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# The Strategic Use of Microtargeting: The Case of the German Federal Elections of 2025

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# The Strategic Use of Microtargeting: The Case of the German Federal Elections of 2025

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## **Abstract:**

Political microtargeting (PMT) is often associated with data-intensive voter profiling and the Cambridge Analytica scandal. This paper argues that such a framing is increasingly outdated, particularly in tightly regulated contexts. Drawing on expert interviews, social media content analysis and digital advertising spending data from the 2025 German federal election, we show that PMT has not disappeared under stricter European regulation but has fundamentally changed its form. Constrained by the GDPR and the Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising regulation, parties largely abandoned direct psychographic profiling. Yet targeted political communication remained highly effective through a different mechanism: algorithmic amplification. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and YouTube systematically amplified content from parties at the political margins, independent of advertising expenditure. The AfD and Die Linke achieved visibility far exceeding their paid spend, while better-funded mainstream parties underperformed in recommended feeds. Drawing on the Big Five personality model and the Persuasion Knowledge Model, this paper explains why platform-native, emotionally charged content proved so persuasive and why audiences were least likely to recognise it as targeted communication. The findings suggest that democratic oversight must shift focus from paid advertising to the design of algorithmic recommendation systems.

**Keywords:** political microtargeting, algorithmic amplification, online political advertising, GDPR, German federal election, persuasion knowledge, platform governance, social media campaigning

**JEL codes:** D72, D91, M37

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## 1. Introduction

Democratic societies are increasingly confronted with two parallel trends: growing political polarisation and the concentration of political communication on digital platforms. These developments have made political microtargeting (PMT) a central concern for scholars, regulators and campaign practitioners alike. PMT refers broadly to the practice of designing personalised political messages, assessing their likely impact on targeted sub-groups and distributing them directly to segmented individual users (Bodó et al., 2017, p. 3) (Barbu, 2014, p. 44). This paper focuses specifically on online political microtargeting (OPM), the digital form of this practice, which uses individually based data, search histories, social media behaviour and inferred preferences, to identify and reach specific users via internet platforms. Unlike classical political targeting, which addresses broad demographic segments through generalised messages, OPM allows campaigns to select audiences based on personal characteristics rather than adapting to predefined groups (López Ortega, 2022, p. 338–339). While much of the existing literature on OPM is shaped by high-profile cases from the U.S., most notably the Cambridge Analytica (CA) scandal, less is known about how microtargeting operates in highly regulated European democracies, where direct data exploitation is legally restricted and politically sensitive.

This paper examines the strategic use of microtargeting in political advertising in the context of the 2025 German federal election, asking what role algorithmic social media platforms play in shaping political visibility and voter exposure. The central argument is that PMT should no longer be understood solely as direct, data-intensive voter profiling. Stricter regulation and heightened public scrutiny have reduced the reach of classical microtargeting strategies, but targeted political communication has not disappeared. Instead, it has adapted. Parties increasingly rely on indirect, platform-mediated mechanisms in which algorithmic recommendation systems perform much of the audience selection function, largely independent of parties advertising expenditure.

Germany represents a particularly telling case. PMT operates here under strict legal and structural conditions, shaped by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising regulation (TTPA),

alongside strong public sensitivity toward data protection. This makes it possible to analyse whether microtargeting has declined, transformed, or simply shifted form. Rather than disappearing, the evidence from the 2025 election suggests the latter: platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and YouTube have become political intermediaries in their own right, structuring visibility through engagement-driven algorithms that reward emotionally charged, polarising and platform-native content.

