

Political parallelism in the digital sphere: Referrals to media outlets by political party actors in Austria

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Abstract

This study explores political parallelism within the digital sphere by analyzing news-sharing behavior of political party actors on Twitter in Austria. Employing the concept of political parallelism, I investigate whether these alignments persist in the context of social network sites. Using Twitter data collected during the 2019 European Parliament and Austrian national election campaigns, alongside survey data from the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES), the study assesses which media outlets are referred to by political actors and how ideological proximity influences these referrals. The findings indicate that political actors are more likely to amplify news from outlets whose readership aligns ideologically with their party, confirming the extension of traditional political parallelism into digital media environments. Furthermore, contrary to expectations, the results show that right-wing, nationalist parties do not necessarily use media referrals more selectively than mainstream parties. Finally, the findings suggest that political party actors use media referrals as opportune witnesses, to selectively amplify information that aligns with the party's political stance. These insights underscore the impact of political parallelism on political information environments and have implications for audience engagement in the digital sphere.

Keywords

News Sharing, Media Referrals, Political Parallelism, Political Actors, Twitter, Austria

Politischer Parallelismus in der digitalen Sphäre: Verweise auf Medien durch politische AkteurInnen in Österreich

Zusammenfassung

Diese Studie untersucht politischen Parallelismus im digitalen Raum durch die Analyse des Nachrichtenverbreitungsverhaltens politischer Parteiakteure auf Twitter in Österreich. Ausgehend vom Konzept des politischen Parallelismus, untersuche ich, ob diese Ausrichtung auch im Kontext sozialer Netzwerkplattformen besteht. Anhand von Twitter-Daten, die während der Kampagnen zur Europawahl und zur österreichischen Nationalratswahl 2019 gesammelt wurden, sowie mittels Umfragedaten der Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES) wird analysiert, auf welche Medien politische Akteure verweisen und wie ideologische Nähe diese Verweise beeinflusst. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass politische Akteure häufiger Nachrichten jener Medien verbreiten, deren Leserschaft ideologisch mit der Position ihrer Partei übereinstimmt, wodurch die Übertragung traditioneller Formen des politischen Parallelismus auf digitale Medienumgebungen bestätigt wird. Darüber hinaus verdeutlichen die Ergebnisse entgegen den Erwartungen, dass rechtspopulistische, nationalistische Parteien Medienverweise nicht notwendigerweise selektiver nutzen als Mainstream-Parteien. Schließlich deuten die Ergebnisse darauf hin, dass die Akteure der politischen Parteien Medienverweise als 'opportune witnesses' nutzen, um gezielt jene Informationen hervorzuheben, die mit ihrer politischen Haltung im Einklang stehen. Diese Erkenntnisse unterstreichen die Bedeutung des politischen Parallelismus für politische Informationsumgebungen und haben Implikationen für die Publikumsbeteiligung von Medien im digitalen Raum.

Schlüsselwörter

Nachrichten teilen, Medienverweise, Politischer Parallelismus, Politische Akteure, Twitter, Österreich

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1. Introduction

Social network sites (SNSs) have gained significant prominence as political campaign tools, underscored by their strategic utilization by political actors who seek not only to disseminate political messages but also to shape media narratives and public discourse (Lewandowsky et al. 2020; Seethaler/Melischek 2019). Recent research has placed significant emphasis on news sharing practices (e.g. Buyens et al. 2025a; Karnowski et al. 2021; Kümpel et al. 2015; Trilling et al. 2017) highlighting their critical role in shaping the digital information environment.

Studies specifically examining political actors' news sharing behavior on Facebook reveal that they selectively amplify news sources that align with their ideological preferences (Buyens et al. 2025b; Heidenreich et al. 2024). In a similar vein, Freitag and colleagues (2021) recognize politicians' selective referrals to media outlets on Twitter and use it as a proxy to infer news outlets' political positions. These patterns suggest that political actors' news sharing behaviors correspond closely with the concept of political parallelism, traditionally understood as the systematic alignment between political parties and specific media outlets (Hallin/Mancini 2004).

Historically, political parallelism has predominantly been observed within legacy media systems, characterized by media outlets explicitly reflecting and supporting a particular party line or ideological viewpoint (Mancini 2016). Recent studies demonstrate that these alignments exist and that both actors are actively contributing to maintain them. Political parties more readily address issues raised in newspapers read by their constituents (van der Pas et al. 2017). Similarly, newspapers are more likely to report on messages from parties that their readers favor (Haselmayer et al. 2017). As media consumption increasingly shifts toward digital platforms, it is crucial to examine whether traditional notions of political parallelism extend into the digital sphere.

This study contributes to the existing literature by examining the use of another SNS, namely Twitter (now X), to explore which media outlets political actors refer to and whether they tend to amplify outlets that are ideologically aligned with them. Twitter, as it existed in 2019 when the data for this study were collected, represents a particularly compelling case for extending analyses of political parallelism into digital environments. At that time, the platform had a substantial user base of journalists, political elites, and opinion leaders, all influential in framing broader media narratives and public discourse (Ausserhofer/Maireder 2013; Russmann 2022). Since then, Twitter has undergone substantial changes in ownership, policies and user composition (e.g. Haman/Školník 2025; Bisbee/Munger 2025). Therefore, it is important to note that

all subsequent descriptions of the platform refer to its characteristics prior to these changes.¹

The empirical analyses are based on Twitter data from April to September 2019 in Austria, containing referrals to print media outlets. Thus, they cover both the European Parliament election campaign and the Austrian national parliament election campaign. Furthermore, I draw on online panel survey data from the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES) in 2019. I use the survey data to derive propensity-to-vote scores for regular readers of print media outlets to operationalize the political leaning of a media outlets' audience, thereby providing a quantitative measure of a "common manifestation of political parallelism" (Hallin/Mancini 2004, 102).

In the digital era the attraction of new customers through the widest possible reach becomes a crucial factor for economic survival of media outlets, given the steady decline in newspaper sales and low revenues from online advertising (Khuntia et al. 2016). Considering that users on SNSs are more likely to click on news items that are shared by a politician of their preferred party (Buyens 2025), the findings of this study have implications for audience engagement and, subsequently, the economic well-being of news businesses. Furthermore, it sheds light on the political information environment of citizens on SNSs and the information they get, either through self-selection or incidental news exposure (Van Aelst et al. 2017). In the following section, I introduce the literature on how political actors use Twitter as a campaign tool. Based on the concept of political parallelism, I then develop my hypotheses regarding party actors' use of referrals to media outlets. Before presenting the results, I describe the design of the study and the data on which the subsequent analyses are based. The final section includes a discussion of the results and the implications for our understanding of party-media relations in the digital sphere.

2. Twitter as a political campaign tool

Social network sites have firmly established themselves as central components of political communication strategies in contemporary electoral campaigns (Jungherr 2016; Severin-Nielsen 2023). Political actors increasingly integrate these platforms into their campaigns and utilize them strategically (Kreiss et al. 2018; Stier et al. 2018), guided by a clear understanding of audience segmentation and distinct communication objectives.

¹ In the remainder of the manuscript, I use the past tense when referring to Twitter's characteristics, as it is unclear whether findings from earlier research continue to hold in the aftermath of these substantial changes.

