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How Party-System Dynamics Shape Political Parties' Use of Facebook Between Elections

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Abstract: We investigate the use of Facebook in the Danish system over a two-month period in 2021, with an increased political polarization, during the COVID-19 lockdown. Based on the analysis of 5093 posts, we find indications of how party-system dynamics shape niche parties and catch-all parties' use of Facebook. While catch-all party members share political information with relatively low reach, niche parties are much more inclined to criticize opponents, a strategy that often produces higher interactivity. Finally, we discuss the impact of party-system dynamics on the strategic use of Facebook among different parties. Our findings indicate that the social media use of niche parties with irrelevant features is often shaped by a centrifugal logic (competition towards the poles), while the social media use of catch-all parties is often shaped by a centripetal dynamic (competition towards the center).

Keywords: social media; niche parties; catch-all parties; moderate pluralism; polarization; Facebook; populism; party system; normalization; equalization



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1. Introduction

For many years, scholars have researched the effect of social media on political life (see, e.g., [Bail et al., 2018](#); [Bright, 2018](#); [Garimella et al., 2018](#); [Tucker et al., 2018](#); [Urman, 2020](#)). But how does political life shape social media?

In this article, we study how party types ([Evans, 2002](#); [Meyer & Miller, 2015](#); [Sartori, 2016](#)) and party-system dynamics ([Sartori, 1976](#); [Wolinetz, 2006](#)) shape political parties' use of social media. The purpose is to enrich the research of social media use in politics with insights from party-system dynamics and types of political parties.

There is a need to study the impact of party-system dynamics, or political culture in general, on politicians' use of social media. Social media provides political parties with a tool to re-establish a connection or relationship with voters. Though political parties were deemed slow to innovate in ways of interacting with potential voters online ([White, 2006](#)), political parties today have adapted to the increased competition for attention in the digital public sphere. The internet has become a key battleground. Political parties all over the world use social media to reach a broader audience ([Peeters et al., 2023](#)), and digital technologies increasingly become embedded in political communication ([Lilleker et al., 2017](#)). Today, political parties are continuously trying to build and maintain relationships with voters, who are showing increasingly volatile voting behavior along with a focus on issue-based voting ([Strömbäck, 2008](#)). But how do different types of political parties do it? And do party-system dynamics shape how different parties use social media? So far, very little research has linked the insights from the Sartoris framework to the use of social

media. Therefore, we ask as follows: *How do niche parties and catch-all parties use Facebook in a system of moderate pluralism?*

While it might be common sense that the use of social media mirrors the identity of the political party, we aim to go further and study how party types, as well as party system, dynamics shape the use of social media. We contribute to the research of social media expression in politics using classical variables like differences in party-system dynamics. Our contribution is twofold. First, we detect if different types of parties (niche parties with irrelevant features versus catch-all parties) use social media in different ways, in a system of moderate pluralism with proportional electoral rules. Second, we clarify whether an increase in centrifugal dynamics (competition oriented towards the political poles) (Sartori, 1976; Wolinetz, 2006) affects the use of social media among different political parties.

We make an empirical contribution by studying how different types of political parties use social media in an exemplary system of moderate pluralism: Denmark. Research into Danish politician's use of social media is still emerging (Olesen, 2020). Almost all (97%) Danish politicians used Facebook during the 2019 election (Jensen & Schwartz, 2020). According to our own count, only 3 of the 179 members of the Danish Parliament (the *Folketing*) do not have a public Facebook account. Politicians still embrace social media differently. Some are highly active, others less active. However, in general, the use of social media is deeply integrated into the strategies of political parties (Olesen, 2020). This makes Denmark an exemplary and paradigmatic case of how Facebook is used in political communication in systems of moderate pluralism. The 5093 posts were collected during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2021, a period associated with increased polarization in the political climate (Ares et al., 2021; Halberg Nielsen & Bang Pedersen, 2023; Myers, 2021), which should (*ceteris paribus*) lead to an increase in centrifugal dynamics among the political parties. This makes it a unique period to study the impact of party-system dynamics on the use of social media.

In the next section, we review the previous relevant literature in the field of social media research. In addition, we hypothesize on party types in systems of moderate pluralism based on Sartori's (1976) typology of party-system dynamic and Larsson's (2015) typology of content. Then, in the methodological section, we explain and outline our approach to how we harvested the 5093 Facebook posts from Danish politicians and then, follow our analysis, discussion, and conclusions.

2. Review

Most of the research on social media has focused on how social media has influenced party systems. Scholars have, for many years, debated the effect of social media on political culture. Some scholars continue to argue that social media has a polarizing effect on politics (Bail et al., 2018; Bright, 2018; Garimella et al., 2018; Tucker et al., 2018; Urman, 2020). Such polarization is destructive to voters' trust in political parties, deliberation, and participation, due to online hate, discrimination, and acts of "blaming and shaming" (Bilewicz Michałand Soral, 2020; Johnson et al., 2019; Petersen et al., 2018).

However, Lilleker et al. (2017) argued that it is still a challenge to determine what impact digital technologies really have in securing votes. This impact has also been the subject of the equalization versus normalization debate in the digitalization and politics literature: Are digital technologies, including social media, empowering weak political actors (equalization) or just reinforcing existing power relations and structures (normalization)? This means that major parties hold an advantage over minor parties and also on social media due to their resources and skills (Sobaci, 2018). Comparing dominant and peripheral parties' Facebook activities, Lev-On and Haleva-Amir (2018) also confirmed

the normalization hypothesis, though the equalization hypothesis has some explanatory power for parties that expect to gain a significant number of seats in upcoming elections.

Despite the equalization–normalization debate, scholars also still argue if there is an impact of digital technology on political communication. According to [Klinger and Russmann \(2017\)](#), social media has not (yet) fundamentally changed political parties' campaign practices. [Koc-Michalska et al. \(2021\)](#) argued that digitalization has had minimal effects on the nature of political communication. Political parties have not significantly changed their strategic, top-down-oriented communication.

