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Exploring the Dynamics of Digital and Social Media Marketing by Political Parties: Organic Posts vs. Paid Advertising on Meta Platforms

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ABSTRACT

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of how political parties in Greece utilized both organic posts and Meta paid ads during the 2023 elections. While previous research has explored various aspects of digital campaigning, few studies have systematically employed the Meta Ad Library to document and assess the content and timing strategies of political parties. This research fills this gap by examining the digital communication strategies of parties during the pre-election period. The findings reveal how political parties strategically leveraged both organic reach on platforms like Facebook and Instagram and paid advertising on Meta to engage voters. A significant finding is that posts targeting specific issues are more likely to be sponsored, whereas posts with ambiguous issue orientations tend to be organic. Additionally, posts focusing on health, infrastructure, and transportation issues are disproportionately represented in paid ads compared to organic posts. These insights contribute to the broader field of political marketing by emphasizing the role of data-driven strategies in digital campaigns. The study offers valuable implications for optimizing digital campaign strategies tailored to platform affordances and voter priorities. Directions for future research are discussed as well.

KEYWORDS

Political marketing; meta paid ads; social media; microtargeting; digital campaign strategy

Introduction

The effectiveness of social media in political marketing is a growing focus of research, particularly as political campaigns become increasingly dynamic and tailored to specific audiences (Bossetta 2018; Kreiss, Lawrence, and McGregor 2018). Social media platforms, especially those owned by Meta—namely Facebook and Instagram—have transformed political communication by allowing parties and candidates to engage directly with voters through organic and paid content. Organic posts increasingly function as political word-of-mouth mechanisms, enabling message diffusion through interpersonal networks and follower referrals (Chowdhury and Naheed 2020). These platforms are now essential tools in modern political campaigns, offering unique affordances that enable parties to amplify their reach, build brand awareness, and ultimately secure votes (Bossetta and Schmökel 2023; Dommett and Power 2019; Kruschinski et al. 2025; Olof Larsson 2023; Sosnovik et al. 2023). This reflects broader calls for developing globally informed and multi-system political marketing research that captures the evolving strategic complexity of digital campaigning across diverse institutional contexts ((Pich and Armannsdottir 2025).

Social media's precise targeting options have made it an indispensable tool in political marketing, allowing campaigns to effectively reach key voter segments (Kim et al. 2018; Kreiss, Lawrence, and McGregor 2018). Microtargeting has revolutionized audience segmentation (Boerman, Kruikemeier, and Zuiderveen Borgesius 2017; Sosnovik et al. 2023), but it has also drawn criticism for promoting divisive messaging and reinforcing echo chambers (Kruikemeier et al. 2022). The integration of digital technologies has transformed how political messages are delivered, with platforms like Facebook and Instagram enabling tailored content to engage voters more effectively (Jürgens and Stark 2017; Kruschinski et al. 2025). Meta's platforms stand out not only for their vast user base but also for their detailed targeting capabilities, which offer deeper insights into audience behavior. For instance, Meta's Ad Library provides a granular analysis of how political ads are targeted, ensuring transparency in political strategies (Kreiss, Lawrence, and McGregor 2018; Sosnovik et al. 2023). This ability to reach specific demographics through both paid ads and organic posts gives political actors a significant advantage in crafting effective communication strategies (Kruschinski et al. 2025). While much research on social media campaigning has focused on individual platforms, recent studies offer a more holistic view by comparing multiple platforms, highlighting the unique dynamics of each (Abid et al. 2025; Bossetta 2018; Hemsley et al. 2018; Jungherr 2016; Kruschinski et al. 2025). Understanding these platform-specific differences is crucial, as each medium invites distinct forms of social interaction and engagement (Papacharissi 2015). Recent research further shows that political engagement unfolds across multiple touchpoints and follows dynamic, non-linear journeys, especially among younger voters who combine online and offline interactions based on personal relevance (Poorrezaei et al. 2023). These developments embody what Newman (2025) describes as the emergence of "new bridges and faster, more dangerous roads" in political marketing, where accelerated message cycles, algorithmic persuasion, and opaque targeting practices sharpen both strategic opportunities and democratic risks. However, despite the growing availability of data through tools like the Meta Ad Library, few empirical studies to date have systematically analyzed how political parties use Meta paid ads in comparison to organic strategies during election periods. In particular, the literature lacks focused, data-driven comparisons of Meta paid ads and organic content within the same political context, across platforms like Facebook and Instagram.

To address this gap, the present study examines the evolving digital strategies employed by political parties, which now leverage both organic and Meta paid ads to influence voter perceptions. This transformation in political communication has led to the development of novel approaches that allow parties to refine their messaging and enhance voter engagement through tailored content across platforms. Meta's platforms stand out not only for their vast user base but also for their detailed targeting capabilities, which offer deeper insights into audience behavior. Offering a comprehensive analysis of how Greek political parties crafted their digital strategies, this research compares organic posts and Meta paid ads during the 2023 elections. Moreover, recent work conceptualizes politicians as brands whose image shapes affective voter responses even in parliamentary systems, reinforcing the strategic importance of leader-centred visual content in targeted paid advertising (Van Steenburg and Guzmán 2025). By drawing on data from the Meta Ad Library, it provides valuable insights into the role of targeted digital marketing in contemporary political campaigns. This comparative approach sheds light on the relative effectiveness of both strategies in building engagement and motivating voter behavior. In doing so, the study contributes to political marketing theory and offers practical recommendations for campaign consultants, advertisers, and communication professionals. Additionally, it discusses the study's limitations and proposes future research directions.

Literature review

Political marketing provides the overarching framework for this study, as it focuses on the deliberate and purposive use of communication strategies by political actors to achieve electoral

and organizational goals. Unlike broader political communication research, political marketing emphasizes the strategic integration of product, promotion, and market intelligence within what Newman (1999, 2016) has termed the “marketing revolution in politics.”

Scholars such as Cwalina, Falkowski, and Newman (2011) have highlighted how political marketing offers a cross-cultural theory of voter behavior, while Lees-Marshment et al. (2019) has examined how market-oriented parties adapt their strategies to meet voter expectations. Political marketing research has also emphasized professionalization and the growing role of consultants and strategic communication in campaigns (Scammell 1995; Strömbäck 2007). Comparative studies in Central and Eastern Europe (Kolczyński and Mazur 2023; Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė 2023) show that professionalization processes are converging with Western trends, but remain conditioned by resource inequalities and institutional legacies. The digitalization of campaigning has extended this logic to online environments, where the normalization versus equalization debate is central: resource-rich parties tend to consolidate their advantages, while smaller parties often rely more on organic communication (Bene 2017; Gibson and Römmele 2001). At the same time, the rise of “fourth-age” campaigning (Magin et al. 2017) highlights the centrality of social media affordances, microtargeting, and personalization, expanding the scope of political marketing into platform-mediated spaces. Building on this tradition, the present study situates itself within the political marketing subfield by exploring how Greek parties operationalize both organic and paid strategies on Meta platforms. The Greek case extends insights from well-studied Western democracies such as the US and UK to a smaller, multi-party democracy, showing how resource-constrained actors adapt to platform affordances while simultaneously reinforcing issue ownership patterns.

This study draws upon two primary theoretical frameworks: the theory of platform affordances and issue ownership theory. The former (Bossetta 2018; Hase, Boczek, and Scharkow 2023) elucidates how the technical architecture of platforms such as Facebook and Instagram enables or constrains specific forms of political communication, particularly in the strategic deployment of organic versus paid content. The latter (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Haßler et al. 2020) explains how parties strategically prioritize policy domains in which they are perceived as competent, commonly referred to as ‘owned issues’, to enhance credibility and voter appeal. These frameworks are complementary within a political marketing lens: affordances shape the means of communication, while issue ownership guides its substantive focus. Together they help explain why certain parties amplify their “owned” issues through paid promotion and why others rely on organic visibility, especially in resource-constrained environments.

Meta paid ads and organic strategies

Research into political marketing is fundamental for political practices that involve deliberate and purposive communication aimed at achieving specific goals (Lees-Marshment 2019; Mochla and Tsourvakas 2023). In today’s digital era, political campaigns globally allocate significant portions of their budgets to paid advertising on social media platforms. This shift underscores the importance of understanding how political actors leverage these platforms to enhance voter engagement and effectively communicate their messages during election campaigns. Social media provides a wide range of targeting options, enabling political actors to effectively reach or exclude specific voter groups (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. 2018; Kruschinski and Bene 2022). Consequently, online political microtargeting has become a vital strategic tool, allowing campaigns to utilize user data and algorithmic ad delivery systems to connect with the most receptive or persuadable audiences. Microtargeting refers to the practice of delivering personalized political messages to small, often highly specific, groups of voters based on their demographic characteristics and behaviors (Leerssen et al. 2019; Ortega 2021). This practice has been linked to message customization strategies and increased voter responsiveness across platforms. Studies of the 2022 U.S. midterms (Carson and Ulrich 2024; Panagopoulos and Lore 2024) confirm that microtargeting

and online ad strategies were crucial in shaping turnout and issue salience, suggesting that these dynamics travel across contexts.

At the same time, organic content remains crucial for building long-term relational engagement. Recent research demonstrates that voters—especially younger voters—encounter political information through multi-touchpoint journeys that combine social media, interpersonal networks, and self-directed information searching (Pooresaei et al. 2023). This multi-channel behavior highlights the need to analyze how parties strategically combine organic communication with paid Meta advertising. Moreover, scholars increasingly emphasize that political communication on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram is shaped by underlying platform affordances, including audio-visual possibilities, algorithmic ad delivery and community-building features (Bossetta 2018; Hase, Boczek, and Scharkow 2023). These insights underscore the value of studying how parties operationalize these affordances in practice—an issue addressed in the present analysis.