Political actors carefully select SNS according to whom they aim to reach and how they perceive audience expectations (Kelm 2020). Prior to the ownership and policy changes from 2022 onward, Twitter attracted a distinct user demographic characterized by younger age, higher socioeconomic status, and advanced educational backgrounds compared to the general population (Blank 2017). Arguably, parties' communication on Twitter, at least in Europe, was therefore less targeted toward voters but rather toward other stakeholders, such as opinion leaders, and journalists, who were disproportionately active on Twitter (Ausserhofer/Maireder 2013; Humayun/Ferrucci 2022; Russmann 2022; Valentini 2019). According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020, only 5 per cent of Austrians used Twitter as a news source (Newman et al. 2020)², whereas almost 60 per cent of the country's journalists indicated that they used it at least to some extent for their investigations (APA 2016). This is also illustrated by the fact that Twitter profiles of political and media actors were closely connected to each other (D'heer/Verdegem 2014; Schlögl/Maireder 2014). Seethaler and Melischek (2019) further demonstrated that these connections were consequential, as they enabled political actors to effectively build the media agenda.

Based on an understanding of their audience, parties tailor content according to their specific goal, whether it is to convey information, interact with voters, or mobilize supporters (Russmann et al. 2021). Research suggests that Twitter as a political campaign tool was mainly used to communicate unidirectionally. Initially perceived as a platform capable of fostering direct, unmediated dialogue between political actors and ordinary citizens (D'heer/Verdegem 2014; Grant et al. 2010; Larsson/Ihlen 2015), Twitter appeared to have become a tool primarily for impression management and to 'broadcast' information (Graham et al. 2013; Mueller/Saeltzer 2022). Notably, broadcasting encompasses several tweeting behaviors. Graham and colleagues (2013) distinguish five types of broadcasting behaviors. 'Updating', the most frequent form, includes tweets regarding campaign events or location updates from the campaign trail. 'Position taking' includes tweets that highlight a political actor's opinion on political issues. In contrast, and more commonly, 'critiquing' includes tweets in which candidates explicitly take an opposing standpoint to their political rivals. 'Promotion' includes tweets in which a candidate advertises for themselves, their colleagues or their party. Finally, 'dissemination' aims at spreading information and includes tweets that provide links to news stories or, for example, government reports. In their analysis, dissemination

has been found to account for 4 per cent of the tweets and consisted mainly of referrals to newspaper articles.

3. Political Parallelism

Studies have shown that characteristics of individual news articles (Khuntia et al. 2016; Trilling et al. 2017) or multiple articles reporting on the same news topic (Karnowski et al. 2021) influence whether a given news article is shared on SNSs. Formal characteristics of an article, such as its focus on politics or front-page placement, had a much stronger influence on its sharing performance on Twitter compared to its news factors or explicit emotionality. However, Trilling and colleagues (2017) found an article's media outlet to be the most important predictor for its sharing performance on SNSs. Karnowski et al. (2021) attribute this effect to audience reach, but political considerations also play a role. Political party actors selectively reference news from specific outlets based on ideological alignment (Buyens et al. 2025b; Heidenreich et al. 2024).

In this study, I build upon these findings and argue that, during the period of this study, political parallelism was a key driver of political actors' media outlet referrals on Twitter. Political parallelism, as conceptualized by Hallin and Mancini (2004), builds upon Seymour-Ure's (1974) notion of press-party parallelism. The original concept identifies three defining features of how the press parallels political parties: "by organization, loyalty to party goals and the partisanship of its readers" (Seymour-Ure 1974, 173). According to de Albuquerque (2018), two key prerequisites must be met for political parallelism to occur. First, both the political sphere and the media landscape must feature competing alternatives, ensuring that distinct political perspectives are represented across media outlets. Second, the relationship between political actors and media organizations must exhibit a sufficient degree of stability and predictability. It is also noteworthy that the original conceptualization of political parallelism assumes stable political cleavages and institutionalized media-politics relationships, conditions which, although met in many Western democracies, do not exist in all political environments (de Albuquerque 2013).

Even in a prototypical Western democracy, not all three defining elements are equally relevant today. Especially organizational links have largely disappeared with the decline of the party press. Additionally, while journalists may still have a discernible political slant, they are more likely to be aligned along ideological and cultural orientations rather than in line with a distinct political party and its goals (Mancini 2016). Kaiser and Kleinen-von Königslöw (2019, 334), for example, advocate for the inclusion of "ideologically guided

² Although more recent editions of the Digital News Report are now available, I report the figures from the 2020 report here, as it reflects the status quo at the time the data for this study were collected.

issue interpretations” as a broader, non-party-centered manifestation of political parallelism.

Seymour-Ure and Hallin and Mancini’s conceptualizations align concerning the central role of the political leaning of a media outlet’s audience in reflecting political parallelism, emphasizing that individuals with divergent political opinions tend to consume different media sources. This preference for ideologically aligned content (Boulianne 2016; Iyengar/Hahn 2009) is in line with cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957), which posits that individuals experience psychological discomfort when confronted with information that contradicts their existing beliefs, motivating them to avoid such content (see for example Mukerjee/Yang 2020; Winter et al. 2016). As a result, politicians operate in an environment where they are incentivized to strategically amplify news that aligns with their supporters’ perspectives. Sharing content from trusted sources not only reinforces ideological cohesion within their base but also enhances message credibility, as individuals tend to distrust outlets they perceive as politically antagonistic (Hyun/Seo 2021; Eberl 2019). Recent studies suggest that political parties are acutely aware of these dynamics, as they are more likely to share news from outlets that their supporters regularly consume (Buyens et al. 2025b; Heidenreich et al. 2024). Based on these considerations, I assume political parallelism to be a driving force behind online media outlet referrals and expect political actors on Twitter to more commonly refer to media outlets whose audience is ideologically close to their party (H1).

Additionally, research suggests that the degree of political parallelism is not uniform across the political spectrum. Buyens and colleagues (2025b) found that on Facebook, politicians from radical parties tend to share more news from outlets that are close to them compared to moderate parties. Studies on media hostility perceptions partly corroborate this finding. Politicians from right-wing parties tend to perceive news media as more biased than their counterparts in other political parties (Soontjens et al. 2021). This pattern extends to right-leaning audiences, who report higher levels of media distrust but at the same time demonstrate lower skepticism toward tabloid journalism relative to other voter groups (Eberl 2019). Similarly, Guðmundsson (2021) found that voters and candidates affiliated with nationalist parties perceive the highest levels of political parallelism.

These findings suggest that political parties may not uniformly refer to media outlets but rather distribute their referrals in ways that reflect their ideological positioning and strategic interests. Parties that perceive a high degree of political parallelism within the media system or a hostile media environment, for example, may concentrate their referrals on a narrower set of

outlets that they perceive to align more closely with their views. Consequently, the extent to which political actors refer to a diverse range of outlets may serve as an indicator of varying degrees of political parallelism across political parties. Therefore, I assume that political parties exhibit various degrees of political parallelism and hypothesize that nationalist and right-wing political actors less evenly distribute media referrals compared to mainstream parties (H2).

