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When Office is not an Option: Policy Profiles in the UK's Final European Election Campaign

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Overview

1. Background
2. Theory
3. Hypotheses
4. Data
5. Method
6. Results
7. Next steps

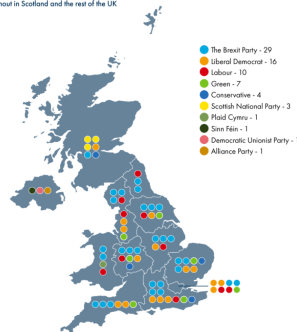
UK 2019 EP Election

► UK participation

- Delays to Brexit resulted in having to hold EP elections at short notice
- UK MEPs would only hold their seats for a few months, before being redistributed to other member states
- Rare example of an election where office-related benefits are curbed

2019 European Parliament Elections

Election results and voter turnout in Scotland and the rest of the UK



What motivates candidates to run for office?

- ▶ **Office seeking**
 - ▶ Maximise chances of winning political office ([Callander, 2008](#))
- ▶ **Vote seeking**
 - ▶ Maximise number of votes gained
- ▶ **Policy seeking**
 - ▶ Pursue preferred policy position ([Wittman, 1983](#))
- ▶ **How do candidates' social media campaign strategies differ when office related benefits are reduced?**

Party campaigning strategy

- ▶ Parties can talk about issues they own (Ennser-Jedenastik et al., 2021), or issues popular with the public (Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016; Barberá et al., 2019)
- ▶ Issue responsiveness tends to be lower in second order elections (Binzer Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2008; Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016)

UK

- ▶ Strategic factors that promote coherent campaign communication much weaker here
 - ▶ Office seeking incentives curbed
 - ▶ Vote seeking incentives muted by lack of time/resources attached to the campaign by parties
- ▶ Beyond Brexit issue, more freedom to pursue preferred policy platform

Candidate campaigning strategy

- ▶ Candidates can push party issues, as well as pursue their own individual policy preferences (Silva and Proksch, 2021)
- ▶ Social media in particular, can allow candidates to create a personalised ideological profile that differs from their party (Barberá, 2015; Ceron, 2017)
- ▶ Motivations to pursue party or individual preferences may be guided by position within the party
 - ▶ Top candidate, guided by office seeking motivations
 - ▶ Lower candidate, dependent on party

UK

- ▶ Office-seeking motivations reduced for top candidates
- ▶ Now in similar position to lower candidates, future career dependent on party and leadership

Expectations

Party Campaign Strategy

- H1** Beyond Brexit, candidates from UK parties are less likely to discuss the party's top issues compared to those from other European countries.

Candidate Electability

- H2** There is less difference in terms of their issue profile between viable and not-viable candidates in the UK compared to other countries.

Data

- ▶ EP 2019 Political campaigning on twitter dataset ([Stier et al., 2020](#))
 - ▶ All tweets by MEP candidates, as well as public replies, mentions, and retweets
 - ▶ 16 million tweets
 - ▶ 28 countries, 31 languages
 - ▶ 500,000 MEP candidate tweets
 - ▶ 23 April - 30 May 2019

Manual Coding

- ▶ 17 research assistants hired to code tweets across 11 languages
- ▶ 9,000 tweets per coder
- ▶ tweets split by candidate/public, then by country (for candidates), and language
- ▶ random sample taken for each language
 - ▶ weighted so that 75% candidate tweets, 25% public
- ▶ for languages with more than one coder, 2,000 of the tweets were coded by both for inter-coder reliability checks

Coding Process

- ▶ Coders were asked to label tweets across a range of features, including:
 - ▶ sentiment
 - ▶ communication style (broadcasting opinions, vs engaging with other users)
 - ▶ campaign messaging
 - ▶ political issues

For tweets that mentioned political issues, these were then grouped into 10 categories:

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| 1. Economy | 6. Support for democratic values |
| 2. Environment | 7. Opposition to democratic values |
| 3. Immigration | 8. Anti-elitism |
| 4. Brexit | 9. Crime and justice |
| 5. EU | 10. Other (transport, health, education) |

Table: Tweet language distribution and sampling

Country	Language	All tweets		Sampled tweets	
		Candidates	Public	Candidates	Public
UK	English	131,332	5,113,760	13,500	4,500
France	French	62,403	2,911,611	13,500	4,500
Spain	Spanish	52,824	2,328,691	13,500	4,500
Italy	Italian	17,826	1,834,711	13,500	4,500
Poland	Polish	43,770	1,048,559	13,500	4,500
Netherlands	Dutch	13,793	433,309	7,500	2,750
Germany*	German	13,156	371,372	13,156	4,500
Sweden	Swedish	16,074	133,281	7,000	3,000
Greece*	Greek	4,349	72,301	4,349	32,000
Portugal*	Portuguese	3,701	49,115	3,701	9,000
Ireland	English	14,697	0	6,000	0
Hungary*	Hungarian	326	2,118	326	2,118