Others argue that the causality is the opposite: Political parties' strategies strongly influence the use of social media. [Hoffmann et al. \(2016\)](#) argued that the use of social media is influenced by the politicians' motives., Political parties aim to create engagement or perhaps even outrage among their followers on social media([Sobaci, 2018](#)). Differences in political culture, like differences in party-system dynamics, may also create important variants in social media use. [Klinger and Russmann \(2017\)](#), for example, argued that strategic incentives among political parties may differ from country to country due to differences in political culture. Accordingly, there is good reason to expect a difference between *types* of political parties in social media strategy. Some scholars ([Sobaci, 2018](#); [Margetts, 2006](#)) argue that the size of the party matters: New and minor parties without a broad member base are more enthusiastic and innovative and have more incentives to make use of social media. [Magin et al. \(2024\)](#) and [Schmuck and Hameleers \(2020\)](#) also argued that there is a connection between (populist) party characteristics and social media use. [Gibson and Mcallister \(2015\)](#) found that major parties dominate in the adoption of personal websites, and minor parties are stronger users of social media; as mentioned, [Lev-On and Haleva-Amir \(2018\)](#) found that parties that expect to gain a significant number of seats in upcoming elections are much more successful on social media. This research indicates that social media cannot alone explain changes in today's digitalized political communication. One example is polarization. We know that it is wrong to blame only social media for polarization. We know that the polarization of the U.S. public began long before the social media era ([Bafumi & Shapiro, 2009](#)). Polarization has long been a major topic in the research of liberal party systems ([Farjam & Loxbo, 2023](#)). One of the early contributions to this literature was [Sartori \(1976\)](#). His fourfold typology of party systems (predominant party systems, two-party systems, moderate pluralism, and polarized pluralism) took account of polarized politics. Though Sartori's typology is not new and was formulated before the emergence of green and new political parties and neo-populist parties, his conceptualization may still have relevance. One example is [Wolinetz \(2006\)](#), who based on Sartori, argued that the dynamic towards polarized pluralism has been diminished in favor of the dynamic of moderate pluralism, also in Scandinavian party systems; however, this does not exclude the centrifugal dynamic (competition oriented towards the political poles), depending on the strategy of the different political parties and pressure from party-system dynamics. This string of research has not been further developed in the social media era. In summary, there is a need to study the impact of political culture and party types on politicians' use of social media. Some scholars, like [Magin et al. \(2024\)](#) and [Schmuck and Hameleers \(2020\)](#), have started studying the impact of populist parties. However, we also need to study the use of social media in light of the more traditional conceptualization of party types and party-system dynamics.

3. Theory and Hypothesis

The purpose of our theoretical framework is to be able to detect the impact of party-system dynamics and different types of parties on social media use.

3.1. Party-System Dynamics

We will only consider the last two systems in Sartori's typology, because they are the most relevant for our analysis of party-system dynamics in Denmark. The main distinction between moderate and polarized pluralism is the orientation of the competition. In moderate systems, the competition is centripetal (oriented towards voters in the center). Though there are a multitude of parties, the systems are bipolar, as parties on both sides of the middle compete for the same centrist voters (Hansen & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2017). In polarized systems, the center is occupied, so the competition becomes more centrifugal (oriented towards voters at the poles) (Wolinetz, 2006). The Danish system of political parties has changed from a multiparty system with a predominant party (Wolinetz, 2006) to a multi-party system with a two-bloc coalition system. After the latest election in 2022, Denmark can again be described as a multiparty system, now with one predominant party. Also in Danish politics, the traditional economic left-right conflict has been supplemented by a new politic dimension, but the Danish system is still a traditional left-right party system (Green-Pedersen & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2020). Still, ideological differences are considered modest, and traditionally, the centripetal dynamics have been most profound (Sartori, 2005, 2016). The same, four established political parties have remained of central importance in the past 45 years. So, traditionally, the centrifugal dynamic is less profound in Denmark (see, e.g., Olesen, 2020). However, it is important to emphasize that a multiparty system with proportional electoral rules does not exclude centrifugal dynamics in Denmark. The dynamic can, for example, be observed in Danish election campaigns, when political competition increases (Hansen & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2017). During such circumstances, polarizing parties tend to use extreme issues and measures to compete with centrist parties, in their attempt to attract voters. Such a system is characterized by strong divisions, over-bidding, or overpromising.

3.2. Party-Type Differences

These dynamics can both affect and be sustained due to the type of the party, such as either (more or less irrelevant) a niche party or a catch-all party:

Niche parties "emphasize policy areas neglected by its competitors" (Meyer & Miller, 2015, p. 261). They often compete with mainstream parties but have different electoral strategies and play different roles in political institutions (Wagner, 2012). Despite their differences, we expect that niche parties in general position themselves strongly on issues that are important for their (niche) voters. Galais and Cardenal (2017), for example, argued that small parties with niche audiences can gain advantages compared to mainstream parties by appealing to niche audiences on social media. From former studies, we know that the audience on social media platforms engages more with content that is personalized and caters to emotions (Keller & Königslöw, 2018; Larsson, 2015). This could create an incentive for some niche parties to be more emotional, personal, and critical toward political opponents and/or their policies on such platforms to maximize visibility. "Going negative" can be a useful political strategy to increase online popularity (Bene, 2017; Heiss et al., 2019; Peeters et al., 2023). As parties with niche audiences and niche issues, niche parties are often irrelevant for (alternative) governing coalitions (Evans, 2002; Sartori, 2016; Wolinetz, 2006).