A common manifestation of political parallelism in media content is the strategic use of “opportune witnesses” (e.g., Berkel 2006). This concept originally described how newspapers selectively publish sources that support their editorial viewpoints (Hagen 1993). However, research indicates that political actors use a similar strategy by referring to media content that reinforces and legitimizes their positions. In legislative processes, references to media reports serve multiple strategic functions, including demonstrating the topicality and urgency of an issue, justifying policy positions, and leveraging negative media coverage to criticize political opponents (Melenhorst/Van Aelst 2017). Sevenans (2017) further emphasizes that politicians themselves acknowledge this practice, explicitly using news coverage to defend their party’s positions or to attack their opponents. Similarly, Freitag et al. (2021) showed that when members of parliament in Germany share news items on Twitter, they hardly do so to criticize its content (c.f. Liminga/Strömbäck 2023). This is in line with studies generally showing that the primary motivation for sharing news on SNSs is to amplify information that is congruent with one’s beliefs (Aruguete/Calvo 2018; Holton et al. 2014; Shin/Thorson 2017).

These findings suggest that when political actors refer to media outlets, they do so to borrow legitimacy from external sources, thereby reversing the original dynamic of the “opportune witnesses” concept. To capture this expectation empirically, I use the tone of a tweet containing a media referral as a proxy for how ‘opportune’ the media referral witness is. If referrals indeed serve as opportune witnesses, they should rarely appear in a negative context. More broadly, research on political actors’ general tweeting behavior shows that the use of negativity is highly context-dependent, varying by ideology, incumbency status, and the competitiveness of electoral races (Gelman et al. 2021; Mueller/Saeltzer 2022). Based on the studies outlined above, I assume that media referrals follow a distinct logic and hypothesize that media referrals are rarely placed in a negative context and that this pattern holds across parties, regardless of their specific ideological or electoral context (H3).

4. The Case: Austria

Austria has traditionally been considered as a democratic-corporatist media system (Hallin/Mancini 2004), characterized historically by a strong party press, high newspaper circulation and strong professionalization. However, more recent empirical research suggests that Austria is better understood as a hybrid media system. Revisiting Hallin and Mancini's categorization, Brüggemann and colleagues (2014) found that Austria does not fully align with the democratic-corporatist model, particularly due to its higher level of political parallelism compared to Nordic countries. Büchel and colleagues (2016) confirmed this assessment, classifying Austria as a border case that shares important characteristics with polarized-pluralist systems, particularly a weak press and high levels of political parallelism. More recently, Humprecht and colleagues (2022) challenged this classification, arguing that Austria's media system still largely corresponds to the democratic-corporatist model. However, even in their analysis, Austria exhibits the highest level of political parallelism among the countries classified as democratic-corporatist. Similarly, Lelkes (2016) found that Austria's overall level of political parallelism ranks mid-range in a cross-country comparison. Crucially, Lelkes distinguished between media types, demonstrating that Austria's newspapers have one of the highest levels of political parallelism in Europe, whereas television exhibits much lower levels. The latter is a result of the dominant role of the national public broadcaster ORF, which has legal and self-regulatory safeguards in place to ensure its editorial autonomy and codifies its efforts to maintain objectivity and to represent a plurality of opinions (Beaufort 2022). In contrast, Austria's print media system is characterized by external pluralism and high horizontal concentration. Historically, Austria had a strong party press, which, in 1950, accounted for almost 50% of total newspaper circulation (Plasser/Lengauer 2010).

Today, as in many European countries, the party press has been marginalized and has given way to formally independent newspapers (Esmark 2014), whose circulation remains comparatively high and which enjoy high levels of trust among the country's population (Newman et al. 2020). Though formally independent, Austria's press has a longstanding tradition of actively engaging in political campaigning and expressing distinct political views (Eberl et al. 2018; Hallin/Mancini 2004). The tabloid *Kronen Zeitung*, for example, holds a strong market position and has historically exerted significant political influence. Its former editor-in-chief, Hans Dichand, openly described himself as a "fourth estate" figure, attributing the success of multiple referenda and petitions to his paper's editorial campaigns (Dichand 1996). Also, partisan ties between

political parties and media outlets in Austria still exist as party actors and journalists interact frequently and keep a short distance to each other, a dynamic fostered by the small size of the country (Pfetsch et al. 2014). These ties have also become apparent in numerous cases where journalists moved seamlessly into politics (diepresse.com 2019).

The rise of SNSs and the adoption of digital journalism by traditional print media outlets have reshaped how political actors and the media interact. Especially in the Austrian political Twitter sphere, the media played a key role by providing an important link between different political clusters (Schlögl/Maireder 2014). Reliable Twitter user numbers for Austria are difficult to obtain. Estimates range between 160,000 registered users (artworx 2021) to up to 10% of the Austrian population who regularly used the SNS (Newman et al. 2020) in the late 2010s. In any case, the number of users was rather small compared to that of other SNSs like Facebook or Instagram (Newman et al. 2020). Similar to other countries, it can be assumed that the user base in Austria was not representative of the population as a whole and mainly consisted of academics, politicians, activists and journalists (Russmann 2022; Schlögl/Maireder 2014). Given these contextual factors, Austrian newspapers and Twitter in 2019 provide a particularly compelling combination for investigating political parallelism in the digital sphere.

It is important to note that the period of data collection in 2019 coincided with an extraordinary phase in Austrian politics (Eberl et al. 2020). After the 2017 national election, the conservative ÖVP formed a short-lived coalition government with the far-right FPÖ. Less than two years after inauguration, the coalition collapsed in May 2019 following the so-called 'Ibizagate' involving leading figures of the FPÖ. 'Ibizagate' refers to a secretly filmed video from 2017 showing later Vice-Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache (FPÖ) appearing to offer government contracts to a woman posing as a Russian oligarch's niece in exchange for benevolent media reporting. The government's dissolution led to the appointment of an interim technocratic cabinet and the calling of snap elections. As a result, Austrian political actors faced two national elections within just two years, alongside the European Parliament election in May 2019.

5. Research Design

This study draws on two data sources: tweets by political party actors and their official party accounts, as well as online panel survey data. The collected tweets cover the period from 12 April 2019 to 29 September 2019, thus including both the European Parliament election

on May 26 as well as the Austrian National Parliament election on September 29.

5.1 Tweets

All tweets from the parliamentary parties that have an official party account, namely, the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ), the NEOS – The New Austria and Liberal Forum, JETZT – Pilz List as well as The Greens – The Green Alternative (Greens), which temporarily dropped out of parliament, were collected. In addition to the official party accounts, accounts of party leaders as well as members of parliament were included. For the tweets of active members of parliament, I drew on the Twitter Parliamentarian Database (van Vliet et al. 2020). I collected tweets from official party accounts and party leaders, who were not active members of parliament during the study period, using both the R package rvest (Wickham 2021) and the Python library snsrape. Table A1 in the appendix provides an overview of the Twitter accounts included in the analyses, together with the number of tweets per account. In this study, I also consider retweets, as traditional media are highly prominent sources for retweets (Jungherr 2016). In total, I draw on a dataset of 39,368 (re-)tweets.

For every tweet and retweet, I extracted all hyperlinks as well as retweet mentions and used regular expression operations to code the presence of media outlets. My operationalization of media referrals, therefore, includes: original tweets from a political actor either with a hyperlink to a media website or @mentioning a media outlet, retweets of other accounts that either contain a hyperlink to a media website or @mentioning a media outlet, as well as retweets of news outlets (irrespective of whether the original tweet of the news outlet contains a hyperlink to a news article). Since I am interested in the 'transition' of political parallelism from the traditional to the digital sphere, I chose to include media outlets that have both a print and an online version. Additionally, I focus on media outlets with a wide readership in Austria, covering boulevard, mid-market as well as quality outlets. The analyses, therefore, include seven daily newspapers: the *Kronen Zeitung*, *Österreich*, *Heute*, *Kurier*, *Kleine Zeitung*, *Der Standard* and *Die Presse*.³ In total, 1,049 tweets in the dataset referred to one of the seven newspapers under consideration. Table 1 shows the distribution of media referrals across political parties and media outlets.