The analysis draws on three semi-structured expert interviews with practitioners and academics in political communication and digital campaigning, supplemented by social media content analysis, media reporting and digital advertising spending data for the period November 2024 to February 2025, sourced from WhoTargetsMe.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 The Development of Political Microtargeting

Targeted political communication has a longer history than its association with social media might suggest. Its modern roots lie in the direct-mail campaigns of the 1970s, when improved opinion polling and demographic data allowed campaigns to tailor messages to specific voter groups for the first time (Bakir and McStay, 2022, p. 141). A decisive shift came with Gerber and Green's (2000) field experiments, which demonstrated that direct, personalised voter contact measurably increased turnout, while mass media exposure had comparatively weak effects (Gerber & Green, 2000, p.653). Their findings showed that door-to-door canvassing could raise turnout by around ten percentage points (Gerber & Green, 2000, p.660). Building on these findings, Green and Gerber's 2004 handbook *Get Out the Vote!* reexamined campaign strategy around target efficiency, claiming that microtargeting marks a more efficient form of voter mobilization (Ross & Spencer, 2022, p.1031). The political scientists claim that instead of spending on large-scale television or newspaper advertising, campaigns could achieve higher returns by targeting those most likely to be mobilized, based on behavioral data such as prior turnout history. Gerber and Green proposed that voter contact should be guided by empirical models rather than intuition, using available data to calculate an individual's likelihood of voting and responsiveness to personal outreach. This reasoning led to the now-standard practice of assigning each voter a "propensity score" that helps determine whether the campaign should invest resources in contacting them (Ross & Spencer, 2022, p.1031). Their findings directly encouraged campaigns to move away from neighborhood-level canvassing and toward individual-level targeting, what would later evolve into full-scale microtargeting. As Ross and Spencer (2022, p. 1031) observe, these academic experiments gave data-driven mobilization its scientific legitimacy: "campaigns began to engage in more intensive data collection efforts to assess voter propensities", treating voting history as the central predictor of future participation. In this way, Gerber and Green did not simply improve get-out-the-vote tactics but they shifted the theory of campaigning from merely persuasion to prediction.

The digital turn came with the 2008 U.S. presidential election, widely seen as the first large-scale application of OPM. The Obama campaign built a unified data infrastructure integrating voter files, donation histories and online interactions, enabling thousands of targeted email variations and personalised digital outreach (Graff, 2009, p. 15–16). By 2012, campaigns were using behavioural and lifestyle data to segment audiences and deliver differentiated advertising to distinct voter profiles (Peters, 2012, HTML) (Vega, 2012, HTML). These practices reached a new level of ambition with Cambridge Analytica (CA), which used machine-learning models to assign Big Five personality scores to users and deliver tailored political messages based on inferred psychological profiles (Shah et al., 2019, p. 2-5). CA's activities, spanning the 2016 U.S. presidential election and Brexit, made visible the risks of data-intensive psychographic targeting at scale and triggered a significant regulatory response, particularly in Europe. As whistleblower Christopher Wylie described, CA represented "an example of what modern-day colonialism looks like" (Crabtree, 2018, HTML), illustrating how data-rich firms could exploit weaker regulatory environments to influence political outcomes globally.

## **2.2 Regulatory Framework: The EU–U.S. Contrast**

The CA scandal accelerated a divergence between the U.S. and EU approaches to regulating OPM. In the U.S., the absence of comprehensive federal data protection legislation has allowed a large data broker industry to develop, making voter data comparatively accessible to political actors. Attempts to restrict this, such as the proposed Banning Microtargeted Political Ads Act of 2021, have so far failed (Kröger et al., 2024, p. 36).

The EU has taken a distinctly different path. Under the GDPR, data protection is treated as a fundamental right, and political opinions are classified as a special category of personal data under Article 9, making CA-style mass profiling legally risky and practically constrained (Dobber et al., 2019, p. 6)(Towfigh and Luckey, 2022, p. 71). Parties must have a lawful basis for processing voter data, and breaches carry penalties of up to €20 million or 4 percent of global turnover (Dobber et al., 2019, p.6). The 2024 TTPA extended this framework, requiring mandatory labelling of political advertisements, disclosure of funding sources and a ban on using sensitive personal data for targeting. In response, Meta announced in July 2025 that it would no longer

allow political advertising on its EU platforms from October 2025, citing the "unworkable requirements and legal uncertainties" introduced by the TTPA (Meta, 2025, HTML).