However, we do not claim that all niche parties are irrelevant, but niche parties do not always maintain their relevance. As irrelevant parties cannot obtain political influence over time, we expect, in our analysis, that the less relevant the niche party is, the less (compared to catch-all parties) it appeals to mainstream media and the more dependent it becomes on an active social media strategy. So, especially irrelevant niche parties have the incentive to appeal to volatile voter audiences on social media by using the language of strong divisions, over-bidding, or overpromising. To operationalize our expectations regarding niche parties,

we use Larsson's (2015) typology of political content on social media (see Table 1). We expect that the communication of niche parties will be dominated by *Personal* posts (posts where politicians share personal details from their private lives, like hobbies or family events), *Mobilization* posts (posts where the politician attempts to motivate and engage followers), and *Critique* posts (posts where the politician criticizes political initiatives). In a situation of increased centrifugal dynamic, we expect niche parties, especially with irrelevant features, to focus more on content types to appeal to voters on social media by focusing more on criticism of opponents, being personal, and/or mobilizing receivers and followers to participate by liking, commenting, or sharing the post—or offline by participating in events or voting in elections.

Table 1. Typology of content types, adapted from Larsson (2015).

Type of Post	Definition	Examples of Coding
<i>Daily reports</i>	Posts documenting the work of politicians (e.g., participation in negotiations, visits outside the Folketing, participation in live debates). Daily reports provide followers with regular updates on the political or professional activities of the user. Through such updates, audiences gain insight into ongoing developments, fostering a sense of transparency and immediacy. This form of communication leverages the “always-on” nature of social media, allowing for real-time engagement that keeps supporters connected to the politician. We use this category instead of the “campaign reports” category in comparable research that focuses on campaign activities on behalf of the more mundane online activities of politicians (see Larsson, 2015; Jensen & Schwartz, 2020).	Examples of posts are tasks and milestones in or from daily political activities, as well as updates on individual politicians' careers. One politician describes what her tasks for the day involve. Another politician shares that he has taken on a new role in a committee.
<i>Personal</i>	Posts where politicians share personal details from their private lives, outside their daily reports (e.g., hobbies, family, or other general things or activities that communicate the politician's personal life). Personal posts offer glimpses into the private lives of Members of Parliament.	Examples of posts are sharing a visit to the hairdresser or sharing celebrating a wedding anniversary.
<i>Information</i>	Posts that communicate political views and positions are often centered around new legislation or political initiatives. These posts typically aim to inform the audience with fact-oriented content, providing clarity and context about complex topics. They are designed to educate and engage, ensuring followers understand key issues and the rationale behind specific actions or proposals. By presenting accurate and reliable information, such posts reinforce credibility and authority in the subject matter.	Examples are posts about a stance on mosques in Denmark or posts about a political agreement that has been reached.
<i>Mobilization</i>	Posts where the politician attempts to motivate and engage receivers and followers to participate online by liking, commenting, or sharing the post or offline by participating in events or voting in elections.	Examples of posts are a politician's attempt to encourage Facebook users to sign a voter declaration or a post where a politician seeks input on where new bike paths are needed.

Table 1. Cont.

Type of Post	Definition	Examples of Coding
<i>Acknowledgment</i>	Posts where the politician acknowledges new initiatives or actors (e.g., political opponents, the media, or citizen groups) with positive sentiment. These posts focus on expressing gratitude and recognition, whether directed at supporters, colleagues, or specific groups. These posts often reinforce positive relationships and foster a sense of appreciation within the community. By thanking individuals or groups, public figures can build goodwill and strengthen bonds with their audiences.	Examples of posts are praising a political fellow for his contributions to Danish politics. Another example is an acknowledgment of an entire group of people, like the armed forces.
<i>Critique</i>	Posts where the politician criticizes political initiatives, current affairs, political opponents, the media, or groups of citizens with negative sentiment.	Examples of posts where a politician criticizes a political opponent for portraying a scare narrative about the left-wing bloc, a politician calling the defense minister the worst ever encountered, or a post criticizing the government's climate policies.

Thus, our hypothesis (H1) is that during a situation of increased centrifugal party-system dynamics, the content types of personal, criticism, and mobilization are more evident among niche parties with irrelevant features than catch-all parties (with relevant features).

In the Danish Folketing, the Liberal Alliance (LA), New Right (NR), and the Alternative (A) all focus more on catching narrower segments of the voter population (Andersen et al., 2019). LA (founded in 2009) is positioned as the most right-wing party on the traditional economic left–right dimension. NR (founded in 2015) is also a highly right-wing party, both in terms of the traditional economic left–right dimension and in stopping immigration. A is a green grassroots party (founded in 2013) with a strong appeal to young urban voters (Green-Pedersen & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2020) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Catch-all and niche parties in Denmark.

Party Name	Political Orientation	Party Type
Social Democratic Party (SDP)	Left	Catch-all/relevant
Danish Social-Liberal Party (SLP)	Center-left	Catch-all/relevant
Venstre—the Liberal Party of Denmark (V)	Right	Catch-all/relevant
The Conservative People's Party (CPP)	Right	Catch-all/relevant
Socialist People's Party (SPP)	Left	Catch-all/relevant (populistic)
Red–Green Alliance (RGA)	Left	Catch-all (niche voter segment)
Danish People's Party (DPP)	Right	Catch-all (populistic)
New Right (NR)	Right	Niche/irrelevant
Liberal Alliance (LA)	Right	Niche/irrelevant
Alternative (A)	Center-left	Niche/irrelevant

Catch-all parties are characterized by a reduction in their ideological profile to be able to appeal to a wide electoral base (Kirchheimer, 1966; Sartori, 2005). Catch-all parties are often oriented towards the political middle, and they are often in government. They are often relevant parties characterized by their potential over time to be part of (alternative)

governing coalitions or be able to “blackmail” or influence competitors through the threat of electoral loss (Evans, 2002; Sartori, 2016; Wolinetz, 2006). Previous investigations of the Danish case have shown that the more relevant a political party is, the greater the tendency for its agenda to be picked up by the mainstream media during electoral campaigns (Hopmann et al., 2012) and less incentive to adopt a social media strategy that creates high engagement with voters. Catch-all parties are often (but not necessarily) large. Major parties have more resources, and they are expected to use these resources to create a sophisticated digital presence (Sobaci, 2018). Accordingly, in our analysis, we expect that catch-all parties in general do not position themselves on a strongly combative social media strategy. Instead, they are expected to position themselves in more factual terms in building trust among the centrist voters for whom they compete. To operationalize our expectations regarding catch-all parties, we use Larsson’s (2015) typology of political content on social media (see Table 1) and expect that the communication of catch-all parties will be dominated by *Information* (fact-oriented posts that communicate political views and positions, possibly regarding new legislation or political initiatives) and *Daily reports* (posts documenting the work of politicians like participation in negotiations, visits outside the Folketing, participation in live debates). We use this category instead of the “Campaign reports” category in comparable research that focuses on campaign activities on behalf of the more mundane online activities of politicians (see Larsson, 2015; Jensen & Schwartz, 2020).