It is important to note here that the analysis is limited to actual media referrals by political actors on Twitter. This approach cannot account for the broader universe of potentially shareable articles. As highlighted by Heidenreich et al. (2024), such selection processes can introduce bias, and the subsequent findings should therefore be interpreted as patterns of observed sharing behavior rather than as definitive evidence of underlying referral preferences.

Besides the extraction of media referrals, I manually coded the sentiment of each tweet containing a media referral on a three-point scale from -1 to +1.⁴ Tweets that included an explicit negative evaluation toward the media referral, such as criticizing the content of the news article or more generally the reporting of the media outlet, were coded -1. Tweets that expressed praise toward the referred media were coded as +1. Ambivalent and neutral tweets, as well as uncommented retweets, were coded 0.

5.2 Online Panel Survey

To measure the political leaning of each media outlet's regular readership, the 2019 Austrian National Election Study online panel survey data (wave 8, fieldwork period: 12-28. April 2019) was used (Aichholzer et al. 2020). In this survey, respondents (n = 3,114) indicated how often they read daily newspapers as well as how likely they were to ever vote for a given party (i.e. the propensity-to-vote score). A regular reader is operationalized as a survey respondent claiming to get information on political events through newspapers and to read a specific newspaper, either in print or online, at least two days a week. The propensity-to-vote score was measured on a 10-point Likert scale, where a higher number indicates a higher likelihood of voting for a party. Figure 1 shows the mean propensity-to-vote scores for each party-outlet dyad.⁵

3 The reach of the newspapers under consideration in this study are as follows: *Kronen Zeitung* (27.2%), *Österreich* (8.8%), *Heute* (12.2%), *Kurier* (7.0%), *Kleine Zeitung* (10.4%), *Der Standard* (6.6%) and *Die Presse* (4.2%) (Media-Analyse 2019).

4 To assess intercoder reliability, tone was coded for a subset of 50 tweets by both the author and an otherwise in this study uninvolved person (Percent Agreement = 98%, Weighted κ = 0.66).

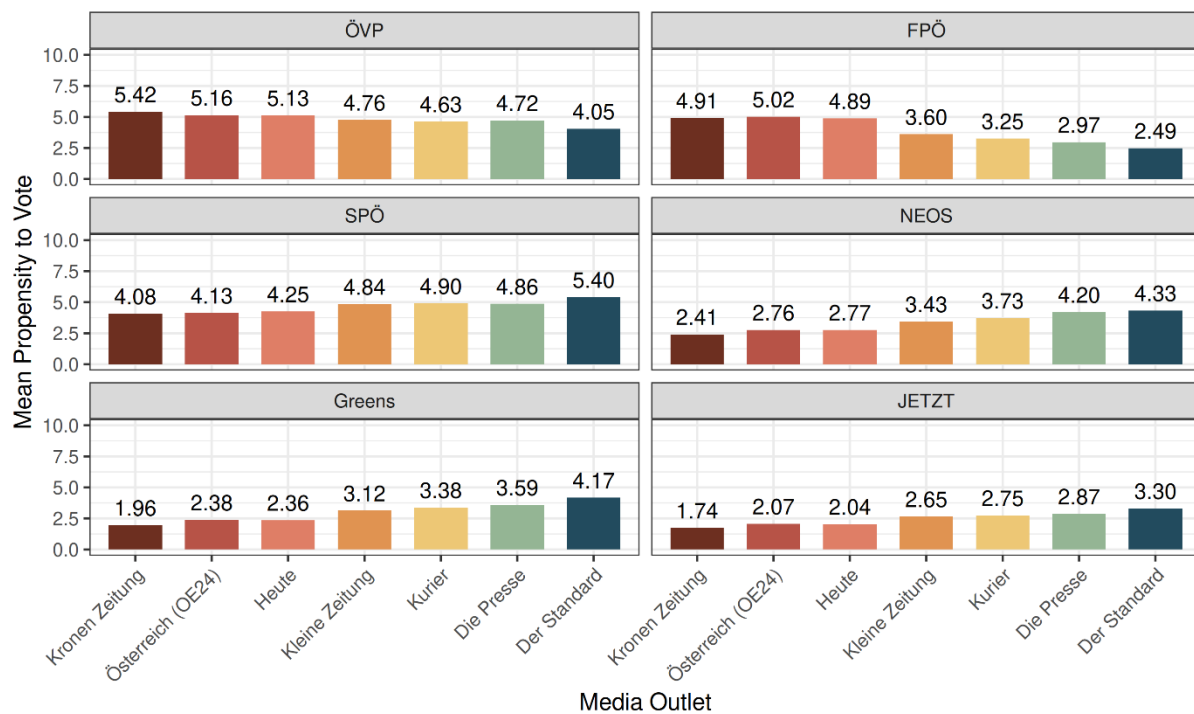
5 For descriptive statistics related to the PTV scores see Table A2 in the Appendix.

Table 1: Media referrals overview

Party	Outlet							Total
	Der Standard	Die Presse	Heute	Kleine Zeitung	Kronen Zeitung	Kurier	Österreich	
ÖVP (N = 1,705)	1	7	1	7	14	6	1	37 (2.2%)
SPÖ (N = 11,666)	121	25	10	20	35	53	15	279 (2.4%)
FPÖ (N = 2,342)	7	6	6	4	17	14	25	79 (3.4%)
NEOS (N = 12,267)	173	99	13	27	33	95	5	445 (3.6%)
Greens (N = 7,343)	37	10	4	14	5	22	7	99 (1.3%)
JETZT (N = 4,045)	50	8	2	17	12	16	5	110 (2.7%)
Total	389	155	36	89	116	206	58	1,049

The table lists the number of media referrals from one of the party actors (i.e. party account, party leader, or MP) toward each media outlet. The parenthesized number in the Party column indicates the total number of tweets by each party. The parenthesized percentage in the Total column indicates the share of media referrals relative to the total number of tweets per party.

Figure 1: Propensity-to-vote scores for each party-outlet dyad



6. Results

In total, 1,049 tweets linked to or retweeted print media outlets, making up 2.7% of all tweets. Table 1 illustrates that while some political party actors use Twitter more actively than others, they also vary regarding their referral behavior toward media outlets.

During the period of this study, the Social Democrats and the liberal NEOS used Twitter most extensively. However, their referrals to media outlets varied. While the NEOS had the highest share of tweets mentioning print media outlets (3.6%), the SPÖ only (re)tweeted print media outlets in 2.4% of their tweets. On the other hand, the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the conservative ÖVP used Twitter the least. Interestingly, the populist Freedom Party, which is usually critical of traditional media, includes referrals to these very sources comparatively frequently, namely in 3.5% of their tweets, while the ÖVP did so only in 2.2%. The Green Party shared news outlets to an even lower degree, in only in 1.3% of their tweets. The splinter party of former Green Party members, JETZT, referred to print media sources 2.7% of the time.