Time and engagement

The transformation brought about by social media in political advertising has sparked significant debates regarding its impact on democracy and society, particularly concerning privacy breaches, voter manipulation, and undue electoral influence (Gorton 2016; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. 2018; Matthes 2022). Algorithmic ad delivery systems have been central to these discussions, as they use data-driven methods to target specific segments of voters, often reinforcing existing political biases (Ali et al. 2019). The effectiveness of social media in political marketing is a key area of interest for both researchers and campaign strategists. Understanding how various social media platforms interact with political communication strategies is essential in a dynamic and diverse political landscape (Bossetta 2018; Kreiss, Lawrence, and McGregor 2018). Platforms like Meta's Facebook and Instagram have emerged as pivotal tools, allowing political actors to engage with audiences through both paid ads and organic content. According to Kruschinski et al. (2025), political parties have adapted their messaging strategies to leverage both the organic reach and paid advertising opportunities on Facebook. Recent studies have also shown that the timing of digital political messaging can significantly affect user engagement, particularly during peak campaign phases (Stier et al. 2018). The combination of organic and paid content strategies offers campaigns flexibility, enabling message diversification and greater voter interaction. Ortega (2021) notes that the tone and strategic targeting of paid ads differ markedly from organic content. This aligns with Evans and Parton (2024), who demonstrate that negativity in digital campaigning tends to increase during general elections and can exhibit gendered dimensions. Moreover, organic communication frequently operates as a political word-of-mouth mechanism, facilitating interpersonal diffusion and peer-driven reinforcement (Chowdhury and Naheed 2020), which may amplify the impact of strategic messaging beyond initial audiences.

Platform affordances and content formats

Operationalizing platform affordances in this study involves translating the technical features of Meta platforms into observable strategic behaviors during campaigning. Following Bossetta (2018) and Hase, Boczek, and Scharkow (2023), affordances are understood as action possibilities embedded in platform architecture that shape how political communication unfolds. In the context of Facebook and Instagram, three affordance dimensions are analytically relevant: audio-visual affordances that enable video-based and leader-centred visual messaging; algorithmic affordances that support boosting, targeting, and the paid amplification of strategic content; and community-building affordances that facilitate the organic diffusion of posts through likes, shares, and comments. These dimensions form the conceptual bridge between platform design and the empirical patterns observed in the Greek campaign.

Organic media affordances enable political actors to publish content at no cost and with unlimited frequency, primarily reaching followers but also extending organically through shares

and likes. Such interactions help build a supportive community, encourage reciprocity, and sustain low-cost mobilization, which is especially valuable for smaller, resource-constrained parties (Bene 2017; Koc-Michalska et al. 2021; Magin et al. 2017). Instagram reinforces these dynamics by emphasizing visual and audiovisual content, which has become central to political communication (Enli 2017; Russmann and Svensson 2017). Platform-specific visual cultures shape political messaging, particularly among younger audiences (Highfield and Leaver 2016). Evidence from recent European elections shows a marked shift toward audiovisual advertising, where valence issues and leader personalization dominate (Kolczyński and Mazur 2023). This trend is consistent with political branding research showing that politicians function as brands whose image shapes affective voter responses even in parliamentary systems, underscoring the strategic importance of leader-centred visual content in paid advertising (Van Steenburg and Guzman 2025).

Sentiment and strategic messaging

Political microtargeting, while effective, has been criticized for privacy violations and the spread of polarizing messages (Dommett and Power 2019). For instance, Krotzek (2019) examined how adapting content to users' psychological profiles impacts political behavior, finding that while such adaptations improved users' ability to evaluate candidates, they did not significantly alter voting decisions. Additionally, Kruikemeier, Sezgin, and Boerman (2016) discovered that awareness of targeted content can sometimes lead users to be more cautious or resistant to engaging with the ads (Dobber, Fathaigh, and Zuiderveen Borgesius 2019).

This combined approach reflects the evolving nature of political communication in the digital age, where voters increasingly navigate multi-touchpoint engagement pathways across online media, personal networks, and user-driven information searches (Poorrezaei et al. 2023). By utilizing both Meta paid ads and organic media strategies, political parties can effectively manage their online presence, enhance brand awareness, and secure votes. A well-defined marketing strategy and a deep understanding of Meta's ad system are integral to achieving these goals. However, Ali et al. (2019) caution that these strategies may inadvertently contribute to voter manipulation or the reinforcement of biases, raising ethical questions about the long-term implications of such practices for democratic processes.

Beyond ethical concerns, issue ownership theory contributes to understanding how parties strategically frame campaign messages. By emphasizing policy domains in which they are perceived as credible, political actors reinforce their core identity and enhance persuasive appeal, particularly in paid media, where targeting affordances enable the amplification of owned issues (Van Spanje 2010). At the same time, under-targeting of issues such as transparency, justice, or environment—as observed in comparative studies of both Western and Central and Eastern European contexts (Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė 2023; Williamson 2024) raises concerns about representational equity. This highlights how political marketing theories intersect with normative debates: strategic innovation may strengthen campaign effectiveness but also raises concerns about fairness, transparency, and democratic representation.

Despite these advancements, several gaps remain in the political marketing literature that this study addresses. Research still lacks systematic comparisons between organic and paid political communication in real-world pre-election periods, leaving limited empirical understanding of how parties balance these modes of outreach (Pich and Armannsdottir 2025). The use of Meta's Ad Library as a transparency and data source remains underdeveloped in European and smaller multi-party contexts, restricting insight into targeted advertising practices beyond highly researched US and UK cases (Newman 2025). Prior studies have also insufficiently examined how audiovisual affordances—such as leader-centred videos and issue-specific visual framing—shape parties' paid advertising strategies, despite evidence that such formats dominate contemporary campaigning. Calls for greater transparency in digital advertising continue to intensify in light of risks related to algorithmic delivery and data-driven persuasion (Newman 2025). Moreover, most political marketing insights originate from two-party systems, underscoring the need to

understand how communication strategies function within fragmented parliamentary systems like Greece, where resource asymmetries and issue ownership dynamics may differ substantially (Pich and Armannsdottir 2025).

Building on this literature, the present study advances a conceptual model linking party size, message types, and platform affordances to the strategic balance between organic and paid communication. Larger and more professionalized parties are better equipped to leverage algorithmic affordances through paid advertising, whereas smaller parties depend more on organic, community-building affordances due to resource constraints (Newman 2025; Pich and Armannsdottir 2025). Message types also shape these choices: mobilization appeals, leader-centred content and issue-owned themes align with Meta's targeting and amplification affordances, while informational and relational messages correspond more closely to organic communication. Together, these dynamics explain how parties of different sizes and strategic orientations use Meta's affordances in distinct ways.

Research questions

The timing of message delivery is a crucial aspect of political marketing that can significantly impact electoral outcomes (Fowler et al. 2021; Sides et al. 2018). In the context of German campaigns, distinct phases can be identified: an early voting and information phase leading up to election day, a mobilization phase, and a get-out-the-vote (GOTV) phase in the final 72 h (Fowler et al. 2021; Sides et al. 2018). While there is no definitive evidence supporting a singular effective timing strategy, research suggests that messages delivered closer to election day may yield greater effectiveness (Panagopoulos 2011). The affordances of Facebook, particularly its ability for self-curated, unlimited organic posts, facilitate message continuity and enhance the credibility of political actors (Vaccari and Nielsen 2013). In contrast, the tailored nature of paid media enables campaigns to target specific voter segments during critical campaign phases. Smaller parties, in particular, can benefit from utilizing paid media to raise awareness about local candidates or to mobilize voters for postal voting early in the campaign. Moreover, the research of Kruschinski et al. (2025) suggests that a more integrated approach combining organic and paid content strategies can optimize the use of Facebook's capabilities.

The findings from Kruschinski et al. (2025) reveal significant differences in how political parties time their organic and paid media on Facebook. Notably, the two largest parties significantly utilized ads in relation to their overall party communication, while smaller parties like The Left and AfD employed ads only marginally during their campaigns. Additionally, the research highlights various timing strategies employed by all parties, despite a decline in paid media toward the campaign's conclusion. These strategies included delaying paid media purchases due to overlapping electoral campaigns (as seen with The Greens, CDU, AfD, and The Left), sponsoring specific organic content to enhance visibility and engage new users at targeted times (as practiced by the FDP), and focusing paid ads on geographic regions during early campaign phases to mobilize absentee voters (CDU, FDP). These results challenge previous studies that suggested parties predominantly use Facebook ads toward the end of their campaigns (Ortega 2021; Fowler et al. 2021). This discrepancy may stem from differences in electoral systems, the second-order nature of the analyzed elections, as well as constraints related to campaign budgets, available resources, and expertise (Petithomme 2012). Thus, we pose the following research question:

RQ1: Do political parties strategize the timing of their organic posts and Meta paid ads to maximize voter engagement and campaign effectiveness?

As political campaigns increasingly leverage social media to engage voters, the choice of platform and content type is essential for shaping communication strategies. Campaigns assess the affordances of social media platforms concerning their overall marketing strategies, adjusting resource allocation and messaging accordingly (Koc-Michalska et al. 2021; Kreiss, Lawrence, and

McGregor 2018; Stier et al. 2018). This evaluation involves exploring the inherent opportunities and constraints of each platform.

Research by Ceccobelli, Quaranta, and Valeriani (2020) found that the “formal nature” of posts whether photos, links, or videos can predict user interaction levels. The shift from text-oriented campaigning to audiovisual content reflects an effort to democratize political expression and maximize engagement through “spreadable” and “emotionally rousing” content (Kreiss and McGregor 2018). While populist parties predominantly favor Facebook (Kalsnes 2016), their engagement on Instagram is less pronounced. Studies suggest that political activity on Instagram has increased, particularly among non-populist parties, indicating changing dynamics in political communication (Olof Larsson 2019). Therefore, it is essential to investigate how political parties utilize different platforms and content forms—specifically, their preferences for video versus photo content—in their electoral campaigns, as this will aid in understanding their strategies. Thus, we pose the following research questions:

RQ2a: How do political parties utilize Facebook and Instagram in their communication strategies for both organic posts and Meta paid ads?