In a situation of increased centrifugal dynamic, we expect that catch-all parties are less influenced by the centrifugal dynamic, due to their interest in maintaining their appeal as mainstream and relevant. Consequently, they will focus on content types of factual political information, daily reports, or acknowledgments of actors or policies.

Thus, our hypothesis H2 is that during a situation of increased centrifugal party-system dynamics, the content types of political information and daily reports are more evident among catch-all parties (with relevant features) than among niche parties with irrelevant features.

In the Danish Folketing, the four original political parties—the Social Democratic Party (SDP), Venstre—the Liberal Party of Denmark (V), The Danish Social-Liberal Party (SLP), and The Conservative People’s Party (CPP)—all have the features of catch-all parties. They are all based more on their electoral professionalism than a broad membership base (Christiansen, 2022; Mariager & Olesen, 2022). Furthermore, the Socialist People’s Party (SPP) and The Danish People’s Party (DPP) can, despite their respective niche and populist heritage, also be described as catch-all parties (see Table 2) in the period, we studied them. The Red-Green Alliance (RGA) was originally a merger between left-wing socialists, communists, etc. RGA simultaneously also has a narrow (urban) voter base. However, the RGA also has a broad political focus, encompassing issues such as foreign affairs, the climate, and welfare. That is why we also categorize them as catch-all (Green-Pedersen & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2020; Seeberg, 2020; Seeberg & Kölln, 2022).

In summary, our theoretical framework consists of (1) party-system dynamics (moderate pluralism and polarized pluralism) and (2) two party types (niche parties and catch-all parties). The aim is to use these categories to detect differences between the two party types in the use of social media during a period of increased polarized pluralism in the Danish Folketing.

4. Methodology

The purpose of the methodology is to explore if we can trace the social media activities made by these two types of political parties. Our study therefore examines the Facebook reach of different types of parties during election periods, to see if different party types pursue different social media strategies to achieve different goals.

4.1. Selection of Denmark as a Case

The selection of Denmark as a case was based on an information-oriented approach (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The selection was based on the following two criteria. Firstly, we chose Denmark due to the widespread use of Facebook in political communication, and therefore, expectations of rich information and learning points relevant to social media use in systems of moderate pluralism (see Pedersen et al. (2021) for a similar case choice). We could have chosen other social media platforms than Facebook. We know that Denmark has an outstanding integrated Twittersphere (now X-sphere), where all the official X accounts of all major political parties share audiences with each other. However (before BlueSkye), X was an elitist media in Denmark (Urman, 2020). Only 11% uses X, compared to 42% on Instagram, and 70% on Facebook (Newman et al., 2024).

Secondly, most studies of political parties and social media have focused on Anglo-Saxon party systems in the US and UK (Sobaci, 2018). So, we chose Denmark, because the Danish case has paradigmatic potential (see Flyvbjerg, 2006), since our purpose is to contribute to the emerging field of social media use in multiparty systems with moderate pluralism (Urman, 2020). Compared to most European countries, the Danish system has been considered less fragmented (Green-Pedersen & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2020). These characteristics limit the range of our results to similar moderate multiparty systems, as found in other Scandinavian countries (Larsson, 2019, p. 1099; Larsson, 2015, p. 460).

4.2. Choice of Data Collection Period

In contrast to most of the social media research in the field (see Van Dalen et al., 2015; Larsson, 2015), we choose not to study an election campaign period. So, our study was conducted before the 2022 election.

Larsson (2015) argued that social media communication tends to be more competitive and politicized in election campaigns than in non-election periods, which may give an inadequate picture of the more mundane political culture, where politicians may focus more on long-term relationship building rather than support for political issues on Facebook.

However, Peeters et al. (2023) argued that though there may be more activities during campaigns, the dynamic remains the same. Peeters et al., however, found that criticism (negativity) works less well during elections, because parties do not need to reach the same level of emotionality. Consequently, critique is a more useful strategy between elections.

Based on these insights, we choose to study the politicians' everyday activities on social media. We have therefore harvested posts from Facebook over a two-month period (15 February–15 April 2021).

This means that the data were collected during the second pandemic-related lockdown in Denmark.

This period presents a unique opportunity to study an increased centrifugal dynamic in the Danish system of moderate pluralism because the political debate in general paved the way for polarizing critique of centralized government and state intervention (Halberg Nielsen & Bang Pedersen, 2023) (see Myers (2021) and Ares et al. (2021) for similar arguments for studying polarization during COVID-19). This period of increased centrifugal dynamics ended after the 2022 national election. The election outcome was a major shift in Danish politics, with a return to a centripetal dynamic, which resulted in a new groundbreaking government across the aisle. So, we will argue that the choice of period provides a unique opportunity to study the impact of party-system dynamics on social media communication.

4.3. Coding of Data

Overall, by applying the typology of Larsson (2015) as codes, our coding process takes a deductive approach. The typology builds on mutually exclusive types of content (see Larsson, 2015, p. 464; Schwartz, 2020, p. 93). In other words, each of the posts could only be categorized as one specific type of content. That is obviously not in accordance with the more mixed nature of specific Facebook posts, but we stayed true to this approach and decided not to attach several codes to the same posts. We chose to do so for two reasons: firstly, because one type of content often dominates the main message in a post, and, secondly, because we want to accumulate patterns across a relatively large sample of posts.