My first hypothesis stated that political actors on Twitter more commonly refer to media outlets whose audience is ideologically close to their party. I estimate this association by running a multilevel negative binomial

regression model (see also Buyens et al. 2025b). The unit of analysis is the political party actor-media outlet dyad. The dependent variable is a count of each political actors' media referrals per outlet, including empirical zeroes for dyads in which no referrals occurred. The negative binomial regression model accounts for overdispersion in the data. I include all political actors that referred at least once to a media outlet in the analysis (N=49, see Table A1 in the Appendix). To account for the fact that media referrals are nested within political actors, and political actors are nested within parties, I include random intercepts at the political actor and party level. All numerical independent variables are standardized.

The results of two multilevel negative binomial regression models are presented in Table 2. Model 1 only includes the variable of interest, namely readership leaning, as an independent variable. Model 2 adds controls for reach of a media outlet as well as the account type (leader and MP versus party accounts). Both models demonstrate that the association between political actors' media referrals and the political leaning of media outlet's audiences is positive and statistically significant (M2: IRR = 2.95, 95% CI [2.42, 3.60], $p < 0.01$). This finding indicates that political actors on Twitter are more likely to refer to media outlets whose readership is ideologically close to them, providing empirical support for hypothesis 1.

Table 2: Multilevel negative binomial regression model

	Dependent variable: Count of media referrals per outlet			
	Model 1		Model 2	
	IRR	95% CI	IRR	95% CI
Readership leaning	2.81**	[2.35, 3.36]	2.95**	[2.42, 3.60]
Reach			1.08	[0.96, 1.21]
Account type (ref. Party)				
- Leader			0.32*	[0.11, 0.95]
- MP			0.26**	[0.11, 0.65]
(Intercept)	1.86	[0.55, 6.24]	5.61*	[1.42, 22.17]
Observations	343		343	
Log. Likelihood	-633.2		-628.5	
AIC	1,276.4		1,272.9	
BIC	1,295.6		1,303.6	
Pol. actor variance (N)	0.90 (49)		0.73 (49)	
Pol. party variance (N)	2.10 (6)		1.94 (6)	

Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

To assess my second hypothesis, that nationalist and right-wing political actors less evenly distribute media referrals compared to mainstream parties, I analyze the distribution of media referrals across media outlets per party (i.e. party-outlet dyads, see Figure 2) and use Shannon’s H to measure the concentration of media referrals (Figure 3).

Figure 2 visualizes the share of media referrals per outlet for each party. The distribution suggests notable differences in referral strategies across parties. For a majority of the parties, namely JETZT, SPÖ, NEOS, and the Greens, *Der Standard* is the primary recipient of media referrals. In contrast, the right-wing parties FPÖ and ÖVP most often refer to the tabloid newspapers *Österreich* and *Kronen Zeitung*, respectively.

A first approximation for hypothesis 2, as seen in Figure 2, is how many newspapers are needed for a party to account for 80% of their total media referrals. For most parties, the four most frequently referenced outlets collectively make up at least 80% of their total referrals. However, there are two notable exceptions: NEOS, which reaches this threshold with just three media outlets, indicating a more concentrated referral pattern, and the FPÖ, which requires five outlets to cover 80% of its total referrals, reflecting more evenly spread media referrals.

Figure 3 additionally quantifies these disparities using Shannon entropy (H) values for each political party. Originally developed in information theory, Shannon’s H has been commonly applied in communication and political science studies, for example to quantify issue attention concentration (Lewallen 2025), news and media diversity (Jürgens/Stark 2022; Loecherbach et al. 2020) or political polarization (Bao/Gill 2024). As Jürgens and Stark (2022) note, Shannon’s H captures not only the breadth of the number of sources or topics encountered but also the balance of how attention is distributed across them. In their comparison of different measurements of diversity, McDonald and Dimmick (2003) further highlight that Shannon’s H performs well with small sample sizes. Applied here, the measure allows for an interpretation of the evenness with which parties distribute their media referrals across different outlets. Higher entropy values reflect a more even distribution, while lower values suggest a concentration of referrals toward fewer media outlets.

Descriptively, the FPÖ exhibits the highest entropy ($H = 2.54$), indicating the most balanced media referral behavior. This suggests that the FPÖ engages with a relatively broad spectrum of media outlets. The Greens and SPÖ follow closely with slightly lower but still comparatively high entropy values ($H = 2.42$ and

Figure 2: Parties’ share of referrals per media outlet

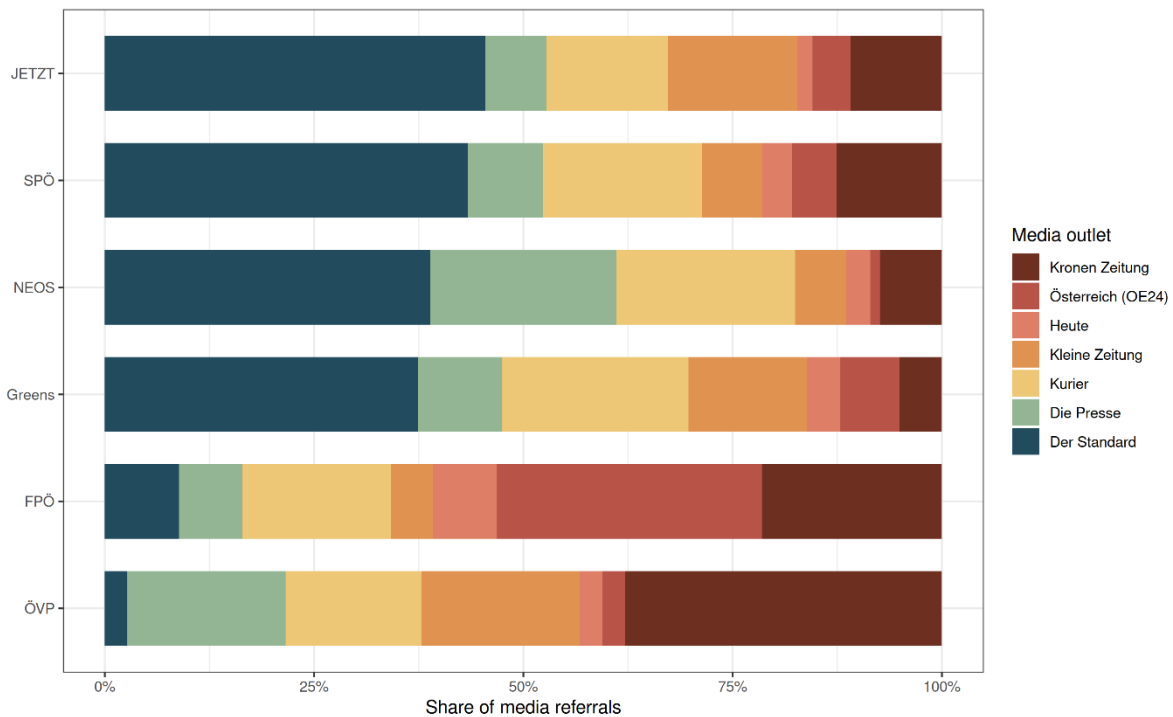
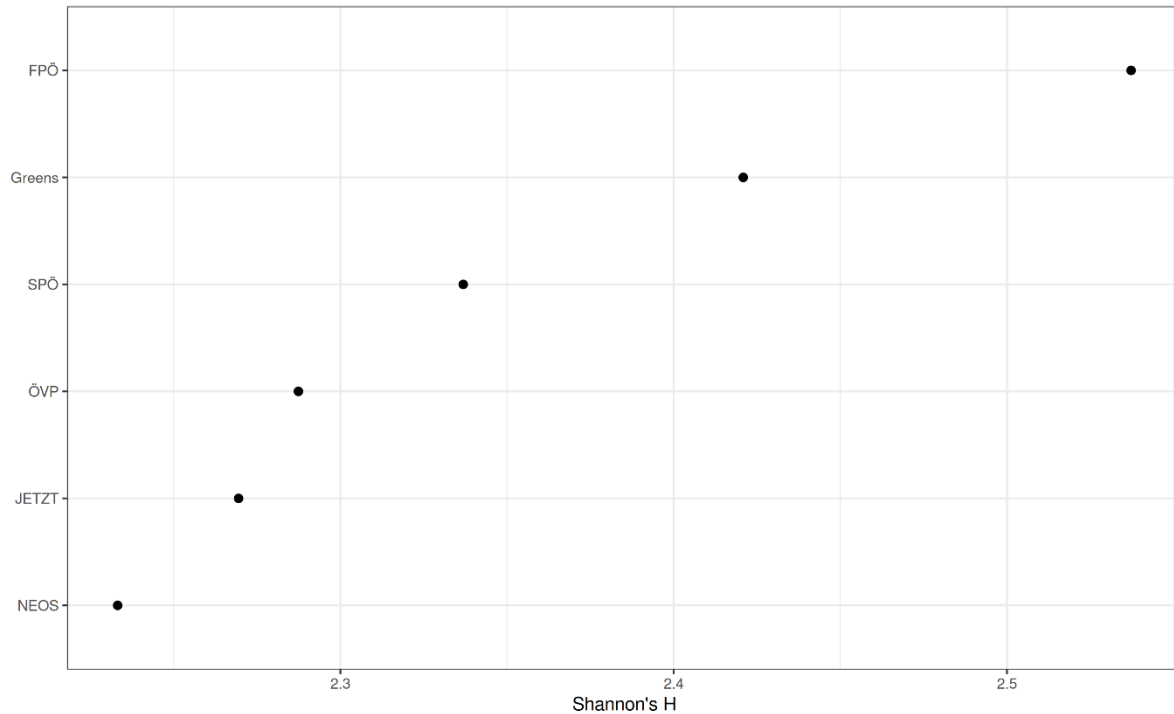


