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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

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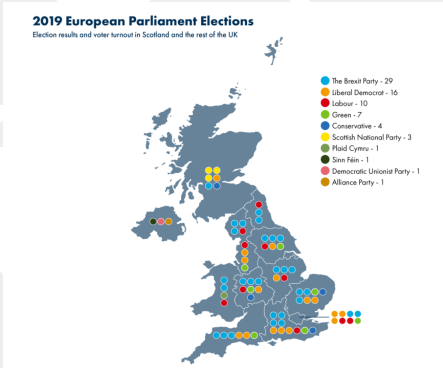
## UK 2019 EP Election

- **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



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## 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?**

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## 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

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## 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

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## Expectations

### Party level

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 Level

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

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## 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

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## 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

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

Table: Tweet language distribution and sampling

| | | All tweets | | Sampled tweets | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Country** | **Language** | **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

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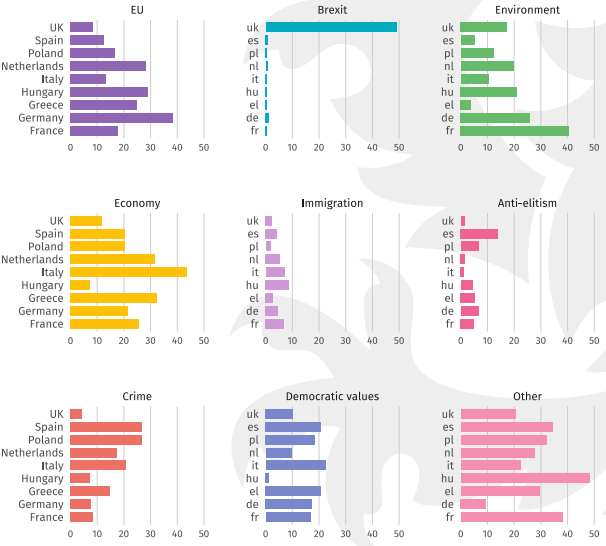
## Machine Learning Classifier

- 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



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## 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 vote share
  - Total tweets (logged)
  - Party EU dissent (CHES variable)

- Multi-level logistic regression models, country fixed effects
  candidates $\rightarrow$ *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*** | 0.496*** | 0.497*** |
| | (0.023) | (0.054) | (0.054) |
| UK (dummy) | -0.069 | -0.085 | -0.094 |
| | (0.065) | (0.060) | (0.063) |
| Viability (unpromising) | | -0.016 | -0.017 |
| | | (0.008) | (0.009) |
| | | (0.042) | (0.042) |
| UK*Unpromising | | | 0.010 |
| | | | (0.023) |
| Politicians | 1459 | 1438 | 1438 |
| Parties | 55 | 54 | 54 |
| Var: party | 0.025 | 0.021 | 0.021 |

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

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## Results

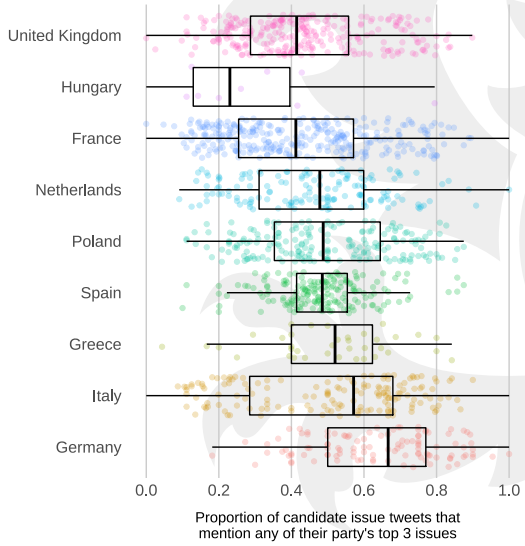
**Candidate-party Issue Alignment**

- 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



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## 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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