We systematically used two coders. Due to the high number of posts, the two coders had to split the dataset into two. To reach a high inter-coder reliability, the coders started by coding 200 posts to ensure consistency through a shared understanding of the typology (see Table 1), who reached intercoder reliability by agreeing on the dominant code in the posts. The validity was continuously tested during the coding process by following and reflecting on the distribution of coded posts, persons, and parties. Intercoder reliability was calculated using Krippendorff's Alpha (which is also used as a reliability measure in Larsson (2015, p. 464)). Here, we reached a value of $K_{\alpha} = 0.85$, which is seen as an acceptable and reliable degree of consensus among the coders (Krippendorff, 2004). The categorization is only made on text and does not include analysis of audio, video, or links. We also disregarded humor, because it is often subjective and well-known to be difficult to code to reach a high intercoder reliability.

Next, based on the content analysis, a descriptive statistical analysis was conducted. This focused on the activity of the politicians and how their posts performed in terms of interactions (likes/reactions, comments, and shares). To investigate the general performance of each content type, we calculated the median number of interactions of each type.

Then, to test what types of content achieved systematic interactions (or not), we tested the connection between content type and the number of interactions using a linear regression analysis, where the content type was the independent variable, and the number of interactions was the dependent variable. We used gender, age, number of followers, and party affiliation as control variables, as these variables have been shown to contribute to the popularity of a post (Metz et al., 2020, p. 1487). Due to the structure of the dataset, with more observations (posts) for each case (politicians), the observations were not independent of each other. Calculating a regression model that does not account for this runs the risk of artificially calculating small standard errors and p-values, which leads to statistical bias and false conclusions regarding the statistical significance of the observed connections. To account for this, we used the so-called Complex Samples General Linear Model in SPSS to incorporate clustered standard errors, which makes it possible to take the above into account.

Content type, sex, and the party affiliations of the respective politicians were categorical variables, because the values of the variables cannot be ranked in a meaningful way. They were therefore treated as dummy variables, where one dummy variable was constructed for each category in the given variable. Each observation (post) was given the value 1 on the content type to which the observations belong and 0 on the other content types. This means that posts coded as *information* were given the value 1 on the category *information* and 0 on the other categories (*daily reports*, *personal*, etc.). Except for a single category, each category of variables had its own dummy. The category that was not given its own dummy, became the reference category, meaning that this was the category to which the other dummies were compared (Agresti & Finlay, 2014, p. 416). For the variable *content type*, *information* became the reference category. For the variable *party*, Venstre—the

Liberal Party of Denmark became the reference category. These were chosen as a reference because they had the largest number of observations.

5. Results

In the following, we will present the results from the analysis, based on MPs 5093 Facebook posts in the two-month period (15 February–15 April 2021).

The 39 Venstre MPs have created the most posts during our data period, closely followed by the Social Democrats (49 MPs) (see Table 3). These are also the two largest parties in the Folketing with the most MPs. The least active is the Alternative, which is also the smallest party in the Folketing now (one member). However, if we instead scrutinize the average number of posts per politician in the two-month period, the New Right stands out with 57.3 posts per politician on average for the whole period. The Liberal Alliance (three members) and Alternative are the second and third most active (50.3 and 43 posts on average, respectively). In comparison, the politicians from the two largest parties, the Social Democrats and Venstre, have posted 21.1 and 29.1 posts on average, respectively.

Table 3. Facebook activity from all MPs sorted according to political parties.

Party	MP	Posts	Posts *	Interactions	Interactions *
A	1	43	43	12,746	296.4
RGA	13	481	37	323,000	671.5
SPP	15	369	24.6	330,024	894.4
SPD	49	1036	21.1	1,167,499	1126.90
SLP	14	365	26.1	245,792	673.4
V	39	1136	29.1	401,794	353.7
CPP	13	479	36.8	478,466	998.9
DPP	16	653	40.8	698,797	1070.10
LA	3	151	50.3	177,769	1177.30
NR	4	229	57.3	1,356,267	5922.60
Independent	8	151	18.9	295,715	1958.40

Data collected via Crowdtangle from 15 February to 15 April 2021. * Refers to average values. Of the 5093 posts, only 95 (1.9%) of them had received more than 10,000 interactions, covering 1,545,080 interactions (28.2%) of the total 5,487,869 interactions. With such huge differences in the number of interactions, calculating the number of average interactions per post makes no sense. Instead, we chose to calculate the median as a measure of the typical number of interactions per post. Here, we found the median to be 191 interactions per post.

The New Right is the most engaging party by far. On average, they received 5922.6 interactions per post, which also means that they have been able to attract the highest amount of engagement with a total of 1,356,267 interactions. This is truly remarkable for a niche party with four MPs. In contrast to the New Right, the Alternative is the least engaging party, with an average of 296.4 interactions per post.

5.1. Content Type Most Used

The two most common types of content are *information* (38.9%) and *critique* (24.9%) (see Table 4). Information as the most significant type of content resembles the results of Larsson (2015) and Schwartz (2020). Posts in the *critique* category also receive more interactions than any other type of post. The median value for *critique* is 446 interactions, which is far more than any other category. The relatively high amount of critique, a high media value, compared to most of the other content types, indicates that the centrifugal dynamic is indeed also present in the Danish system of moderate pluralism.

Table 4. Content analysis in percentage (number) according to political party.