Figure 3: Parties' Shannon's H for media referrals on Twitter



H = 2.34, respectively), pointing to similarly diversified media engagement patterns. In contrast, the ÖVP, JETZT, and particularly NEOS display lower entropy values (H ranging from 2.29 to 2.23), suggesting a more selective or concentrated media strategy. These parties appear to rely on a narrower set of media outlets in their referral behavior.

To assess whether these differences are statistically meaningful, I used multiple Hutcheson's t-test to perform a pairwise comparison of the parties' Shannon diversity indexes. To control for type I error inflation due to multiple comparisons, p-values were adjusted using Bonferroni correction. The results reveal that the only statistically significant difference in media referral concentration is between the far-right FPÖ and the liberal NEOS. The FPÖ's entropy is significantly higher than that of NEOS ($t(126) = 2.83, p < 0.05$), indicating that political actors within the FPÖ refer to media outlets significantly more evenly than their counterparts from NEOS. Other comparisons, including those predicted by hypothesis 2, such as between FPÖ and the mainstream parties ÖVP and SPÖ ($p = 1.00$ and $p = 0.58$, respectively), showed no significant differences.⁶

⁶ To assess the robustness of the estimates, the appendix includes a boxplot of Shannon's H per party using bootstrap resampling (Figure A1), as well as Gini coefficients (Figure A2) as an alternative, yet rarely used measure in the field of political communication of concentration/evenness.

In my third hypothesis, I predicted that political actors rarely put media referrals in a negative context, for example by criticizing or attacking the media outlet's reporting, and that this pattern holds across parties. Table 3 shows the distribution of tone per political party for tweets that contain media referrals. Overall, the majority of tweets across all parties exhibit a neutral tone, with a significant portion of these tweets being uncommented. The FPÖ, ÖVP, and Greens used media referrals exclusively in a neutral context, neither criticizing nor explicitly praising the content of the media referral (e.g. the news article). The FPÖ and the Greens were also the only ones that refrained from adding a comment in the majority of their tweets with media referrals. Positive tweets were relatively rare across all parties, with only NEOS ($N = 4$), SPÖ ($N = 9$) and JETZT ($N = 5$) occasionally expressing positive sentiment in the tweet text containing a media referral. Even fewer tweets contained negative sentiment toward the media referral. Only three tweets (0.29%), two from the SPÖ and one from JETZT, explicitly criticized the referred media outlet or its content. A Kruskal-Wallis test, with party as the independent grouping variable and tone of the tweet as the dependent variable, revealed no significant differences ($H(5) = 7.28, p = 0.20$) among the six parties.

While tone was coded on a three-level scale, as proposed by Lengauer and colleagues (2011), hypothesis 3 specifically focuses on media referrals in a negative

context, reflecting the theoretical expectation that when media referrals serve as opportune witnesses, they are unlikely to be placed in a negative context. An equivalence test, specifically the two one-sided t-test (TOST), on the difference among parties in proportions of negative referrals indicated that the observed differences between groups were all within the pre-specified equivalence bounds of $\pm 5\%$ ($p < .001$). Thus, all parties can be considered statistically equivalent with respect to their rare use of negative tone when referring to media outlets. These findings confirm hypothesis 3, suggesting that Austrian political actors across the political spectrum use media referrals on Twitter mainly as opportune witnesses, substantiating their viewpoints or amplifying convenient information.

Table 3: Tone of tweets with media referrals

Party	Tone		
	Negative	Neutral (uncommented)	Positive
FPÖ	0	79 (46)	0
Greens	0	99 (68)	0
ÖVP	0	37 (17)	0
NEOS	0	441 (186)	4
SPÖ	2	268 (90)	9
JETZT	1	104 (57)	5

The parenthesized number in the Neutral column indicates the number of tweets that did not include a comment. These are considered neutral and represent a subset of the preceding number in the Neutral column.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

This study's goal is to investigate political actors' use of media referrals on Twitter, arguing that political parallelism is a useful framework for understanding which news sources political actors refer to. Overall, political actors in Austria used media referrals on Twitter rather sporadically, only 2.7% of all tweets referred to one of the seven media outlets under consideration. This is in line with results from Graham et al. (2013), who found an only slightly higher rate (4%) in the context of British politics. However, the findings suggest that when they use media referrals, political parallelism is at play, indicating that ties between parties and media outlets that have been found in other media contexts (Haselmayer et al. 2017; van der Pas et al. 2017), also transitioned to Twitter.