Importantly, significant blind spots remain. The TTPA governs paid advertising, but organic political content, influencer activity and AI-driven internal campaign tools fall largely outside its scope (Gibson et al., 2024) (van Drunen et al., 2024). Together, the GDPR and TTPA make untransparent OPM more costly and legally risky than in the U.S., without banning it outright. It is within this regulatory environment that the 2025 German federal election took place.

## **2.3 Psychological Foundations of Political Microtargeting**

### **2.3.1 The Big Five Personality Model**

The Big Five personality model: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Emotional Stability – provides one of the most established frameworks for understanding how stable individual differences shape political behaviour and receptiveness to campaign messages (Goldberg, 1990). Extraversion reflects an energetic and outgoing orientation toward the social world. Agreeableness describes a prosocial and cooperative orientation toward others. Conscientiousness involves goal-directed, organised and responsible behaviour. Emotional Stability reflects calmness and resilience, whereas Openness to Experience represents curiosity, creativity and receptiveness to new ideas (Gerber et al., 2010, p. 113) (Gerber et al., 2011, p. 693) (see fig 1).

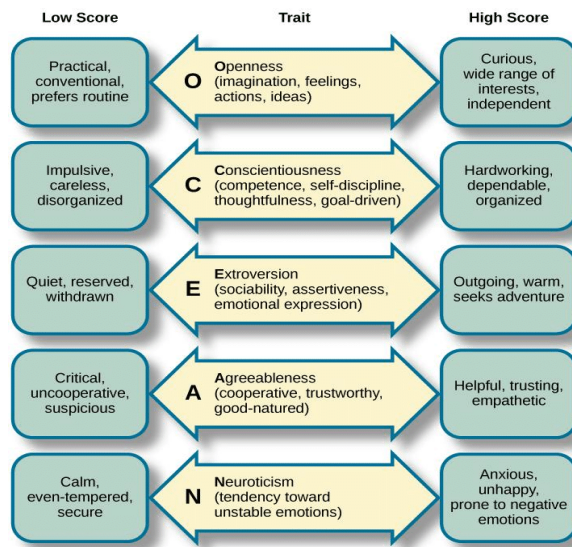


Figure 1 OCEAN Model Personality Traits (Gungea, Jaunky and Ramesh, 2017)

These traits are considered relatively stable across time and influence how individuals perceive, process and respond to different types of information (Gerber et al., 2011, p. 692). Of the five traits, Openness and Conscientiousness are most reliably linked to political ideology: individuals high in Openness tend toward liberal and left-leaning orientations, while those high in Conscientiousness favour conservative values such as order, stability and rule enforcement (Gerber et al., 2010, p. 115–116) (Krieger et al., 2019, p. 3). Crucially, personality also shapes how voters respond to specific message types. Gerber et al. (2013) found that social pressure appeals produced turnout effects up to 18–21 percentage points higher among individuals with high Openness and Emotional Stability (p. 689), while Extraversion is positively associated with online information sharing, meaning personality structures not only who receives political messages but who amplifies them through their networks (Lin, Wang and Sun, 2024, p. 15–16) (see fig 2). For strategic PMT, this means that message framing can resonate very differently across personality segments without requiring any explicit psychometric profiling of individual voters.

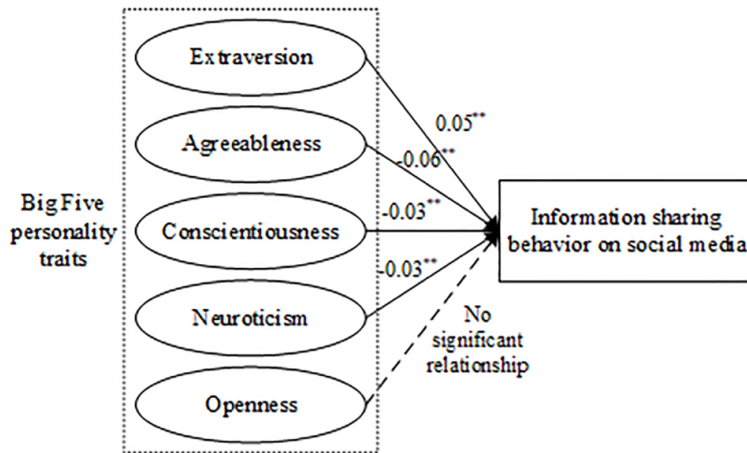


Figure 2 Relationship between OCEAN traits and information-sharing behaviour on social media (Lin, Wang & Sun, 2024, p.16)