RQ2b: What are the preferences of political parties for post formats (video versus photo) in their communication strategies across both organic posts and Meta paid ads?

In exploring the communication strategies of political parties, it is vital to consider how they utilize different message formats in their organic and paid ads. According to Kruschinski et al. (2025), organic posts are primarily used for informational purposes, with only minor emphasis on voter mobilization and limited interaction. This trend aligns with previous studies, which suggest that parties predominantly inform the electorate about their key issues rather than leveraging Facebook’s potential for mobilization and interaction (Lilleker et al. 2011; Magin et al. 2017). Evers (2019) further explains that the lack of human resources for community management and the desire to maintain consistent political branding contribute to this trend among German campaigns.

In contrast, sponsored posts and ads demonstrate a mixture of informational and mobilization content, indicating a strategic adaptation to the unique affordances of each medium. Notably, government parties tend to emphasize mobilization, while opposition parties rely more heavily on providing information (Kruschinski et al. 2025). This finding aligns with prior research indicating that a party’s governmental status significantly influences its campaign strategies and objectives when engaging with voters (Bawn and Somer-Topcu 2012). Therefore, this leads to the research question:

RQ3: What campaign formats do political parties prefer in their organic posts and Meta paid ads?

A critical strategic decision for political branding involves the emphasis on specific issues during a campaign (Sides et al. 2018). Political marketing techniques help identify issues that resonate with the public, whether they are perceived as popular or as “wedge issues” that concern voters (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Hillygus and Shields 2009). Organic media allow political parties to communicate their issue priorities directly to a wide, often partisan audience, thereby influencing the broader political discourse (Stier et al. 2018). Research indicates that parties often focus on consensual policy issues traditionally associated with their platforms in organic posts (Haßler et al. 2020). In contrast, the paid advertising opportunities enable parties to target specific audiences with issue-related sponsored posts and ads that align with presumed voter interests.

Kruschinski et al. (2025) highlight that parties utilize distinct strategies in their organic and paid media regarding issue prioritization. Their findings reveal that while organic posts often highlight a wide array of topics, parties concentrate on issues they traditionally own. Conversely, paid media frequently reflects a narrower issue set aimed at specific target audiences, suggesting that parties tailor their messaging to maximize electoral impact. Additionally, studies from

various countries (Anstead et al. 2025; Bennett and Gordon 2021; Fowler et al. 2021) demonstrate that parties tend to prioritize well-established issues rather than controversial ones in their paid media strategies. This dynamic raises important questions about how effectively parties engage with critical issues in their campaigns. Thus, we pose the following research question:

RQ4: Do political parties prioritize and address specific issues in their organic posts and paid Meta paid ads?

Political parties face a strategic choice between negative campaigning, which involves attacking opponents, and positive campaigning, which focuses on promoting their own records and views. Research indicates that this decision is often context-dependent (Benoit 2022; Haselmayer 2019; Nai 2020). Negative campaigning can mobilize a party's supporters and persuade undecided voters if the messaging resonates, while also potentially demobilizing opponents' voters (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Fridkin and Kenney 2004; Meffert et al. 2006). However, it carries the risk of backlash if negative messages reflect poorly on the party itself (Walter and van der Eijk 2019). Social media platforms like Facebook amplify the effectiveness of negative campaigning, allowing messages to bypass traditional media filters and reach partisan followers directly (Haselmayer 2019). Users are often more engaged with negative content, leading to increased organic reach or "virality" due to Facebook's engagement-driven dissemination logic (Bene 2017; Kruschinski; 2022). Nonetheless, negative posts can alienate undecided voters, who may disapprove of such tactics and reconsider their choices (Walter and van der Eijk 2019).

Despite the potential benefits of negative campaigning, studies have shown that parties tend to rely more on positive messaging in both organic and paid media (Evers 2019; Fowler et al. 2021; Gerbaudo, Marogna, and Alzetta 2019; Ortega 2021). For instance, Kruschinski et al. (2025) found that government parties, such as the CDU and The Greens, primarily used positive sentiment in their organic posts and paid advertisements. In contrast, opposition parties, like the AfD, often engaged in negative campaigning, particularly in their organic and sponsored posts. However, even these opposition parties demonstrated a strategic inclination to maintain a generally positive brand image in their ads. This highlights that while negativity can be a powerful tool in political communication, parties carefully calibrate their messaging strategies based on the type of media and the audience they aim to reach. By examining how political parties strategically deploy both negative and positive messaging in their campaigns, we propose the following research question:

RQ5: How do political parties utilize negative and positive campaigning in their organic posts and paid Meta paid ads?

The study by Sosnovik et al. (2023) highlights that significant variations in policy attention exist across demographic groups, which can reinforce stereotypes and deprive certain users of critical information that may influence their voting decisions. This raises concerns about the equitable distribution of information in political advertising. Furthermore, the research by Ali et al. (2019) emphasizes the role of Facebook's ad delivery algorithms in potentially leading to biased outcomes in ad reach. Advertisers can specify target demographics, but the optimization algorithms may prioritize certain groups, which could further exacerbate imbalances in policy attention. This calls for a deeper understanding of the interplay between demographic targeting and algorithmic biases in political advertising. By examining how political parties customize their messaging based on demographic data, we propose the following research questions:

RQ6: How do political parties tailor their messages to different demographic groups based on Meta's Ad Library data?

Building on the foundational work of Kruschinski et al. (2025), this study aims to provide a comprehensive examination of how political parties construct their digital strategies through both organic posts and Meta paid ads. By leveraging the Meta Ad Library, we seek to uncover

how these parties tailor their messaging across various platforms to effectively engage their target audiences. This analysis aims to enhance our understanding of the dynamics of political communication in the digital age, thereby contributing to the broader field of political marketing by illuminating the strategic interplay between organic and paid content.

Method

To address our research questions, we conducted a manual quantitative content analysis of organic posts and Meta paid ads from the Facebook and Instagram pages of Greek parliamentary parties, focusing on the four weeks leading up to the National Election Day on May 23, 2023. This mixed approach, combining manual content analysis with data retrieved from the Meta Ad Library, follows established best practices in political communication research and ensures both systematic coverage and contextual sensitivity (Krippendorff 2013; Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken 2002). Our study aims to understand how Greek parties construct their digital strategies and prioritize campaign objectives, building on the predictive research of Kruschinski et al. (2025). Unlike previous studies, our analysis uniquely compares political strategies across both organic and paid advertising using the Meta Ad Library—a comprehensive database of active ads related to social issues, elections, and politics on Facebook and Instagram.

The analysis focused on collecting data on the formal characteristics of all posts and ads, including the type of post, publication date, and other relevant features, within the period from April 23 to May 19, 2023. This four-week timeframe aligns with the official pre-election campaign period in Greece, as defined by national electoral regulations, during which political parties are formally permitted to intensify their communication activities. Research in political campaigning demonstrates that the final month before Election Day constitutes the most intense and strategically decisive phase of digital outreach, with parties escalating both organic and paid communication efforts (Fowler et al. 2021). Therefore, capturing this specific period ensures that the dataset reflects the peak of campaign activity, when digital strategies, including Meta advertising, are most heavily deployed. Moreover, the selection is theoretically informed by Kruschinski et al. (2025), who identify three distinct temporal phases in electoral campaigning, including a heightened mobilization phase immediately prior to election day. In the absence of nationally established models for campaign timing in the Greek context, this internationally recognized framework provides a valid and transferable basis for temporal segmentation. Consequently, the chosen four-week timeframe is both methodologically justified and empirically optimal for examining the dynamics of organic and paid communication. The selected period ensures a sufficient volume of data for comparative analysis across parties and platforms. The study focused on the six political parties that held parliamentary representation at the time of the 2023 national elections, as defined by the official electoral announcement.

New Democracy (ND), a centre-right party affiliated with the European People's Party (EPP), utilized both organic and Meta paid ads on Facebook and Instagram. Similarly, SYRIZA—Progressive Alliance employed both organic and sponsored ads across these platforms. In contrast, PASOK—Movement for Change (PASOK-KINAL), a member of the Party of European Socialists, focused solely on organic posts on Facebook and Instagram, without engaging in Meta-sponsored advertising. The Communist Party of Greece did not have official accounts or Meta paid ads on either social media platform. EL. LYSI, a right-wing to far-right party, maintained an official Facebook account and launched an Instagram account in June 2023, using Meta for paid ads. Finally, MeRA25, part of the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25), engaged in both organic posts and Meta paid ads.

Organic Facebook posts ($N=871$) and Instagram posts ($N=160$), along with their formal characteristics (i.e., type of post, date of publication), were recorded daily in a systematic manner. These posts were stored by manually saving each party's Facebook and Instagram pages as individual Excel files for accurate tracking and verification. Additionally, we retrieved 161 Meta paid ads from the

official Meta Ad Library pages of four parties, collecting information such as identification numbers, URLs, run dates, screenshots, targeting details (age, gender), and other formal characteristics.