* All candidate tweets were manually coded for these countries

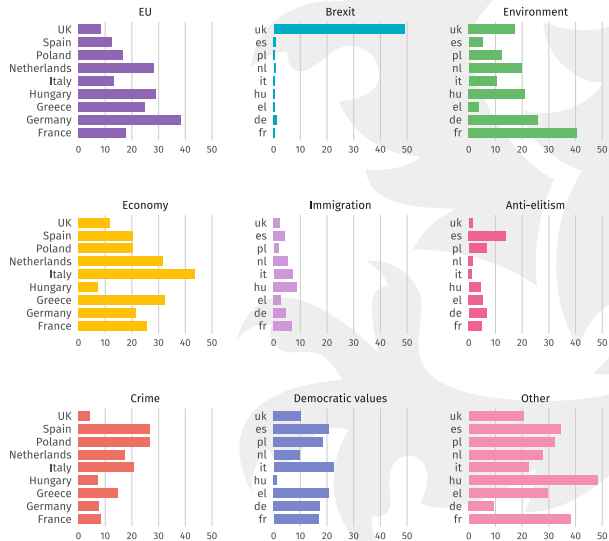
Current model based on English, French, Dutch, Greek, Spanish, Italian, German, Hungarian, and Polish coded tweets

Machine Learning Classifier

- ▶ For countries/languages where all tweets cannot be manually coded, we apply classification methods using the human coded training set
- ▶ Text pre-processing
- ▶ Binary classification models for each individual issue at the tweet level
 - ▶ Extreme Gradient Boosting (xgBoost) models
- ▶ Model performance varies across issues and languages, performing worst where we have limited human coded samples

Political Issues Discussed by 2019 EP Candidates on Twitter

Tweets by 2019 MEP candidates that mention at least one political issue



% of country tweets that mention each issue

Analysis

► **Dependent Variable**

- Ratio of candidate issue tweets mentioning party's top 3 issues / all candidate non-EU issue tweets
- (CHES issue salience score used to for party baseline)

► **Independent Variables**

- Electoral viability (safe seat, doubtful, unpromising)
- Eurosceptic party (dummy)
- Party EU dissent
- Party vote share
- Total tweets (logged)

- Multi-level linear models with country fixed effects
candidates → *parties*

Table: Mentions of Party Top 3 Issues - Candidate level models

Dependent variable:
Candidate mentions of party's top 3 issues

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Intercept	0.478*** (0.023)	0.496*** (0.054)	0.497*** (0.054)
UK (dummy)	-0.069 (0.065)	-0.085 (0.060)	-0.094 (0.063)
Viability (unpromising)		-0.016 (0.008) (0.042)	-0.017 (0.009) (0.042)
UK*Unpromising			0.010 (0.023)
Politicians	1459	1438	1438
Parties	55	54	54
Var: party	0.025	0.021	0.021

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Results

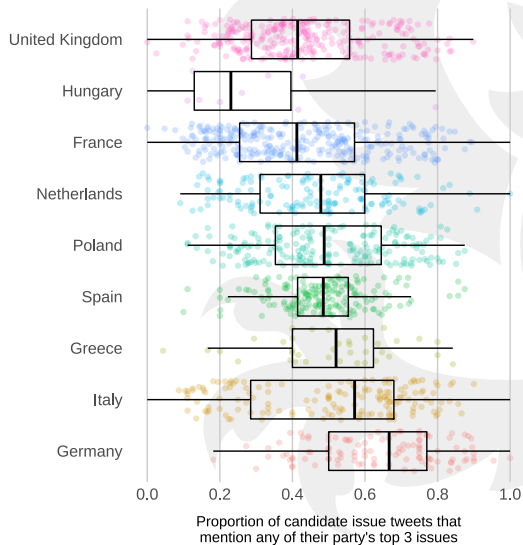
Candidate-party Issue Alignment

- ▶ No significant difference between UK and non-UK candidates in terms of mentioning party's core issues
 - ▶ Cannot reject the null for **(H1)**

Candidate Viability

- ▶ Candidate electability not significantly related to candidate-party issue alignment, and did not vary depending on UK context
 - ▶ Cannot reject the null for **(H2)**

Figure: Candidate Tweets Mentioning Party's Top 3 Issues by Country



Next Steps

- ▶ Complete manual labelling for all 11 countries
- ▶ Extend comparison to all EU28 countries
- ▶ Categorise open ended values coded under the 'other issue' category
- ▶ Measure party issue profiles based on official party twitter account and manifesto data
- ▶ Test if future political career trajectories, impact campaign strategies in the UK (i.e. 2014 vs. 2019 comparison)
- ▶ Compare parties and candidates with regards to responsiveness to the public.

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