### 2.3.2 Persuasion Knowledge Model

Among the various social-psychological approaches to persuasive communication, the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) has emerged as one of the most influential frameworks for explaining how individuals perceive and evaluate persuasive attempts. Developed by Friestad and Wright (1994), the model assumes that recipients rely on cognitive knowledge structures about persuasion agents, tactics and motives to interpret and assess the intent behind a message (1994, p. 1). Importantly, the scholars argue that PKM is not static, but develops gradually over time through experience, cultural learning and repeated exposure to influence tactics (Friestad and Wright, 1994, p. 1) (Noetzel et al., 2025, p. 518). When people recognise that a communication attempt aims to influence their attitudes or behaviour, they can strategically decide whether to accept, resist or reinterpret the message (Friestad and Wright, 1994, p. 3) (Noetzel et al., 2025, p. 521). In the context of PMT, this framework is particularly relevant because it helps explain how voters react to highly personalised and data-driven campaign messages.

Furthermore, PKM distinguishes between different dimensions of persuasion knowledge, including 1) perceived persuasive or manipulative intent and 2) knowledge of targeting strategies (Binder et al., 2022, p. 206) (Hirsch, Binder and Matthes, 2023, p. 554-556). The activation of these dimensions is not automatic but depends on

contextual and motivational factors. Recent research shows that political fit, the alignment between an individual's political preferences and the party sending the advertisement, can significantly shape these processes. When targeted political ads originate from parties' people already support, they tend to be perceived as less manipulative and are less likely to trigger defensive reactions, leading to more favorable evaluations of the party (Binder et al., 2022, p. 206) (Hirsch, Binder and Matthes, 2023). Furthermore, Hirsch et al., (2023) finds that both targeting disclosures and high political fit increased individuals targeting knowledge, meaning that users recognized that their data had been used to personalise the ad. Conversely, when political fit is low, individuals are more inclined to view targeted messages as manipulative, which can increase resistance and privacy-protective behaviour. This demonstrates how psychological mechanisms, rather than just message content, can determine the impact of targeted political communication. Interestingly, in a later study Noetzel, Binder and Matthes (2025) found that "even when individuals evaluated targeting strategies as manipulative, this did not result in negative party evaluations as long as the targeted ads stemmed from a favored party" (p.531), further highlighting that loyal partisans forgive manipulative targeting when it fits their political ideology or narrative.

In their research, Noetzel et al. (2025) has extended the application of the PKM by examining not only how people evaluate persuasive intent but also how these processes unfold at the cognitive level during exposure to targeted political advertising. Noetzel et al. (2025) build on the PKM to analyse how targeting cues are processed during exposure to political microtargeted advertising. This knowledge (referring to knowledge they accumulate over time) can be activated during exposure and shapes how individuals respond to persuasive attempts. Their eye-tracking study explores how *political fit* (alignment with a person's political preference) and *issue fit* (topic relevance) shape both visual attention and the activation of persuasion knowledge. The findings show that political fit has a particularly strong effect on attention: "political fit positively related to first pass dwell time, total dwell time and coefficient K" (Noetzel et al., 2025, p. 20), indicating that people spend more time looking at messages from parties they support. Issue fit also influences attention, particularly in the early stages, suggesting that topic relevance initially captures interest, whereas political alignment sustains it (Noetzel et al., 2025, p. 20-21).

Importantly, the study highlights that individuals bring existing knowledge structures and expectations to communication situations involving targeted political advertising. Even in the absence of explicit cues, participants showed evidence of activating cognitive schemas related to both microtargeting and advertising, which points to an underlying awareness of persuasive strategies. Furthermore, when both political fit and issue fit were high, participants showed greater advertising awareness, indicating that they more readily recognised the posts as persuasive messages (Noetzel et al., 2025, p. 23). This interaction effect demonstrates that people's awareness of persuasive intent increases when certain features of the message draw their attention to it (Noetzel et al., 2025). These findings suggest that voters are not merely passive recipients of digital campaign messages but actively engage in processing and evaluating persuasive content. From a broader democratic perspective, this implies a certain degree of cognitive resilience among citizens during the initial stages of exposure, challenging the assumption that microtargeting automatically renders audiences more vulnerable.