	Information	Critique	Daily Reports	Acknowledge	Personal	Mobilization	Total
DPP	30.2(197)	38.6(252)	12.4(81)	3.5(23)	9.2(60)	6.1(40)	100%
RG	43(207)	29.1(140)	7.3(35)	7.9(38)	2.3(11)	10.4(50)	100%
CD	37.6(180)	34.7(166)	10.4(50)	6.3(30)	6.1(29)	5(24)	100%
LA	28.5(43)	58.9(89)	6.6(10)	2.6(4)	2.7(4)	0.7(1)	100%
Ind.	39.7(60)	25.8(39)	9.2(14)	0(0)	8.6(13)	16.6(25)	100%
NR	24.9(57)	54.2(124)	8.7(20)	4.8(11)	6.1(14)	1.3(3)	100%
SLP	38.6(141)	17.3(63)	19.5(71)	9.6(35)	6(22)	9(33)	100%
S	40.8(423)	4.7(49)	19.6(203)	15.4(159)	14.7(152)	4.8(50)	100%
SPP	54.5(201)	18.7(69)	10.6(39)	7(26)	4.9(18)	4.3(16)	100%
V	40.4(459)	23(263)	13.5(153)	8.5(97)	9.1(103)	5.4(61)	100%
A	32.6(14)	32.6(14)	11.6(5)	14(6)	0(0)	9.3(4)	100%
Total	38.9%	24.9%	13.5%	8.4%	8.3%	6%	100%

Data collected via Crowdtangle from 15 February to 15 April 2021.

Acknowledgments, where politicians recognize/praise other actors, cover 8.4% of the posts. Most of the acknowledgment posts praise non-political actors, while a smaller number goes to other MPs. This could indicate a less integrated Facebook-sphere than might be expected, compared to the then-integrated Twittersphere. However, another possible explanation is that Facebook (contrary to Twitter) is more used for outreach to voters and less to initiate debates with political opponents.

The *personal* category covers 8.4% of the posts, which contains everything from hair-dresser visits and weddings to bouts with COVID-19 and personal tragedies. This reflects how Danish politicians are rather cautious about sharing personal information with their audience, preferring instead to spend their time posting information and criticism of opponents and policies.

Mobilization covers only 6% of the posts, where the politicians encourage their followers to like, comment, share, or participate in an event. This can involve petitions, requests for political input, or invitations to events. The low amount indicates that mobilization is not a popular category—neither among party leaders nor MPs in general.

5.2. Type of Political Party

Information is also the most dominant category for most of the political parties and for all the catch-all political parties. In fact, the closer to the political center (V, SLP, and S), the higher the number of catch-all parties, and the higher the degree of information compared to the other categories. This indicates, as expected, the profoundness of the centripetal dynamic of the Danish multiparty system.

However, the three opposition parties (DPP, LA, and NR) do not have information as the highest category. Two of these parties (LA and NR) are niche parties; for them, *critique* is the dominant category. Especially the populist niche party, the New Right (NR), is eager to criticize other actors. This indicates that the social media communications of these parties are shaped by centrifugal dynamics.

Accordingly, there is also a considerable difference regarding the degree to which politicians from different parties post criticism. Social Democratic MPs (SDP) (a catch-all party in control of the government since 2019) only criticize “other actors, etc.” in 4.2% of their posts. The *critique* strategy is much more prominent among the opposition niche party MPs from the Liberal Alliance (45.7% of their posts are critique) and New Right (49.3%).

Notably, the third niche party, Alternative, does not criticize as much as Liberal Alliance and New Right (32.6% of all posts). One possible explanation for this difference may be that the Alternative has a declared goal of changing the tone of the political debate.

These strategic concerns are likely to hamper the party from deploying an offensive and critique-based Facebook strategy, shaped by the centrifugal dynamic.

5.3. Who Gets the Most Attention?

As already mentioned, the content category with the greatest reach is clearly a *critique*, with a median of 466 (see Figure 1). This is almost twice as high as the category with the second highest reach (*personal*), and three times as high as *information*, the content type with the least reach. These results also partly confirm previous results, where *critique*, *acknowledgments*, and *private life* (with a focus on emotions) often attract many interactions (Larsson, 2015, p. 468; Schwartz, 2020, p. 102). This confirms that “going negative”, criticism of policies or political opponents, is a good strategy to get attention, also in a system of moderate pluralism.

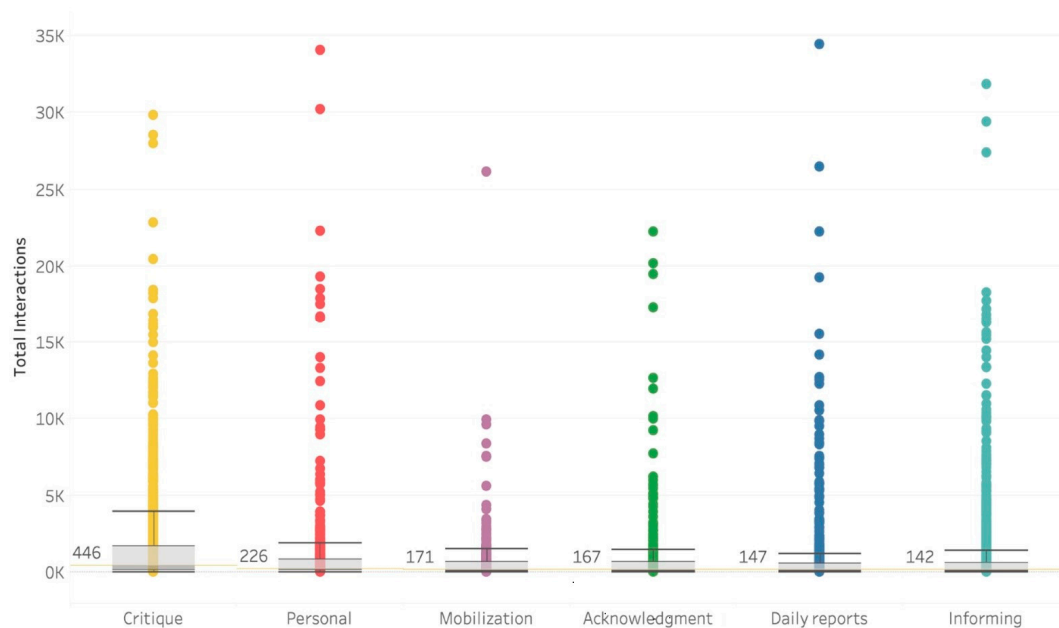


Figure 1. Facebook interactions according to content type. Data collected via Crowdtangle from 15 February to 15 April 2021. Yellow line and annotated numbers refer to the median value.