Two coders, trained extensively and tested for reliability, coded the textual and visual characteristics of both organic and Meta paid ads. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using a random sample of 30 organic posts and 15 Meta paid ads, achieving satisfactory results: The reliability for campaign functions was Krippendorff's Alpha = .668, and for issue priorities, Krippendorff's Alpha = .829. According to Krippendorff (2013), values above .667 are considered acceptable for exploratory research, while values of .800 or higher are recommended only when drawing strong, confirmatory conclusions. Given the exploratory nature of this study and the complexity of coding multimodal political communication (textual and visual elements across two platforms), the Alpha value of .668 is appropriate and methodologically defensible. These results fall within acceptable ranges for political communication studies employing manual content analysis (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken 2002). However, the reliability values should be interpreted with caution; the .668 coefficient indicates acceptable but not strong agreement, suitable for exploratory analysis but insufficient for confirmatory inference.

Campaign functions were categorized based on the strategic intent behind the messages, while issue priorities were coded using a predefined list of policy topics. These topics were later recoded into broader categories (i.e., Economy & Finance, Defence & Foreign Affairs, Labor & Social Issues). Given that there are only two valence levels (positive-negative) and it is straightforward to determine whether a Meta paid ad is positive or negative, no agreement check between the coders was necessary. Finally, a binomial regression model was employed to statistically examine the timing and messaging strategies in both organic and Meta paid ads. The model used a party's (non-)use of Meta paid ads as a dichotomous dependent variable, explained by timing, message characteristics (campaign functions, issue priorities, negative campaigning), and the source of the messages. All predictors were dummy-coded (since all were categorical), and multicollinearity was tested using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) analysis. The majority of predictors had VIF values below 2, with no values exceeding 3, indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern. To aid interpretation for non-technical readers, we report odds ratios and p-values in the results. Odds ratios indicate how much more or less likely a post is to be a Meta paid ad (vs. an organic post) based on the predictor. For example, an odds ratio of 3.8 for the 'Mobilization phase' means that ads during this phase are 3.8 times more likely to be paid than organic, relative to the Early Voting phase. P-values indicate whether such differences are statistically significant.

Results

Building on the foundational work of Kruschinski et al. (2025), this study uses a similar methodological approach, including the presentation style of graphs and tables, to ensure comparability. The reason for using the same color palette is that it was essential for large volumes of information to be easily readable, and since this was successfully achieved in Kruschinski's study, we followed the same approach.

Timing strategies

Figure 1 illustrates the distinct strategies political parties employed for organic Facebook and Instagram posts versus Meta paid ads in the four weeks leading up to election day.

The parties adopted different timing strategies for their campaigns. ND steadily increased its sponsored ads during the early phase of the campaign, peaking during the mobilization phase and sharply reducing them in the GOTV phase. SYRIZA focused on its Meta paid ads early in the campaign, but reduced their frequency during the mobilization phase, leading to a steady decline by election day. EL. LYSI launched ads later in the campaign, with some fluctuations: a slight increase in the mobilization phase, followed by a drop on election day. MERA25 took a selective approach, publishing fewer ads mainly in the pre-election and mobilization phases.

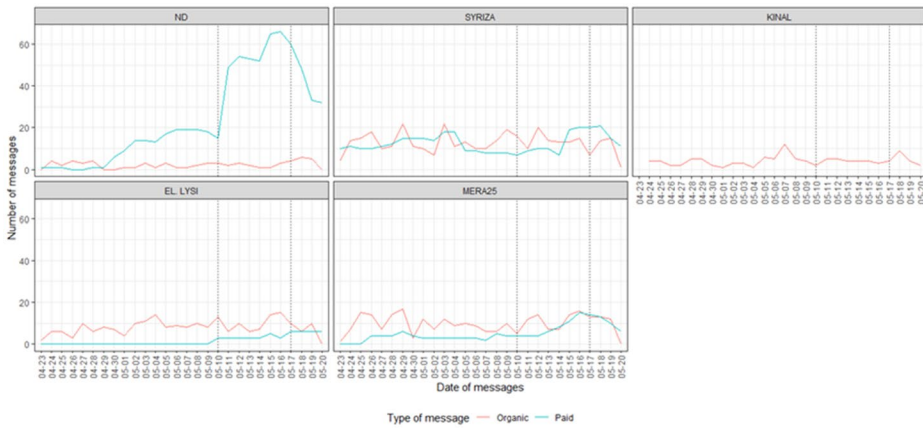


Figure 1. Number and publishing date of the organic posts and sponsored ads by party.

ND made the most extensive use of Meta paid ads, particularly during the mobilization phase, while SYRIZA showed a slight increase only during the latter part of this phase.

Binomial regression analysis supports the observation that larger parties were more likely to rely on Meta paid ads (see Table 1). ND, in particular, was much more likely to use paid Meta ads compared to other parties (OR = 11.2, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, the analysis reveals that the likelihood of paid ads being published was significantly higher during the mobilization phase (OR = 3.86, $p < 0.001$) compared to the early voting and GOTV phases, a pattern primarily driven by ND’s strategy (Figure 2).

Platform utilization and post formats

Figure 3 illustrates the platform utilization of political parties, showing that all parties primarily used Facebook for organic posts. SYRIZA led with 290 posts, while EL.LYSI had 227 posts, though it launched its Instagram account only after the election. MERA25 published 186 Facebook posts and 76 Instagram posts, while PASOK-KINAL had 104 on Facebook and only 6 on Instagram. ND posted 53 times on Facebook and 10 on Instagram.

For Meta’s paid ads, all parties targeted voters across both platforms. However, only ND and SYRIZA concentrated their ads on Instagram, with ND running 44 of 92 ads there and SYRIZA allocating 11 of 14 ads to the platform.

Political parties show distinct preferences in ad formats, with a clear preference for video content in Meta paid ads. ND’s organic posts include 37 photos and 26 videos, but for ads, they favored videos, posting 56 videos versus 36 photos. Similarly, SYRIZA prefers videos in their Meta paid ads (34 videos, 8 photos), despite a balanced organic output of 177 videos and 182 photos. KINAL posted an equal number of photos and videos (55 each) in organic posts, with no Meta paid ads. EL. LYSI prefers photos for organic posts (153 photos, 74 videos), but uses only videos for ads (9 videos). MERA25 favors photos in organic posts (227 photos, 45 videos) but shifts to videos for Meta paid ads (Appendix Figure A1).

Content strategies

Figure 4 illustrates the content strategies political parties employed for organic posts and paid Meta paid ads, focusing on three key functions: information, interaction, and mobilization. ND and SYRIZA emphasized both information and mobilization, with ND’s posts being 54% informational, 32% mobilization, and 11% interaction. SYRIZA’s composition was 47% informational, 30% mobilization, and 13% interaction. KINAL and EL. LYSI prioritized information (55% and 54%, respectively) and interaction (34% and 27%), while placing less emphasis on mobilization.

Table 1. Binomial regression model of different message characteristics on paid media.

Predictors	Organic vs paid		
	Odds ratios	CL (95%)	<i>p</i>
(Intercept)	0.01	0.00–0.04	0.000
<i>Phase (ref. early voting & information)</i>			<0.001
Mobilization (10 days)	3.86	2.46–6.07	
Get-Out-The-vote	0.75	0.30–1.91	0.549
<i>Issues (ref. Unidentifiable & comms with citizens)</i>			
Economy & Finance	1.69	0.92–3.11	0.090
Health	5.23	2.08–13.15	<0.001
Education-Youth	2.31	0.73–7.31	0.155
Development-Investments	2.49	0.77–8.04	0.127
Labour & Social Issues	2.15	1.01–4.55	0.046
Environment	2.19	0.41–11.66	0.357
Defence & Foreign affairs	2.55	1.01–6.41	0.047
Transparency	0.36	0.08–1.64	0.189
Infrastructure & Transportation	4.04	1.21–13.5	0.023
Justice	0.50	0.04–5.56	0.571
<i>Function (ref. Unidentifiable)</i>			
Information	5.12	1.33–19.74	0.018
Interaction	6.92	1.63–29.42	0.009
Mobilization (10 days)	3.84	0.96–15.35	0.057
<i>Positive Valence (ref. Negative)</i>	0.71	0.40–1.25	0.230
<i>Video Format (ref. Photo)</i>	2.31	1.44–3.72	0.001
<i>Parties (ref. Mera25)</i>			
ND	11.20	5.61–22.35	<0.001
SYRIZA	1.34	0.68–2.64	0.397
EL. LYSI	0.32	0.13–0.79	0.013
Observations		1082	
R2 Tjur		0.361	

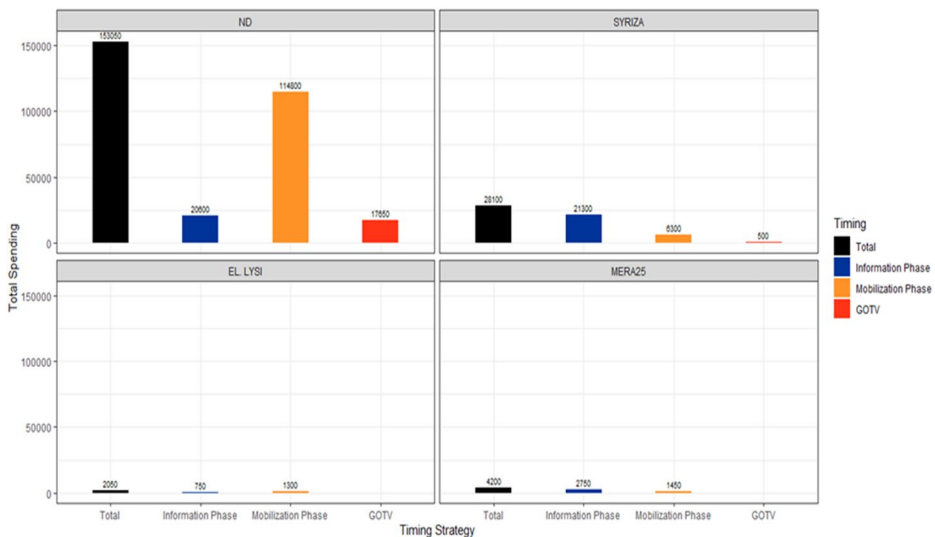


Figure 2. Parties spending by phase.