### 3. Case Study: The German Federal Election 2025

#### 3.1 Case selection and Analytical Context

As my expert interview partner Dr. Almog Simchon (Simchon, 2025, Interview) notes, debates about PMT remain closely tied to this case, because CA explicitly claimed to conduct:

*“psychological microtargeting”*

by

*“building psychological profiles of individuals and using these profiles to tailor political messages.”*

Simchon (Simchon, 2025, Interview) emphasises that while the company’s data acquisition practices were clearly unethical, the scandal also raised a separate and at the time, still unresolved empirical question:

*“whether psychological microtargeting is actually effective.”*

In his postdoctoral research, Simchon (Simchon, 2025, Interview) examined precisely this effectiveness issue, reporting that when

*“a political message aligns with an individual’s personality,”*

the persuasive effect is

*“relatively small, but it is statistically significant”*

and strategically relevant

*“when such effects occur at scale.”*

However, the present case study deliberately examines a structurally different environment. Since the CA revelations, legal and regulatory frameworks, especially within the EU, have tightened, and platform-level rules and increased public scrutiny have changed the landscape under which political marketing functions. In Germany in

particular, political actors face a comparatively restrictive environment and high sensitivity toward privacy and data protection.

Consistent with this, expert interviewee Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview) stresses that in Germany,

*“microtargeting as such is generally frowned upon,”*

and that ahead of the last federal election,

*“almost all parties stated...that they did not want to actively use it,”*

describing

*“something like an informal consensus among the parties.”*

As a result, the forms of microtargeting discussed in earlier high-profile cases are not directly transferable to contemporary German election campaigning in a simple “CA-style” sense.

Against this background, this chapter examines the 2025 German Federal Election as a post-CA case of PMT under conditions of regulation, public awareness and reputational risk. The research objective is to analyse how political marketing strategies adapt in a highly regulated democratic context, where direct data exploitation is constrained, but audience segmentation and targeted communication remain strategically relevant. In particular, the case study explores whether contemporary practices reflect a shift away from classical, data-intensive microtargeting toward more indirect forms of targeting that rely on platform-mediated, algorithmically curated environments. Here Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview)’s argument is central:

*“if we understand microtargeting more broadly and say that it also includes the use of algorithmic recommendation mechanisms, then the picture changes... I allow the platforms to do the microtargeting, without me having to do anything.”*

Rather than accessing personal data directly, political communication increasingly operates within social media ecosystems where user behaviour, engagement patterns and inferred interests shape content exposure. This raises the question of how

microtargeting functions today, not primarily as direct psychometric profiling, but as an interaction between campaign strategy, platform recommendation systems and voter perception within a post-scandal, post-regulatory setting.

## 3.2 Empirical Overview of the 2025 Election context

### 3.2.1 Election results

On the 23. February 2025 the 2025 German federal election produced an outcome that was both unexpected and politically significant. Although the *Union (CDU/CSU)* under Friedrich Merz secured victory with a comparatively weak vote share, the true winners of the election were the far-right *AfD* with Alice Weidel as the party's leading candidate and the far-left *Die Linke* led by its dual top-candidate team consisting of Heidi Reichinnek and Jan van Aken. The *AfD* nearly doubled its result from 2021 and reached 20.7 percent, the highest level it has ever achieved at the federal level, gaining 10.4 percentage points compared to the previous election. *Die Linke* also experienced a remarkable recovery: only months earlier, many observers doubted whether the party would even re-enter the Bundestag, yet it ultimately achieved 8.8 percent, making it one of the surprise successes of the election, partly attributed to its effective use of social media campaigning. In contrast, the former "*Ampel*" coalition parties suffered substantial losses, with the *SPD* led by Olaf Scholz experiencing the largest decline. The liberals, *FDP*, led by Christian Lindner, also saw its support collapse, losing around seven percentage points and ultimately failing to surpass the five-percent threshold, marking a devastating electoral setback for the Liberals. *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (The Greens)* received 11.7 percent of the vote, down from 14.7 percent in 2021. However, among the three former "*Ampel*" coalition parties, their losses were the smallest. The party was led into the election by chancellor candidate Robert Habeck. Lastly, despite achieving comparatively strong results in Eastern Germany, the newly founded *BSW* led by former *Die Linke* leading figure Sahra Wagenknecht narrowly failed to cross the five-percent threshold required for entry into parliament (ARD, 2025, HTML). (See fig. 3)