Looking at factors other than content, we can also see that MPs from the niche party, the New Right, achieve the highest average level of engagement, whereas Venstre MPs achieve the lowest. On average, New Right MPs receive 5568.9 interactions more than politicians from the catch-all party, Venstre, during the data period. This is again an indication of differences among different party types in the Danish system of moderate pluralism.

In summary, we find that the content category with the highest reach is *critique*, which is also the second-most common content type. This is another indication of how the exemplary Danish system of moderate pluralism can also contain tendencies of centrifugal dynamics among politicians on social media. However, the most common content category among the catch-all parties is *information*, indicating a high level of centripetal dynamic, though *information* is also the one content category with the least reach.

Overall, there is support for our two hypotheses, H1 and H2. There is a connection between party type and the content that the individual party posts on Facebook. Parties with high catch-all features mostly post *information*, and parties with highly niche and irrelevant features post *critique*. Consequently, in a system of moderate pluralism, during a period of increased centrifugal dynamic, critique content is more evident among politicians from irrelevant niche parties than catch-all parties. However, it is important to emphasize that *critique* was the only type of content that achieved interactions with statistically signifi-

cant certainty (see Appendix A). It is also important to emphasize that niche parties with irrelevant features versus catch-all parties are a matter of scale; for the Danish People's Party, which we categorize as a catch-all party, *critique* is also the dominant category, but the party is also a right-wing party, with clear populist features built around ownership of the immigration policy issue since their inception in the mid-1990s. These features can likely explain their high number of *critique*-based posts. Furthermore, it is important to note that the Alternative, which is also a niche party with irrelevant features, does not reach the same level of critique as the two right-wing niche parties. This indicates that individual party strategy and not just party-system dynamics play an important role.

6. Discussion

Our results are a contribution to the research of social media, party type, and party-system dynamics. As described in the review section, research on party types and party-system dynamics has not been developed in the social media era. Existing research has focused on major and minor parties. However, it is not that major parties outperform minor parties or that minor parties are more enthusiastic to use social media. Such questions are too simply posed and do not take important party-type variations and party-system dynamics into account. Our results indicate that different party types and different party-system dynamics influence what parties do on social media. First of all, we find a relatively large number of *critique* posts, which is much higher than the 14% from the study by Schwartz (2020) or the 3.6% from Larsson's (2015) study. This indicates an increased centrifugal dynamic shaping some parties' awareness of the power of criticism. The question is why? Party type seems to play a major role. The "niche" parties with irrelevant features have a higher number of posts based on the criticism of political opponents. This is possible because the niche parties are often small, have few MPs, and often have limited opportunities to exercise influence in the Folketing. A critique-based strategy can clearly help to boost interactions and public awareness, also from the national mainstream media, where irrelevant parties can struggle to gain access. Appeals to the public through social media become an important strategy for these parties. Critique-based posts also tend to be more prominent among members of the opposition niche parties. This might simply be due to their opposition status incentivizing them to criticize the government. In our results, this may also be due to the two niche parties with the most critique-heavy posts that are both being ideologically positioned as anti-state parties, which may also give them an incentive to be critical of the government during the COVID-19 lockdown (see below). The lockdown increases the centrifugal dynamic (more volatile voters to reach, who are against the lockdown) and shapes their social media communication. However, the centrifugal dynamic does not shape irrelevant niche parties deterministically. The Alternative has a different strategy, which can also be seen in the smaller number of critique-based posts, compared to the two other irrelevant niche parties.

On the other hand, there are also strong indications that this is just a matter of strategy of the individual party. Not only do two out of the three niche parties with irrelevant features choose to follow the same critique-based strategy, but the results also indicate that there is still a strong centripetal dynamic at play among catch-all parties (with relevant features). The parties do not share information that positions them on political issues among a slimmer audience. Instead, the most frequent content is *information*, which is also the least engaging. The more catch-all the party is, the less critique-based their Facebook strategy is. This indicates that representatives from catch-all parties are shaped by centripetal dynamics. The smaller number of critique-heavy posts from centrist party MPs (especially the Social Democrats in government) can also be explained by their identity as catch-all parties with relevant features. However, in the Danish system of moderate pluralism, characterized by

negative parliamentarism, catch-all parties want to profile themselves as collaborative and centrist-oriented to prove their relevance. The aim is to build trust among centrist voters. Furthermore, they have easier access to the mainstream media (compared to irrelevant niche parties). Especially, parties in minority governments have an incentive to profile themselves as collaborative. This centripetal dynamic creates a push towards moderate emotionality and factuality in the Facebook content that catch-all party MPs post.

Furthermore, our results can indirectly be seen as support for the normalization thesis. When well-known party-system dynamics and party-type features shape activities on Facebook, it can be interpreted as normalization of social media to existing political dynamics. There might also be slight support for equalization, though, since the results indicate that niche parties use social media differently to compensate for the lack of access to mainstream media. However, we cannot say if this creates any form of empowerment for the niche parties. In the 2022 election, *New Right* was not successful, while Liberal Alliance was highly successful, partly because of the social media campaign (on TikTok).

Besides the party-system dynamic and party-type explanation, there may also be a range of additional factors involved, which we will discuss below as potential drivers of the social media communication of the irrelevant niche parties.