MERA25 led in interaction posts, with 45%, balancing information at 44%. In terms of Meta paid ads, SYRIZA focused 47% of its ads on information and 30% on mobilization, while ND’s ads were almost entirely informational (92%). MERA25 adjusted its approach, dedicating 50% of its ads to interaction, while EL. LYSI concentrated solely on mobilization ads.

Table 1 supports these observations through the binomial regression model, which indicates that the likelihood of a post being sponsored is significantly higher if it aligns with one of the

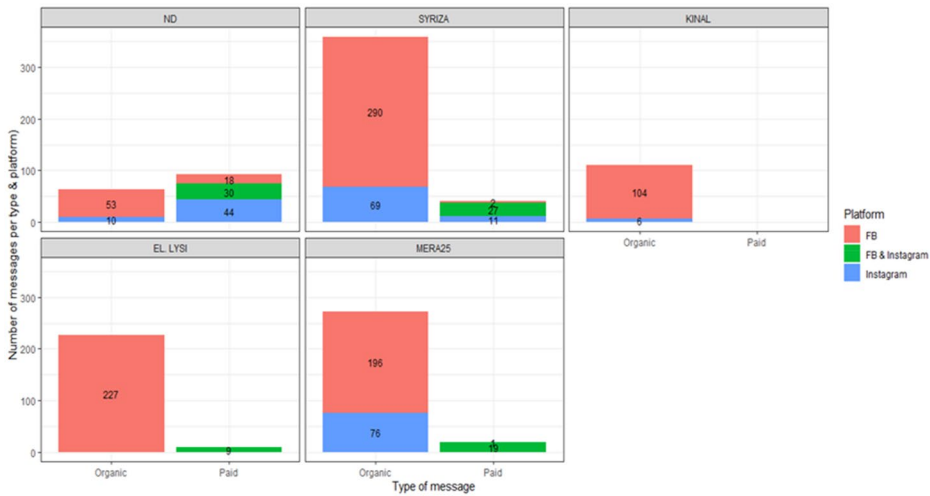


Figure 3. Types of posts by party (Organic and Meta paid ads).

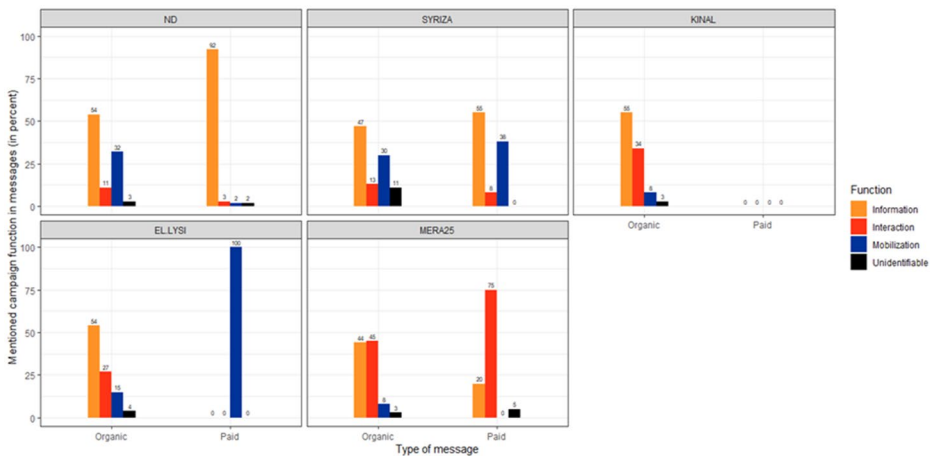


Figure 4. Campaign functions in organic posts and sponsored ads by party (percentages).

campaign functions (Information, Interaction, Mobilization) rather than posts with a more generic or undefined function.

Figure 5 highlights the differences in the parties’ issue focus. In organic posts, ND emphasized economic and financial issues (22%), while SYRIZA and KINAL concentrated on economic matters (13%) and transparency (10% for SYRIZA, 7% for KINAL). EL.LYSI and MERA25 also prioritized the economy, with EL.LYSI focusing on defense (9%) and MERA25 on transparency (7%).

In Meta paid ads, ND emphasized economic/financial issues and health (22% each), while SYRIZA focused on justice (17%) and economics (15%). EL.LYSI highlighted the economy and defense/foreign policy (22% each), and MERA25 allocated 5% to economic policy and transparency. Both ND and SYRIZA dedicated 13% of their ads to labor/social policy, while EL.LYSI allocated 11%.

The binomial regression model further supports these observations. Most coefficients (odds ratios) for the ‘Issues’ predictor are above 1, indicating that posts targeting specific issues are more likely to be sponsored, whereas posts with unclear issue orientations are more likely to be organic. Additionally, posts related to ‘Health’ and ‘Infrastructure & Transportation’ issues are strongly favored in Meta paid ads compared to organic posts, with odds ratios of 5.23 and 4.04, respectively.

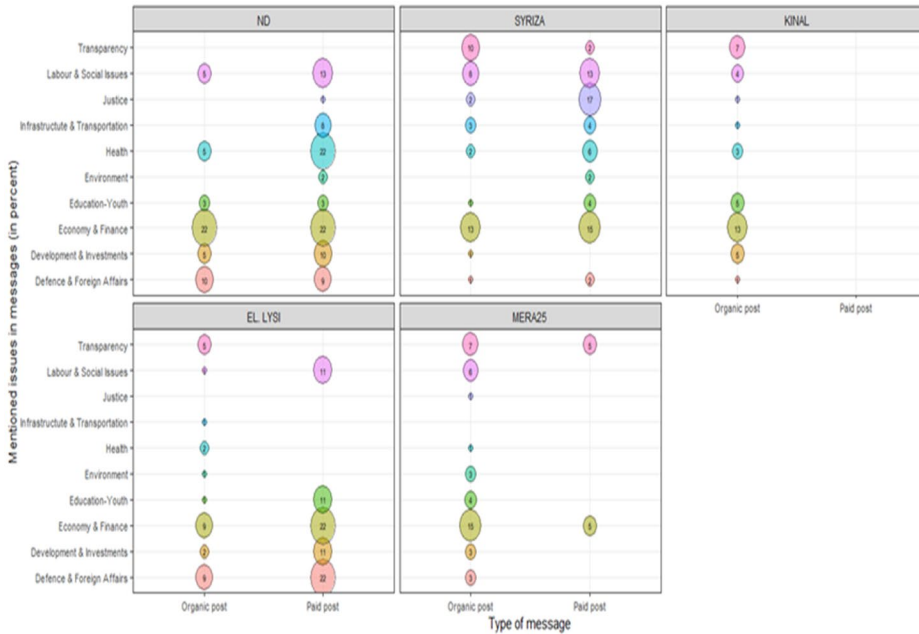


Figure 5. Mentioned issues in organic posts and sponsored ads by party (in percent).

Sentiment analysis

The sentiment analysis reveals a clear contrast in the tone of the parties’ organic posts and Meta paid ads. Most parties maintained positive sentiment in their organic posts: ND at +71%, KINAL at +49%, EL.LYSI at +58%, and MERA25 at +67%. However, in Meta paid ads, ND achieved a perfect positive sentiment of +100%, while SYRIZA displayed significant negative sentiment at -40% (Appendix Figure A2).

Policy attention across demographics

Meta’s Ad Library reveals significant gender and age targeting disparities in political ads. Most ads target men, with EL LYSI at 89% male and MERA25 at 90%. SYRIZA and ND engage more women, reaching 30% and 23% female audiences, respectively. In terms of age, SYRIZA targets 18–24 and 45–54, while ND focuses on 25–34 and 18–24 demographics. EL LYSI emphasizes the 45–54 age group, and MERA25 adopts a broader age strategy (Appendix Figures A3 and A4).

The heatmaps reveal significant gender and age disparities in ad exposure, indicating clear interaction effects between issue priorities and demographic targeting. Women are over-exposed to ads on ‘Labor & Social Issues’, while men experience over-exposure to ‘Economy & Finance’. Regarding age groups: users aged 18–24 are over-targeted in ‘Economy & Finance’ and ‘Labor & Social Issues; those aged 45–54 show over-exposure to ‘Health and Infrastructure & Transportation’ while users aged 25–34 are over-exposed to ‘Economy & Finance’ (Figure A5 in the Appendix: Demographic distribution of political ad targeting across policy categories).

Discussion and conclusions

This study set out to examine how Greek parties balanced organic and paid communication on Meta platforms during the 2023 elections, addressing the broader gap in political marketing research on smaller multi-party democracies. While most existing work has focused on the US or large Western democracies, limited attention has been given to how resource-constrained

parties adapt platform affordances. This discussion interprets the findings in light of the research questions and theoretical frameworks introduced in the literature review, highlighting how the Greek case enriches comparative debates on digital campaigning.

The analysis reveals that all parties predominantly used Facebook for their organic posts, with ND and SYRIZA making notable use of Instagram for their Meta paid ads. One significant moment during the campaign was ND's strategic shift to increased ad spending in the final two weeks, which followed a dip in early engagement, allowing the party to capitalize on a surge in voter attention before election day. ND stands out for its heavy reliance on paid ads, especially during the mobilization phase, reflecting a well-defined strategy to enhance voter engagement leading up to the election. Similarly, SYRIZA ramped up its paid ads during the second half of the campaign, coinciding with key policy announcements on economic reforms. In contrast, SYRIZA and KINAL adopted a more balanced approach, with less emphasis on paid media in the final stages of the campaign. Smaller parties, such as EL. LYSI and MERA25, displayed inconsistent or minimal use of Meta paid ads, suggesting different priorities or resource constraints.