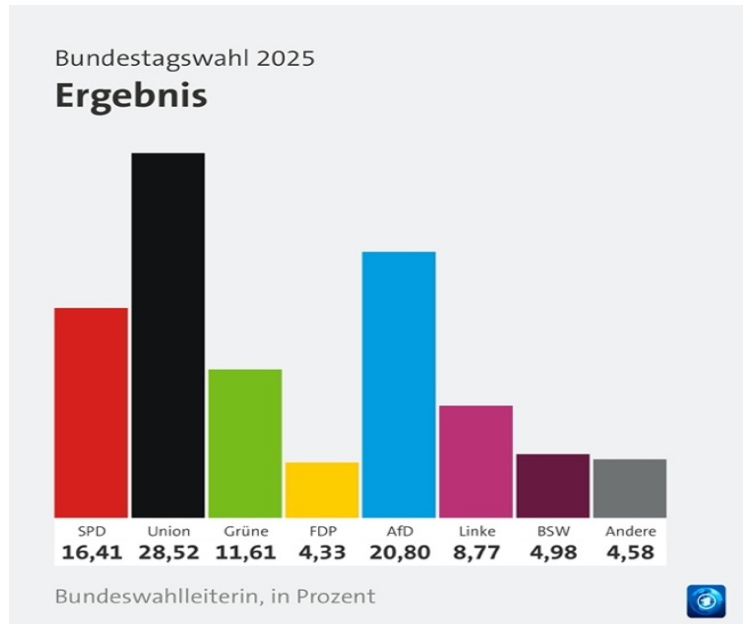


Figure 3 2025 German federal election results (tagesschau,2025, HTML)

### 3.2.2 Issue salience and voter priorities

In the 2025 German Federal Election, survey data indicate that internal security, social security and migration constituted the most important political issues among voters. Internal security and social security ranked jointly highest, each accounting for 18 points, followed by migration with 15 points. By contrast, rising prices were perceived as the least important issue, receiving only 5 points. Among *AfD* voters, the most important issue was immigration (38 points), followed by internal security (33 points), with economic growth and peace/security policy tied in third place (8 points each) (see fig. 4). Among *Die Linke* voters, social security clearly dominated (51 points), followed by environment and climate (18 points), while internal security ranked third (9 points) (Tagesschau, 2025, HTML) (see fig. 5). These issue priorities were also reflected in parties digital campaign strategies. On social media platforms, the *AfD* placed a strong emphasis on migration and national identity, whereas *Die Linke* focused predominantly on social security in its online communication.