The contributions of this study are threefold. First, the results corroborate findings on Facebook from Heidenreich and colleagues (2024) as well as Buyens and colleagues (2025b) on a different SNS, namely Twitter. The political leaning of a media outlet's audience is an

important predictor of a political actor's media referrals (H1 supported). Second, contrary to expectations derived from previous studies, suggesting that nationalist and right-wing parties should distribute referrals less evenly due to higher levels of media hostility and distrust (Eberl 2019; Guðmundsson 2021; Soontjens et al. 2021), the analysis found no significant difference between the FPÖ and the mainstream parties ÖVP and SPÖ in how uniformly they referred to media outlets (H2 not supported). Importantly, the comparatively balanced and high volume of FPÖ referrals may partly reflect the exceptional political situation in Austria in 2019, when the "Ibizagate" scandal and the resulting snap election created incentives for the party to engage more broadly with legacy media outlets. As the scandal severely undermined the party's credibility, the FPÖ may have sought to 'lend' credibility to its communication by referring to a broad pool of established news sources. Third, in line with findings from Freitag and colleagues (2021), this study shows that Austrian political actors across the spectrum rarely use media referrals on Twitter to criticize or delegitimize news outlets (H3 supported). This suggests that political actors use media referrals on Twitter to amplify information that aligns with their political positions. Traditionally, political parallelism assumes that media organizations follow political ideologies (Mancini 2016), as evidenced by journalists' use of opportune witnesses (Hagen 1993). However, the results presented in this study indicate that, in the same way, political actors use news items as opportune witnesses to substantiate their claims and stances, introducing a noteworthy nuance to our understanding of political parallelism.

This study has some important limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the partisanship of a media outlet's audience is only one of several potential indicators for measuring political parallelism (Hallin/Mancini 2004). Future research is invited to include other aspects, such as media content or journalistic role orientation in its research design to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the intricate mechanism of political parallelism in the digital sphere. Similarly, characteristics at the individual news article level as well as distinct news events could not be examined within this research design. Even though articles from different newspapers often cover the same topic, they may differ in how they frame the issue and whose voices to include or exclude. Furthermore, specific news contexts, such as an exclusive investigation of a political scandal, likely influence media referrals in event-specific ways that this study's model could not fully capture.

Correspondingly, Heidenreich and colleagues (2024) pointed out that to determine the shareworthiness of specific news items, the analyses would also need

to include the broader universe of non-shared news articles. Without information on which articles were available but not shared, it remains uncertain whether the absence of referrals to a given outlet is due to a lack of suitable content to share or deliberate avoidance by political actors. As a result, the statistical models presented in this study may produce biased estimates, and the findings should therefore be interpreted with caution. While the analyses cannot fully capture the counterfactual choices politicians might have made had different news items been available, the results of this study remain valid as evidence of how Austrian political actors distributed their actual media referrals across outlets on Twitter. Future research should follow Heidenreich and colleagues' (2024) advice and explicitly incorporate the full set of potentially shareable articles into the analyses to address the issue of selection bias and allow for greater generalizability of the results.

Moreover, exploring the strategic dimensions of political actors' usage of SNSs constitutes another promising direction for further research. For example, differences among actors within the same party could be examined, as one might assume that some kind of division of labor occurs within a party's digital communication system, where some actors focus on voter engagement and others on journalists and media agenda setting. Also, future studies might want to consider referrals to media outlets' personnel (e.g., journalists), which have been shown to be referenced significantly in politicians' tweets (Ausserhofer/Maireder 2013). Another finding from this study that deserves closer attention is the distinctive behavior of the Freedom Party. Despite being a populist, right-wing party, which tend to be more skeptical toward traditional media elites (Engesser et al. 2017), the FPÖ demonstrated a comparatively high and evenly distributed usage of referrals to legacy media outlets.

A final limitation of this study concerns the temporal validity of its findings. The analyses are based on Twitter data collected in 2019. Since then, Twitter has undergone substantial changes in ownership, policies, and user composition, which may have altered the dynamics of media referrals. Future research should revisit whether the patterns observed in this study can be generalized to the post-2022 platform environment.

The results of this study have important implications for our understanding of SNS users' political information environment as well as media outlets' reach and audience engagement. If political party actors predominantly refer to news outlets already ideologically aligned with their audience, followers might increasingly find themselves situated in "politically separated communication spaces" (Jungherr 2016, 79). For media outlets, findings by Cherubini and Nielsen (2016) on how news organizations use audience data and metrics

suggest that sharing news on SNSs potentially affects what the media outlet is covering in the future. This effect could be even more pronounced if the actor sharing the news has many followers, as political parties and their prominent actors usually do. The former online editor in chief of the Austrian tabloid *Kronen Zeitung*, Richard Schmitt, described this interrelation quite openly: "When Strache [former head of the Austrian freedom party (FPÖ)] shares a normal report from us on Facebook, we notice that this increases the quota by one and a half times. And vice versa, he gets more traffic when we push him"⁷ (Huber 2016). Additionally, users on SNSs report that they are more likely to click on news items that are shared by a politician of their preferred party (Buyens 2025). Considering the current economic pressures on traditional media outlets, the dependence on news sharing by prominent social media users, like political actors, to reach a wider audience and build engagement (Khuntia et al. 2016) is likely to intensify further in the coming years.

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⁷ Original quote in German: 'Wenn Strache einen normalen Bericht von uns auf Facebook teilt, dann merken wir, das haut die Quote auf das 1,5-Fache hoch. Und umgekehrt kriegt er natürlich auch mehr Traffic, wenn wir ihn pushen.'

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Appendix Supplemental Material

Table A1: Overview of included Twitter accounts

Party	Role	Screenname	# of tweets	# of media referrals
ÖVP	Party	volkspartei	784	11
	Leader	sebastiankurz	527	3
	MP	AngelikaWinzig	38	2
	MP	ChristophZarits	2	0
	MP	GudrunKugler	16	0
	MP	MartinEngelberg	28	4
	MP	ReinholdLopatka	96	2
	MP	carmenjeitler	1	0
	MP	hoerlfranz	9	0
	MP	karlnehammer	118	10
	MP	martinakaufmann	68	4
	MP	niiico_laus	6	0
	MP	stark8200	11	1
	MP	wolfganggerstl	1	0
SPÖ	Party	SPOE_at	3147	76
	Leader	rendiwagner	278	4
	MP	AndreasKollros	2617	23
	MP	BayrPetra	117	0
	MP	FCNurtenYilmaz	354	4
	MP	KrainerJan	44	5
	MP	MarioLindner82	612	9
	MP	SCHIEDER	744	60
	MP	SabineSchatz	856	39
	MP	VerenaNussbaum	2	0
	MP	chr_kovacevic	31	2
	MP	claufriedl	182	0
	MP	corneliaecker	8	1
	MP	einwallner	6	1
	MP	eviholz	62	7
	MP	jleichtfried	1603	27
	MP	philipkucher	29	0
	MP	renateggruber	5	0
	MP	thomasdrozda	969	21
	FPÖ	Leader	HCStracheFP (until 05/18/2019)	15
Leader		norbertghofer (from 05/19/2019)	40	6
MP		BelaDagmar	97	5
MP		GerhardDeimek	264	4

	MP	HJenewein	182	11
	MP	Hoebi75	1319	23
	MP	PhilippSchrangl	311	16
	MP	ReifenbergerV	7	2
	MP	WassermannSan	1	0
	MP	haf1980	103	10
	MP	wendemoelzer	3	0
NEOS	Party	neos_eu	5324	121
	Leader	BMeinl	1023	64
	MP	DoppelbauerK	230	9
	MP	GLoacker	2736	109
	MP	IrmgardGriss	314	26
	MP	NikiScherak	492	29
	MP	dieGamon	937	19
	MP	michi_bernhard	468	31
	MP	steffi_krisper	743	37
Greens	Party	Gruene_Austria	3533	50
	Leader	WKogler	3810	49
JETZT	Party	NR_KLUB_JETZT	1784	25
	Leader	Maria__Stern	317	5
	MP	Peter_Pilz	1173	38
	MP	Alma_Zadic (until 07/08/2019)	172	15
	MP	HolzingerDan	262	9
	MP	rossmannbruno	311	16
	MP	wolfgang_zinggl	26	2