In terms of campaign functions, ND and SYRIZA focused on information and mobilization, whereas KINAL and EL. LYSI balanced information with interaction. For issue priorities, ND emphasized economic and financial issues, while SYRIZA and KINAL also highlighted transparency. Meta paid ads followed similar trends, with ND and SYRIZA focusing on economic matters, and EL. LYSI on defense and mobilization. Sentiment analysis showed that most parties maintained a positive tone in both organic and paid posts, with SYRIZA being the exception, displaying significant negative sentiment in its paid content. One key insight from the campaign evolution is that both ND and SYRIZA adapted their strategies after seeing initial engagement challenges. This shift in approach helped them target specific demographic groups more effectively in the later stages of the campaign. To statistically validate these findings, a binomial regression model was employed, using the (non-)use of Meta paid ads as a dichotomous dependent variable. This model examined the impact of various factors, including timing, campaign functions, issue priorities, negative campaigning, format types, and demographic targeting, on the likelihood of a party using Meta paid ads.

The analysis demonstrated that specific messaging strategies and timing significantly influenced the likelihood of a party investing in Meta paid ads. Notably, the model revealed that parties prioritizing certain issues, such as economic and financial matters, were more likely to use paid media. This is consistent with the observed patterns where ND and SYRIZA, which focused heavily on economic issues, also had a higher proportion of paid ads. In contrast, parties like EL. LYSI and MERA25, which had varied issue priorities, exhibited more inconsistent use of paid ads. The statistical validation provided a robust foundation for understanding how issue priorities and other factors influenced the strategic use of Meta paid ads, highlighting the interplay between campaign focus and advertising strategy. Additionally, the findings suggest that younger individuals were more engaged in issues such as education and unidentifiable matters, while middle-aged groups received significant attention on the economy, labor, and development. Older adults, on the other hand, were more concerned with health, security, and clear communication from the government, which aligns with their life-stage priorities. It is noteworthy that justice, transparency, and environmental issues were under-targeted, suggesting these topics could have been given more emphasis in political messaging across all demographics.

These findings also demonstrate how specific platform affordances shaped party behavior during the campaign. In this study, audiovisual affordance is operationalized as the increased use of video-based and leader-centred content in paid ads; algorithmic affordance as the concentration of sponsored posts during mobilization phases when strategic boosting is most effective; and community-building affordance as the reliance on interaction-oriented organic posts that stimulate low-cost engagement. These operational definitions guide the interpretation of the observed behavioral patterns. ND's and SYRIZA's extensive use of video and audiovisual storytelling in their paid ads illustrates the audiovisual affordance of Meta platforms, which enables

more immersive and emotive communication formats (Bossetta 2018; Kolczyński and Mazur 2023). Their capacity to boost posts and intensify paid promotion during mobilization phases reflects the algorithmic affordance of Facebook and Instagram, allowing strategic amplification when voter attention peaks (Ali et al. 2019; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. 2018). In contrast, smaller parties' reliance on organic posts highlights their use of community-building affordances, leveraging low-cost relational interactions to compensate for limited advertising budgets (Bene 2017; Koc-Michalska et al. 2021). Together, these patterns show that the affordance structure of Meta platforms conditioned not only the form of content but also the strategic balance between organic and paid communication.

Our findings contribute to recent debates in political marketing that call for more fine-grained, platform-sensitive analyses of how parties operationalize targeting affordances (Newman 2025; Pich and Armannsdottir 2025). By demonstrating how issue ownership, party size and audiovisual affordances interact to shape Meta advertising strategies, the study extends emerging work on the professionalization and algorithmic optimization of digital political marketing in multi-party systems (Abid et al. 2025; Sosnovik et al. 2023).

The analysis of ad formats revealed that video content was more prevalent in paid ads compared to organic posts, indicating a strategic choice to leverage more engaging formats for sponsored content. The predominance of video-based advertising, particularly among ND and SYRIZA, reflects the audiovisual affordance of Meta platforms, which supports high-impact visual storytelling and emotional framing. Regarding demographic targeting, Meta's Ad Library data highlighted significant differences in audience focus across the parties. Most ads were aimed at men, with only the two largest parties (ND and SYRIZA) actively targeting women. ND and EL. YSI focused on Gen Z for their metaverse activities, SYRIZA targeted Baby Boomers, and MERA25 had a more diverse audience approach.

Overall, these findings suggest that larger parties are more inclined to invest in paid media, particularly during critical phases before election day, while smaller parties may rely more on organic posts or allocate fewer resources to online advertising. In addition, exploratory checks of interaction effects (i.e., issue \times gender, issue \times age group) confirmed that demographic targeting conditioned issue priorities in paid ads, reinforcing the main patterns reported above. By combining quantitative content analysis with binomial regression, this study provides new insights into how political parties in Greece used both organic and paid content on Meta platforms during the 2023 pre-election campaign. The findings confirm and expand upon existing theoretical frameworks of campaign strategy, including issue ownership (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Petrocik 1996), audience segmentation (Ali et al. 2019), and microtargeting *via* platform-specific tools (Kruschinski and Bene 2022; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. 2018). The underrepresentation of topics such as environment and transparency further reflects how algorithmic delivery systems and strategic calculations may skew public exposure to certain policy domains (Sosnovik et al. 2023).

This study advances the political marketing literature by applying Newman's (2016) framework of the "marketing revolution" to a smaller multi-party democracy. It shows how issue ownership and digital affordances interact within the strategic triad of product, promotion, and market intelligence. The findings also complement cross-cultural perspectives (Cwalina, Falkowski, and Newman 2011) and recent work on campaign professionalization in Central and Eastern Europe (Gregor and Eibl 2023), extending these debates beyond the dominant US-UK contexts. The Greek case illustrates how even resource-constrained parties adopt professionalized and data-driven strategies, thereby enriching comparative political marketing scholarship. Importantly, the findings speak directly to the research gaps identified earlier: by systematically analyzing both organic posts and Meta paid ads, this study provides rare comparative evidence of how parties integrate unpaid and sponsored digital communication; by using Meta's Ad Library, it contributes to the still limited body of work employing platform-transparency data in European multi-party contexts; by examining audiovisual formats, demographic targeting and issue promotion, it advances understanding of how parties operationalize platform affordances; and by focusing on Greece,

it extends political marketing insights beyond dominant two-party systems into a fragmented parliamentary environment. More broadly, the study strengthens emerging debates in political marketing by demonstrating how integrated organic-and-paid analyses, platform-transparency datasets such as Meta's Ad Library, and affordance-based theorization can be systematically incorporated into multi-party research designs. In doing so, it responds to recent calls for more platform-sensitive and data-driven approaches to digital campaigning (Newman 2025; Pich and Armannsdottir 2025) and provides empirical grounding for work on professionalization, algorithmic optimization and issue-based targeting in contemporary multi-party democracies (Abid et al. 2025; Sosnovik et al. 2023).

For practitioners, the analysis demonstrates how parties of different sizes exploit the same platform affordances in distinct ways: larger parties consolidate dominance through sustained investment in paid ads, while smaller parties rely more heavily on organic reach. These dynamics highlight the practical need for tailoring communication strategies to organizational resources, audience segmentation, and format selection (i.e., video versus static visuals). Campaign managers can use these findings to better calibrate their strategic triad in a rapidly evolving digital ecosystem.

Beyond strategy, the study highlights democratic risks linked to digital campaigning. The selective visibility produced by algorithmic delivery and opaque targeting mechanisms challenges core principles of fairness, transparency, and representativeness. As Newman (1999, 2016) cautions, political marketing, while enhancing responsiveness, may also distort democratic processes if left unregulated. The Greek case thus contributes to wider debates on accountability in platform governance and the democratic implications of digital campaigning (Bene, Petrekanics, and Bene 2023; Cornfield 2021). Looking ahead, the findings open up several theoretical threads that merit further exploration. First, further work should examine the comparative role of personal versus official party accounts, particularly in systems where party leaders dominate digital communication, in order to understand the strategic and affective implications of personalization. Second, future studies should incorporate systematic engagement metrics, such as likes, shares, comments, and click-through rates to evaluate more precisely which message types resonate most strongly with audiences. Third, a cross-national and cross-system perspective is needed to assess whether the patterns observed in Greece are transferable to other institutional and cultural contexts. Fourth, future research should analyze the effectiveness of different message formats, for example by comparing the engagement potential of visual and video-based content with that of textual posts. Finally, scholars should investigate the visibility of underrepresented policy domains, such as environment, justice, and transparency, to determine whether their absence from paid advertising reflects strategic party choices or biases embedded in algorithmic delivery systems (Table 2).

Theoretical implications

This study offers a unique contribution by addressing a gap in the existing literature, specifically by providing a detailed analysis of how Greek political parties construct their digital strategies using both organic posts and paid Meta ads. While previous research has examined various aspects of digital campaigning, few studies have utilized the Meta Ad Library to systematically document and analyze the content and timing strategies of political parties in such depth. This methodological approach enriches the analytical toolkit for digital campaign studies, particularly in under-researched political environments such as Southern Europe. By focusing on both organic and paid content, we aim to reveal how political parties adapt their messaging across platforms to engage with their target audience, contributing to the broader field of political marketing.

The findings emphasize the critical role of microtargeting in modern political campaigns, affirming conclusions from the literature that highlight the strategic importance of social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. By employing a diverse array of ad formats and timing strategies, larger governing parties can optimize their outreach to distinct voter segments, thereby

Table 2. Agenda for future theoretical discussion.