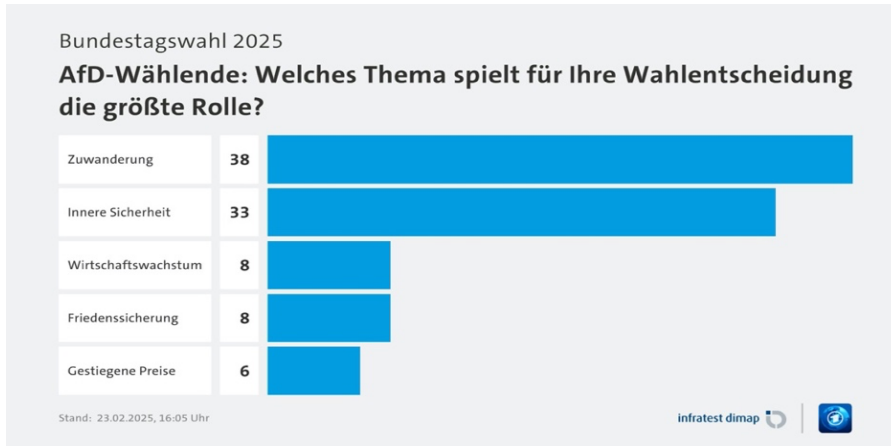


Figure 4 Key issues among AfD voters for their voting decision (tagesschau, 2025, HTML)

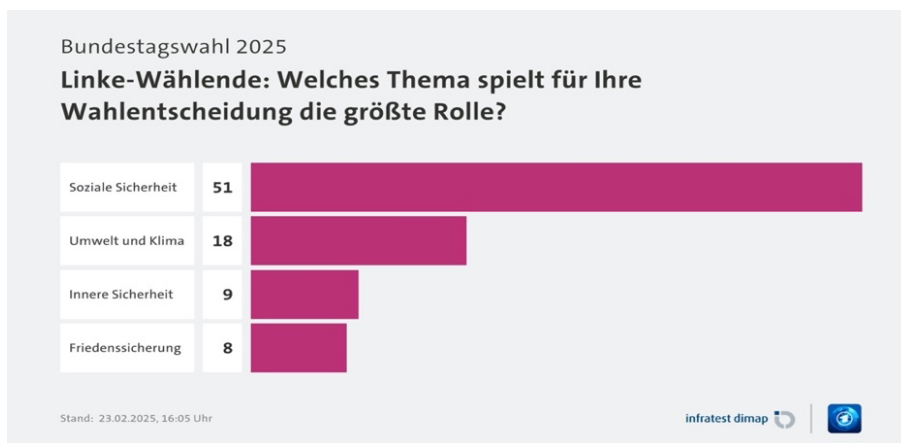


Figure 5 Key issues among Die Linke voters for their voting decision (tagesschau, 2025, HTML)

Beyond issue salience and electoral outcomes, the 2025 election was also characterised by the strategic importance of digital campaigning. Social media platforms played a central role in shaping campaign communication, particularly for parties seeking to mobilise specific voter segments under conditions of limited financial and organisational resources. This development reflects a broader transformation of political communication formats. According to a study, digital news consumption during the 2025 German Federal Election was dominated by news websites and apps (63 percent) and social media platforms (51 percent). Within the category of social networks, Facebook (56 percent) emerged as the most frequently used platform, followed by X/Twitter (35 percent) and WhatsApp (32 percent) (Bitkom, 2025, p. 6).

However, platform relevance was not uniform across voter groups. As Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview) emphasises:

*“those platforms which are used on a daily basis are decisive,”*

and platform importance varies by

*“age group and...educational background.”*

While Facebook remained central for some segments, Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview) notes that for others

*“TikTok has effectively become the standard platform,”*

illustrating the growing relevance of algorithm-driven short-form content, particularly among younger voters.

Complementary findings from a study by *Die Zeit* indicate that recommendation algorithms on platforms such as TikTok, X, Instagram and YouTube systematically amplified content from parties at the political margins, particularly among younger users. While the *SPD* accounted for 24.1 percent of all videos uploaded by official party accounts between 22 January and 23 February 2025, its content represented only 14.1 percent of the videos recommended in the feeds of users aged 21 to 25, corresponding to a visibility loss of approximately ten percentage points. A similar pattern was observed for the *CDU/CSU*, which posted 17.1 percent of the videos but appeared in only 4.9 percent of recommended feed content. Interestingly, parties at the political margins benefited disproportionately from algorithmic recommendation mechanisms. The *AfD*, which accounted for 21.5 percent of uploaded videos, appeared in 37.4 percent of recommended feed content, nearly doubling its visibility. *Die Linke* experienced an even stronger amplification effect: despite contributing only 9.7 percent of uploaded videos, it accounted for 27.6 percent of the videos shown in the feeds of young users (Vojta, et al., 2025, HTML). These findings suggest that platform algorithms played a decisive role in shaping political visibility during the

campaign, largely independent of parties actual posting activity or advertising expenditure.