Table A2: Descriptives of propensity-to-vote per party-outlet dyad

Party	Media Outlet	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
ÖVP	Der Standard	813	4.05	3.38	0	10
	Die Presse	631	4.72	3.39	0	10
	Heute	734	5.13	3.39	0	10
	Kleine Zeitung	592	4.76	3.28	0	10
	Kronen Zeitung	1,181	5.42	3.41	0	10
	Kurier	682	4.63	3.47	0	10
	Österreich (OE24)	707	5.16	3.35	0	10
SPÖ	Der Standard	808	5.40	3.34	0	10
	Die Presse	627	4.86	3.42	0	10
	Heute	733	4.25	3.56	0	10
	Kleine Zeitung	587	4.84	3.37	0	10
	Kronen Zeitung	1,178	4.08	3.55	0	10
	Kurier	678	4.90	3.50	0	10
	Österreich (OE24)	704	4.13	3.49	0	10
FPÖ	Der Standard	816	2.49	3.45	0	10
	Die Presse	631	2.97	3.55	0	10
	Heute	733	4.89	3.90	0	10
	Kleine Zeitung	593	3.60	3.71	0	10
	Kronen Zeitung	1,177	4.91	3.91	0	10
	Kurier	682	3.25	3.66	0	10
	Österreich (OE24)	704	5.02	3.96	0	10
NEOS	Der Standard	810	4.33	3.10	0	10
	Die Presse	628	4.20	3.18	0	10
	Heute	730	2.77	2.90	0	10
	Kleine Zeitung	588	3.43	3.02	0	10
	Kronen Zeitung	1,181	2.41	2.78	0	10
	Kurier	676	3.73	3.06	0	10
	Österreich (OE24)	702	2.76	2.92	0	10
Greens	Der Standard	811	4.17	3.41	0	10
	Die Presse	630	3.59	3.25	0	10
	Heute	733	2.36	2.98	0	10
	Kleine Zeitung	588	3.12	3.06	0	10
	Kronen Zeitung	1,179	1.96	2.75	0	10
	Kurier	678	3.38	3.24	0	10
	Österreich (OE24)	704	2.38	2.95	0	10
JETZT	Der Standard	803	3.30	2.99	0	10
	Die Presse	627	2.87	2.87	0	10
	Heute	724	2.04	2.61	0	10
	Kleine Zeitung	586	2.65	2.81	0	10
	Kronen Zeitung	1,177	1.74	2.48	0	10
	Kurier	675	2.75	2.82	0	10
	Österreich (OE24)	699	2.07	2.61	0	10

Column N displays the number of survey respondents who answered the propensity-to-vote survey item for the respective party.

Robustness Checks

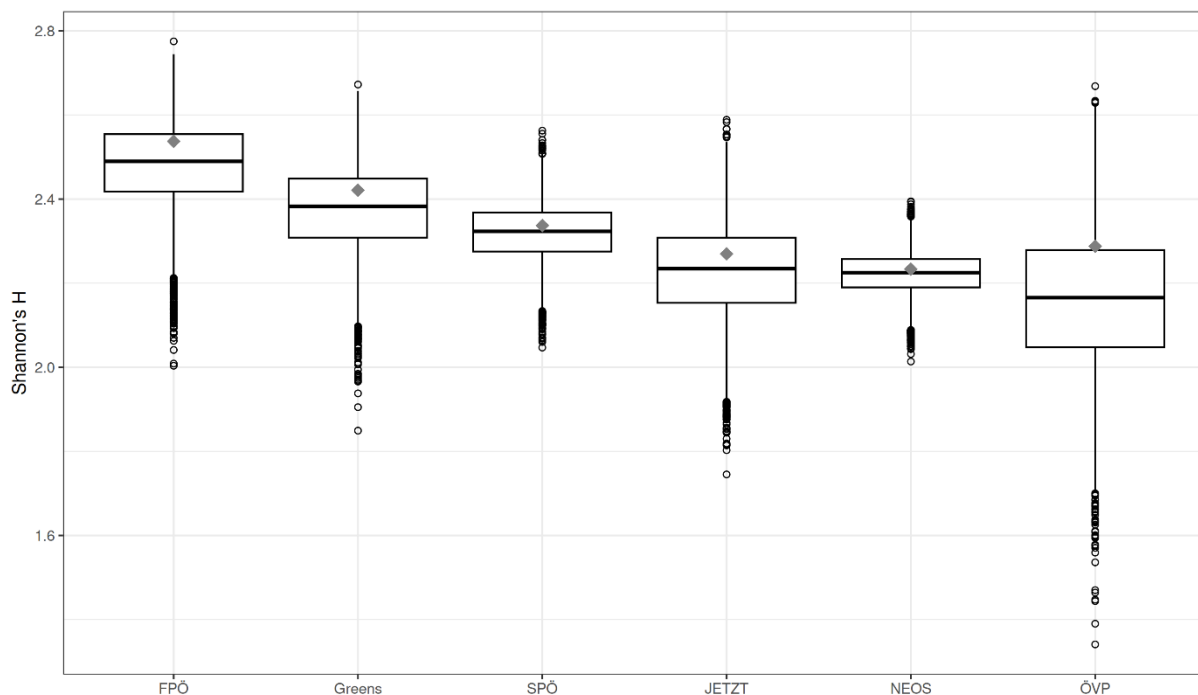
To assess the robustness of the main findings of hypothesis 2, Shannon's H values were re-estimated using bootstrap resampling (10,000 iterations) for each party. The resulting distribution is visualized in Figure A1 via a boxplot.

Due to non-normal distribution of the bootstrapped entropy indexes ($W = 0.987$, $p < 0.05$), I used a Kruskal-Wallis test to assess whether differences in bootstrapped Shannon's H across parties are statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 30,982$, $df = 5$, $p < 2.2e-16$). Subsequent pairwise Wilcoxon rank-sum tests (with Bonferroni correction) confirmed significant differences between all party pairs ($p < 0.001$ in all cases), indicating that each party's media referral pattern is uniquely distributed in terms of evenness when using bootstrap resampling.

Figure A2 additionally quantifies the concentration of media referrals across media outlets using Gini coefficients, with higher values indicating a more unequal distribution. The results show a very similar picture to the Shannon's H results in Figure 3. The NEOS exhibit the highest concentration (Gini = 0.56), while the FPÖ has the lowest Gini coefficient (0.39).

The Lorenz curve, also shown in Figure A2, further illustrates these differences by depicting the cumulative share of media referrals relative to the ranked media outlets. The curve for NEOS deviates most strongly from the equality line, confirming their tendency to concentrate referrals on a few select outlets. Conversely, the FPÖ's curve remains consistently closest to the equality line, demonstrating a more balanced distribution across media sources.

Figure A1: Parties' Shannon's H with bootstrap resampling (iterations: 10.000) for media referrals on Twitter



Note: Gray diamonds visualize observed Shannon's H in primary data set

Figure A2: Gini coefficients and Lorenz curve for share of media referrals per party