Research focus	Identified gap	Proposed research direction
Comparative Role of Personal vs. Party Accounts	Investigate how political messaging differs between party leaders' personal accounts and official party pages	To understand the strategic and affective implications of personalization in digital campaigning
Incorporating User Engagement Data	Examine how interaction metrics (i.e., likes, shares, comments, click-through rates) relate to message types	To evaluate the effectiveness and voter resonance of different messaging strategies
Cross-National and Cross-System Analysis	Apply similar analytical frameworks across diverse national and institutional contexts	To assess the transferability of platform-based campaigning patterns across varied democratic settings
Effectiveness of Message Formats	Compare visual (i.e., video) versus textual formats regarding user engagement and retention	To deepen understanding of how format choices impact political communication outcomes
Visibility of Policy Domains	Explore the limited presence of topics such as environment, justice, and transparency in paid advertisements	To identify potential systemic biases in issue prioritization driven by algorithmic or strategic logics

Source. Authors' own research.

enhancing engagement and potentially influencing electoral outcomes. The significant reliance on Meta paid ads by the dominant party during mobilization phases reflects a sophisticated understanding of microtargeting dynamics that aligns with the strategic use of algorithmic ad delivery systems discussed by Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. (2018) and Kruschinski and Bene (2022). At the same time, the major governing and opposition parties' strong emphasis on economic issues illustrates how issue ownership theory (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Petrocik 1996) continues to explain the prioritization of "owned" domains, as these choices directly shaped decisions to invest in paid advertising. Additionally, Sosnovik et al. (2023) underscore that variations in policy attention across demographic groups can reinforce stereotypes, depriving certain users of critical information that may influence their voting decisions. This highlights the ethical dimensions of microtargeting and the need for responsible data usage. Furthermore, the findings substantiate recent critiques of "platformized" campaigning (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley 2016; Kreiss and McGregor 2018), where platform logics shape political communication strategies. Major parties in resource-constrained, multi-party democracies appear to have internalized these logics by adapting message formats and ad timing to algorithmic dynamics.

The mixed approach of employing both paid and organic content, as described in the literature, is evidenced in the analysis of party strategies. The study confirms that while dominant parties tend to leverage Meta paid ads for targeted reach, other mid-sized parties often maintain a balance that facilitates community engagement and transparency. This finding connects with the equalization versus normalization debate: while larger parties consolidate their dominance through paid ads, smaller ones rely on organic reach or niche issue appeals, suggesting limited opportunities for equalization but also reaffirming that resource disparities largely persist online (Bene 2017). Such insights contribute to the broader discourse on the evolution of political communication strategies, suggesting that effective digital campaigns must integrate organic engagement with targeted advertising, as outlined by Kruschinski et al. (2025). This dual-strategy model also complements Bossetta's (2018) hybrid media campaign model, highlighting that digital campaigning today involves an adaptive blend of top-down control and interactive bottom-up dynamics.

The findings that the dominant governing party's emphasis on economic issues correlated with its heavy use of paid media reinforce the literature's assertion that issue prioritization plays a significant role in campaign strategies. By prioritizing specific domains such as economic matters, parties can align their messaging with voter interests, which in turn influences their decision to invest in paid media. This dynamic also resonates with Newman's (1999, 2016) strategic triad, where product (issue focus), promotion (format and tone), and market intelligence (timing and demographic targeting) interact to shape coherent campaign strategies. Moreover, the findings reveal differential targeting across demographic groups, particularly the focused efforts of major

parties to engage women, underscoring the implications of demographic targeting discussed in the literature. The analysis highlights how parties tailor their messages based on demographic data, which is critical for understanding voter behavior and preferences in the digital landscape. This aspect invites further exploration into the implications of algorithmic biases in ad reach, as suggested by Ali et al. (2019), and how these biases can influence the equitable distribution of political information. The study by Sosnovik et al. (2023) adds that significant variations in policy attention among demographic groups can shape the information landscape, reinforcing the necessity for political actors to be aware of these dynamics. Overall, these results expand the current theoretical understanding of selective exposure and political visibility in algorithmic environments, raising normative questions about representational equity and democratic fairness.

The sentiment analysis revealing a significant reliance on negative tone in sponsored content raises broader questions about the effectiveness of negative campaigning in the digital realm. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that while negative messaging can engage and mobilize core supporters, it may also alienate undecided individuals. The implications suggest that parties in multi-party systems must carefully balance their use of positive and negative messaging, particularly in a digital environment where user engagement strongly affects the algorithmic spread of content (Haselmayer 2019). Furthermore, the consistent preference for video content in paid ads over organic posts highlights the strategic adaptation of parties to leverage more engaging audiovisual formats. This supports the literature's assertion regarding the shift toward visual and multimedia content to maximize voter engagement (Ceccobelli, Quaranta, and Valeriani 2020). Understanding these preferences enriches theoretical debates about how different content types resonate with audiences and how political actors strategically utilize platform affordances to optimize their communication strategies.

Taken together, these findings contribute to the theorization of digital political behavior by demonstrating how parties in semi-peripheral media systems adapt global campaign logics to local constraints. In this way, the study offers a transferable model for comparative political communication research, positioning the Greek case as illustrative of broader transformations in digital campaigning. By bridging local empirical analysis with transnational theoretical frameworks, the study not only confirms the applicability of theories by Bossetta (2018), Ali et al. (2019), and Hase, Boczek, and Scharow (2023) but also extends them. At the same time, it reinforces Newman's insights into the marketing revolution and shows how even resource-constrained parties operationalize strategic triad dynamics in platform-mediated environments.

Practical implications

The findings from this study offer several strategic insights for both marketers and politicians seeking to optimize their digital campaigns. Given that all parties predominantly relied on Facebook for organic communication, with larger parties notably utilizing Instagram for paid advertising, it is essential to tailor strategies to the strengths of each platform. Facebook can be leveraged for broad organic reach and engagement, while Instagram is better suited for targeted and visually engaging sponsored content.

The study also highlights the importance of strategic investment in paid media. The significant reliance on paid ads by the dominant governing party during the mobilization phase demonstrates the need to allocate resources to critical campaign periods in order to maximize voter engagement. Therefore, campaign strategists may benefit from concentrating resources on paid advertising during pivotal campaign phases, as such timing appears critical for maximizing voter engagement. Another key takeaway concerns the balancing of campaign functions. While major parties focused primarily on information and mobilization, some mid-sized parties combined information with interactive content. Politicians should aim for a blend of informative and interactive content to engage a diverse voter base more effectively. This approach can enhance voter interaction and foster more dynamic relationships with the electorate. Issue prioritization also emerges as crucial. The emphasis on economic and financial issues, paired with higher

levels of paid advertising, suggests that aligning ad content with high-priority issues enhances campaign effectiveness. Strategists should focus their paid efforts on issue areas that resonate most strongly with their target audiences.

The analysis further revealed that video content was more prevalent in Meta paid ads compared to organic posts, reflecting a strategic choice to use more engaging formats for sponsored content. Campaign managers should capitalize on the potential of video, which is particularly effective in conveying complex messages and creating emotional connections with voters. Demographic targeting is another important aspect highlighted by the study. Campaign professionals should utilize demographic targeting features to refine audience segments and tailor their messages to the specific needs and preferences of different voter groups. Meta's Ad Library also offers valuable insights into advertising performance and strategy. Campaigners can use this tool to monitor competitors, identify effective ad formats, and refine targeting strategies. Finally, the study suggests that the impact of personal versus official campaign accounts warrants further exploration. The role of personal campaigns run by party leaders, compared to official party accounts, may provide important insights into voter engagement and perceptions.

Limitations and future research

This study is not without limitations, which also point to promising avenues for future research. First, the analysis is specific to the Greek political context and the 2023 national elections. The findings may therefore not be generalizable to other countries or electoral settings, as political strategies, campaign dynamics, and social media usage vary across cultural and institutional environments. Second, the study focused on the official social media pages of political parties. Notably, one of the parties affiliated with the Party of European Socialists did not publish organic content on its official pages during the study period, as its leader primarily campaigned through personal accounts. This reliance on personalization may have influenced engagement patterns but was outside the scope of this analysis. Third, the study did not include audience interaction metrics (i.e., likes, shares, comments, click-through rates). The absence of data limits our ability to assess how users engaged with specific posts or ads, or whether certain strategies translated into higher visibility and resonance. It would be valuable for future studies to incorporate systematic engagement metrics to triangulate findings and evaluate audience reception more comprehensively. A further limitation is the four-week window, which captures only the peak pre-election period; it does not cover earlier agenda-setting stages or longer-term digital strategy, and broader timeframes would be needed to assess whether these patterns persist.

Finally, while the study examined visible and accessible content from the Meta Ad Library and official social media pages, it did not account for internal strategic decisions that may affect ad placement and content. Differentiations in targeting resulting from the use of personal campaigns or external consultants could have shaped outcomes but were beyond the scope of this analysis. Future research should build on these limitations by extending the analysis across different political and institutional contexts, integrating systematic engagement data, and triangulating official party communication with personal and consultant-driven strategies. Pursuing these directions will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how platform logics, party resources, and strategic choices interact to shape digital campaigning dynamics.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix A

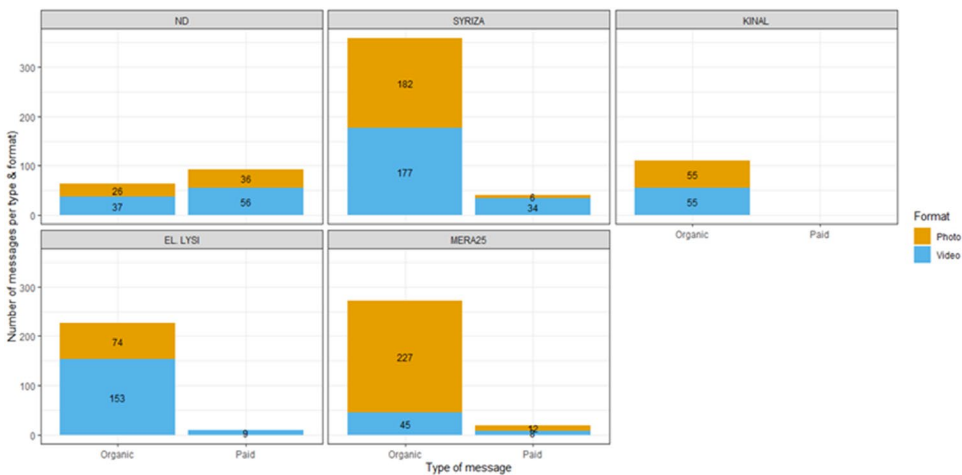


Figure A1. Comparison of organic and paid ads by format (Photo vs. Video) across political parties.

