better on the 2nd vote, while being active on Candidate Watch backfires – which might explain the drop-in usage. Yet, the overall effects are not particularly strong, which is most likely the result of the widespread use of digital campaigning. It no longer gives a more "digital" candidate a competitive edge over their competitors.

Table 1: Linear Regression Models of the Vote Share of Constituency Candidates at the German Federal Election 2021

	1st vote		2nd vote	
Facebook	1.35	(0.88)	1.57*	(0.76)
Twitter	0.32	(0.49)	0.15	(0.42)
Personal Website/Blog	1.30+	(0.71)	1.30*	(0.61)
YouTube	-0.27	(0.48)	-0.30	(0.41)
Short Messages	0.34	(0.53)	0.02	(0.46)
Emails	-0.62	(0.50)	-0.60	(0.43)
Zoom/Skype/Teams	-0.37	(0.61)	-0.03	(0.53)
Candidate Watch	-1.06+	(0.63)	-1.27*	(0.54)
Candidate's party membership (RC: CDU/CSU west)				
CDU/CSU east	-5.76**	(1.88)	-5.76***	(1.62)
SPD west	-2.45	(0.88)	0.77	(0.75)
SPD east	-4.67	(1.28)	-0.11	(1.10)
FDP west	-19.53***	(0.88)	-12.57***	(0.76)
FDP east	-19.54***	(1.47)	-14.13***	(1.26)
Greens west	-12.86***	(0.98)	-7.87***	(0.85)
Greens east	-18.99***	(1.53)	-13.82***	(1.32)
The Left west	-24.45***	(0.95)	-20.44***	(0.81)
The Left east	-17.41***	(1.30)	-14.52***	(1.12)
AfD west	-18.97***	(0.89)	-15.11***	(0.77)
AfD east	-11.29***	(1.42)	-7.45***	(1.23)
Number of candidate's opponents in the constituency	-0.18+	(0.11)	-0.09	(0.09)

Continuation of Table 1

	1st vote		2nd vote	
Candidate's age (RC: ≤ 29 years)				
30 - 39 years	1.10	(0.76)	0.97	(0.14)
40 - 49 years	0.08	(0.81)	0.18	(0.69)
50 - 59 years	-0.24	(0.75)	0.05	(0.65)
≥ 60 years	-0.05	(0.83)	0.38	(0.71)
Candidate's gender: female	-0.22	(0.51)	-0.04	(0.44)
Candidate is already member of the Bundestag	2.46***	(0.60)	0.75	(0.52)
Candidate holds an important position in German federal politics	2.00	(3.53)	0.34	(3.04)
Intercept	28.41***	(1.70)	23.69***	(1.46)
adjusted R^2 in %	79.0		78.7	
n	485		485	

Notice: Unstandardized regression coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses); +: p ≤ 0.100; *: p ≤ 0.050; **: p ≤ 0.010; ***: p ≤ 0.001; analyses based on weighted cases.

Data source: Debus et al., 2022.

Concluding Remarks

Our analysis shows that a rise in digital campaigning for the 2021 German federal election is observable. Presumably, this increase is not (entirely) a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. To some extent, digital campaign activities may serve as a substitute for the lack of face-to-face contacts with voters during the election campaign. However, our long-term perspective shows that the 2021 federal election continues a trend towards the digitalisation of election campaigns that already started in previous years – a trend that is also observable for the social media activities of German MPs in the last years (Kelm et al., 2019). The widespread use of some internet-based campaign activities, such as Facebook, personal websites and blogs, in the 2017 as well as in the 2021 election campaign indicates a ceiling effect, so that the COVID-19 pandemic did not lead to a substantial boost. Rather, digital campaigning is an expression of a professionalisation taking place among constituency candidates regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, our analysis refers to a methodological aspect: When we use a different data collection, we see that the GLES data tend to overestimate the digital activities of constituency candidates. Our own data collection for the 2021 *Bundestag* election (Kelm et al., 2022) yields lower scores, showing that about 50 percent of the constituency candidates use Facebook and Instagram, while Twitter is used by about 30 percent. We attribute this to a specific weakness of the GLES data which is based on a self-selected sample of constituency candidates,

while our data collection directly measures whether or not all candidates have certain social media accounts. It is plausible to suggest that more active constituency candidates are more likely to have responded to the survey. This would explain the very high frequencies of a large number of digital campaign techniques in the analysis presented here. In other words, there is a ceiling effect built into the GLES data.

Overall, we show that using digital campaign methods have relatively limited effects on electoral success. Arguably, this may be due to the prevalence of digital campaigning. In other words, if most or all candidates engage in digital campaigning, the marginal gains are bound to be relatively modest. However, we have only analysed whether candidates use or not use digital tools. The results might change if the degree of activity were integrated, for example the number of posts or the number of followers on social media. Nevertheless, the widespread use of digital campaign methods indicates that candidates cannot risk not using these methods. They have become the norm of modern campaigning. At the same time, campaigns are continuously changing as the actual digital means, particularly social media platforms, are changing continuously.

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