6.1. *The Immigration-Argument as Driver*

Studies across Germany, Sweden, and Denmark have shown how a lot of the critique-heavy posts with a high number of interactions share in common a reluctance towards immigrants and Islam together with praise of national identities (Kulager, 2020); see also Wollebæk et al. (2022) on the Norwegian case. Previous research has also shown how a far-right strategy in recent years has been to obtain mainstreaming enabled by social media and promoted by conservative, right-wing influencers, and online personalities (Winter, 2019). In our data, immigration was the subject of 3 of the 10 most popular posts. So, our results tend to confirm that immigration is a subject that triggers reactions from Facebook users. In Denmark, the *New Right*, which is the top performer in our study, is much more critically positioned towards foreigners than the second-best performer, the Liberal Alliance.

6.2. *Mediatization as Driver*

The mediatization of politics (Klinger & Svensson, 2015; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008) can also be a driver for the significant reach of critique-based posts. Mediatization shapes the behavior of actors so that they follow communicative practices involving polarization and conflict orientation, which are clear ingredients of critique-heavy posts. However, it would take a deeper qualitative analysis of the content of these posts to clarify if mediatization is a significant driver.

6.3. *Newsworthiness as Driver*

The newsworthiness of new political parties may help to explain the reach of the *New Right* (Samuel-Azran et al., 2015; Trilling et al., 2017). During the data collection, the *New Right* was a new party with a rapidly growing member base (Lynggaard, 2021). Further research could establish a stronger connection between their successful reach on Facebook and more general popularity among voters and news appeal in the mainstream media.

6.4. *Does Election Campaigning Have an Effect?*

Finally, it is worth discussing whether the period in which we have collected our data—outside of an election campaign—has impacted our results. Both in and outside campaigns, *information* is the most significant content type (Larsson, 2015; Schwartz, 2020), although previous studies are limited to party leaders.

However, if we compare the use of critique with the Danish election campaign in 2019 (among party leaders) (Schwartz, 2020), the number of critical posts seems to increase, which could be interpreted as the result of increased centrifugal dynamic, which would be in accordance with previous research indicating less negativity during election campaigns (Peeters et al., 2023). However, the difference can also be explained by our shift in focus from party leaders in the previous research to all the MPs in this study. In that case, party leaders should be less critical than the average MP, both in and outside campaigns.

7. Conclusions

Initially, we asked as follows: “How do niche parties and catch-all parties use Facebook in a system of moderate pluralism?” Our results found support for the two hypotheses, H1 and H2, and reveal that there are clear differences in the type of content provided by politicians from catch-all parties compared to politicians from niche parties with irrelevant features, during a period of increased centrifugal party dynamic. Politicians from catch-all parties share political information with relatively low reach. In contrast, politicians from niche parties, such as the two right-wing opposition niche parties, Liberal Alliance, and New Right, are much more inclined to criticize political opponents and policies. This approach often achieves higher interactivity. That is, two out of three irrelevant niche parties choose to pursue the same critic-based strategy, indicating that their strategy choice is shaped by a centrifugal dynamic. Especially because the last one, the Alternative, has a clear communication policy of being dialog-oriented to change the tone of the political debate.

Clearly, a few critical posts gain a lot of attention, but most of the Facebook posts, especially those made by the members of catch-all parties, consist of facts and information concerning policies. The centrifugal dynamic shapes the niche parties' use of *criticism* but is not enough to change the party system type from moderate pluralism to polarized pluralism. The dominance of *information* among catch-all parties illustrates that their use of social media is shaped by a profound centripetal dynamic. Catch-all parties do not seem to position themselves on strongly mediatized, polarizing policy issues. Instead, due to the centripetal dynamic, they are expected to position themselves on Facebook in factual terms in relation to key public policies essential for upholding government. However, positioning must not be so strong that coalition partners are pushed away.

As indicated in the methodology section, there are limitations to our study. First of all, the range of our results is limited to similar moderate multiparty systems with a less fragmented party system, as found in the other Scandinavian countries. However, the results also have indications for multiparty systems with a higher degree of centrifugal dynamic, like Germany (see, e.g., Angenendt & Brause, 2024). Also in these countries, we will argue that the party-system dynamic and party-type features shape the use of social media, towards more critique-based posts (see, e.g., Darius & Stephany, 2019). Secondly, political parties in Denmark have traditionally been reluctant to discuss their social media strategies in public, so we cannot determine with certainty if strategy choice is the reason for the significant differences in critique-based posts. Thirdly, we must also consider how some of the data we have found can be strategically boosted by the parties, so that a few posts receive extensive attention. However, we find it highly likely that different strategy choices shaped by different party-system dynamics are the reason behind the differences in critique-based posts. Even if we cannot entirely confirm a direct relationship between the most engaging content and most used content, we do find a higher level of critique-based content in our data than previously documented. Increased centrifugal dynamic during the COVID-19 lockdown is likely the reason why, though, as mentioned in the discussion, other explanations than COVID-19 are possible.

A highly relevant future research question is whether similar features of the party system or political culture can be found in social media communication in other countries, similar or different to Denmark. Overall, more research on other systems of moderate pluralism could help clarify the special features of the multiparty dynamic in social media communication.

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Appendix A

		Model
Constant		952.440 (357.805) **
Category		
	Daily reports	−204.961 (111.099)
	Personal	226.451 (163.414)
	Information	Reference
	Mobilization	−73.757 (141.878)
	Acknowledgments	31.868 (65.452)
	Critique	333.008 (83.975) **
Party	Danish People’s Party	−292.118 (203.308)
	Red–Green Alliance	−125.044 (150.623)
	Conservatives	392.196 (385.749)
	Venstre	Reference
	Independents	−436.260 (1154.889)
	Danish Social Liberal Party	−180.552 (214.226)
	Liberal Alliance	−97.704 (200.396)
	New Right	2702.882 (1088.796) **
	Social Democrats	−17.321 (121.393)
	Socialist People’s Party	−110.970 (141.496)
	Alternative	150.829 (100.996)
Sex	Female	47.751 (185.697)
	Male	Reference
Followers		0.038 (0.004) **
Age		−21.913 (6.435) **
N		5092
R ²		0.531

Figures given in parentheses are standard errors. Significance level: **: $p < 0.01$

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