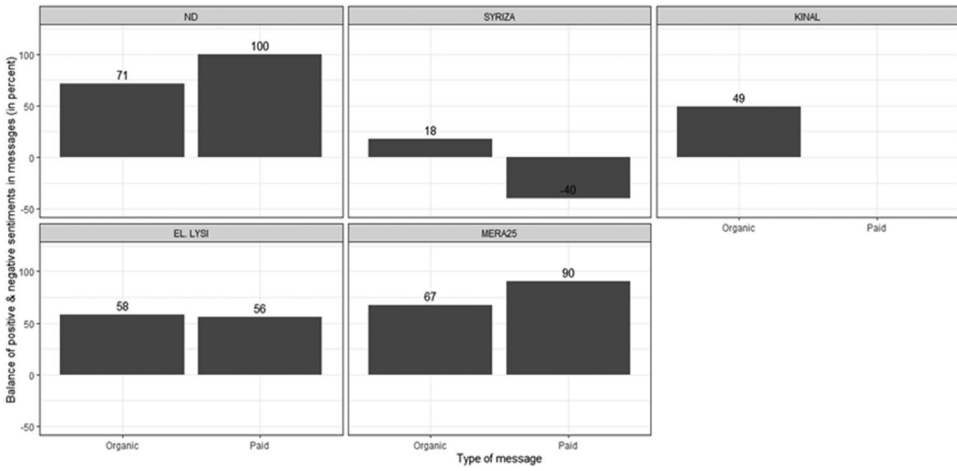


Figure A2. Sentiment balance in organic posts and sponsored ads by party.

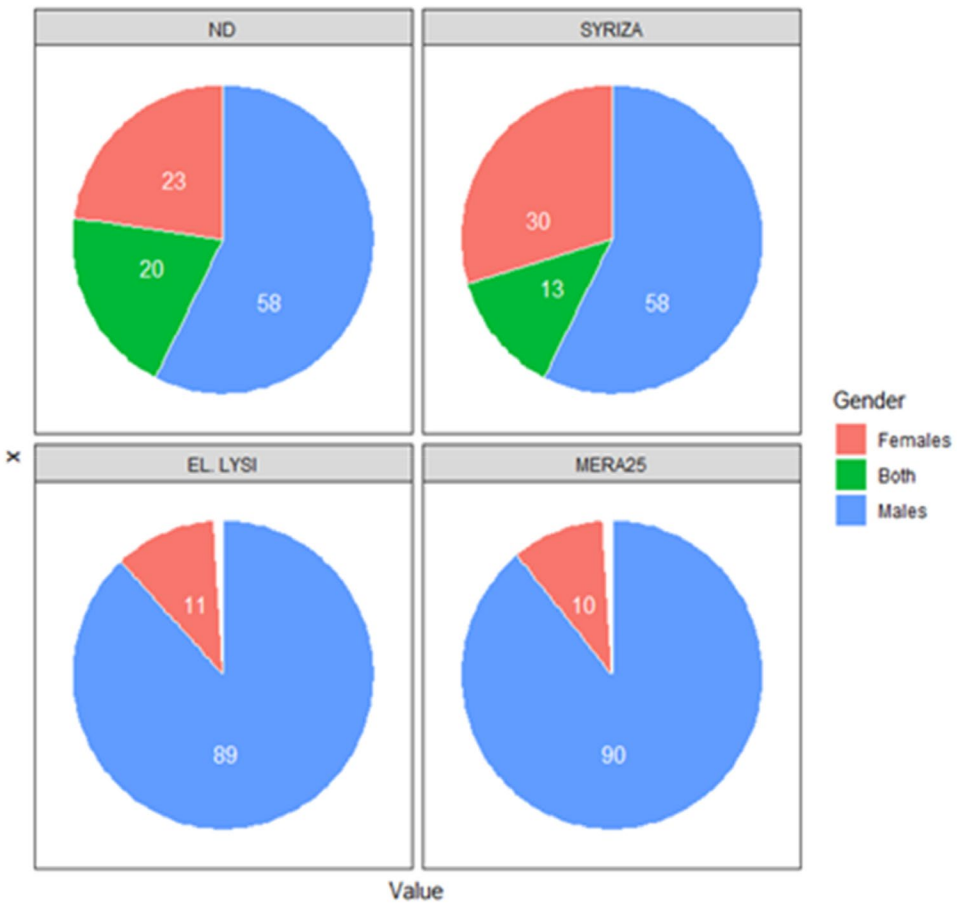


Figure A3. Audience targeting insights by gender.

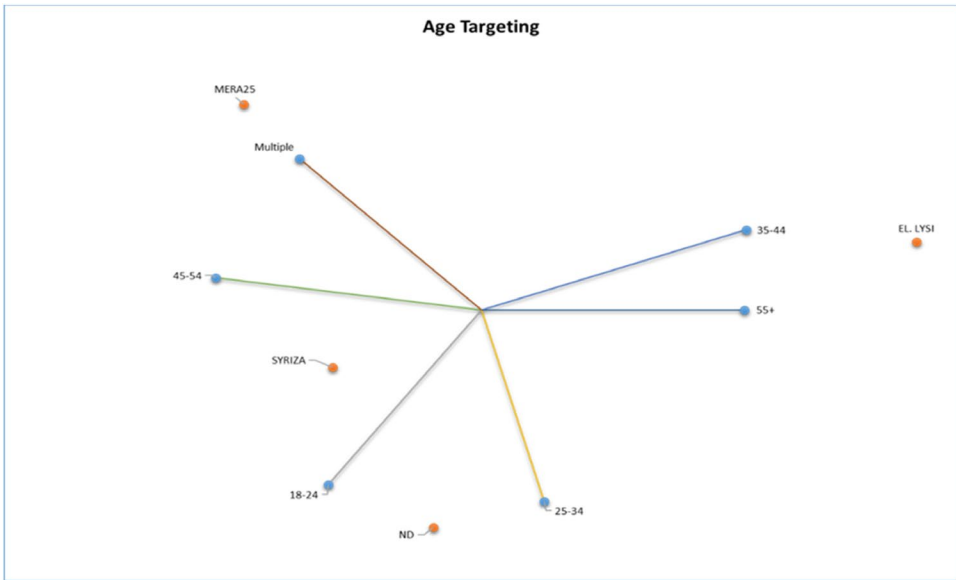


Figure A4. Audience targeting insights by age.

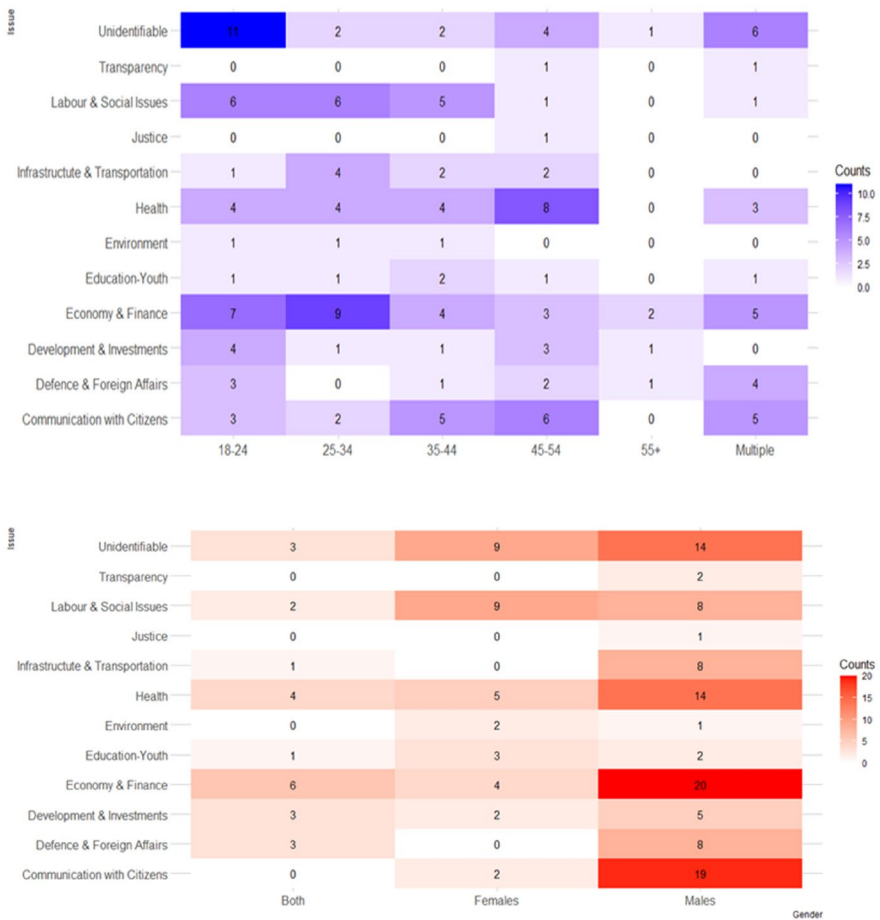


Figure A5. Demographic distribution of political ad targeting across policy categories.