Empirical evidence from TikTok further supports this interpretation. *AfD*-affiliated accounts achieved an average engagement rate of around 10 percent, which is exceptionally high by professional standards. In addition, 59 *AfD*-related accounts surpassed 100,000 cumulative likes, compared to 50 accounts across all other parties combined and posted an average of 142 videos per week during the campaign period, compared to 92 weekly videos by other parties. All differences were statistically significant, indicating a structurally higher visibility of *AfD* content within the platform's recommendation system Meyer *et al.*, 2024, p.14-15).

When it comes to *Die Linke* Meyer *et al.*, (2024, p.15) find that *Die Linke* achieves comparatively high engagement and likes-per-view ratios on TikTok despite a lower volume of posted videos, suggesting that its digital campaign relied on selective, highly resonant content rather than continuous high-output strategies. These results highlight a systematic algorithmic advantage for parties at the political margins during the 2025 election campaign. Rather than merely reflecting posting frequency, recommendation algorithms appeared to prioritise short, emotionally charged political content formats, precisely the type of content that parties at the "extreme" ends tend to produce particularly effectively. Furthermore, on platforms such as TikTok, considered "one of the most influential social media platforms, with a monthly active user base exceeding 1 billion globally" (Meyer *et al.*, 2024, p. 2), *AfD*-related content surfaced rapidly in newly created user profiles, whereas content from mainstream parties appeared significantly later (Vojta, et al., 2025, HTML). On average, it took eleven to twelve minutes after creating a TikTok profile for a video with the hashtag "#AfD" to be shown, whereas videos tagged with "#SPD" were only displayed after around seventy minutes (Vojta, et al., 2025, HTML).

This pattern corresponds closely with Steiner's (Steiner, 2025, Interview) observation that even when parties do not "actively" engage in OPM, platforms can still steer political exposure through recommendation systems that repeatedly show users

*"similar content...that might correspond to their interests."*

In this sense, the 2025 election illustrates how political visibility is increasingly shaped less by deliberate, data-intensive targeting strategies and more by the interaction between platform algorithms, content design and engagement dynamics.

### 3.4 Paid Digital Advertising and Spending Patterns

Figure 6 illustrates paid digital advertising expenditure by political parties on Google and Meta during the final phase of the 2025 German Federal Election campaign (01 November 2024–24 February 2025). The data show clear differences in spending intensity between established parties and parties at the political margins. It is important to note that the figure reflects party-level spending only.

Most notably, *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* were by far the largest digital advertiser during this period, with total spending of approximately €4.26 million. They were followed by the *FDP* (€2.29 million), *SPD* (€1.71 million), and *CDU* (€1.55 million), all of which relied heavily on paid digital advertising to maximise reach across major platforms (whotargets.me, 2025, HTML).

By contrast, *Die Linke* and the *AfD* invested considerably less in paid digital advertising. *Die Linke* spent approximately €476,699, while the *AfD* invested around €942,607 during the same period. Despite these comparatively low budgets, both parties achieved high visibility and electoral success, particularly on social media platforms. The *CSU* recorded the lowest spending among the major parties, with total digital advertising expenditure of approximately €217,382 (whotargets.me, 2025, HTML).

Overall, the spending patterns indicate two distinct campaign logics. Parties with high advertising expenditure, such as the *Greens*, *FDP*, *SPD* and *CDU*, primarily relied on paid reach-driven digital campaigning. In contrast, parties such as *Die Linke* and the *AfD* combined relatively low paid advertising (whotargets.me, 2025, HTML) with high online visibility, suggesting a stronger reliance on algorithmic amplification, organic reach and supporter-driven mobilisation.

These findings support the argument that microtargeting in the German context increasingly operates through platform logics and content design rather than

advertising budgets alone. Visibility and engagement in the 2025 election were shaped less by spending power and more by the ability to produce platform-native, emotionally engaging content that aligns with algorithmic recommendation systems.

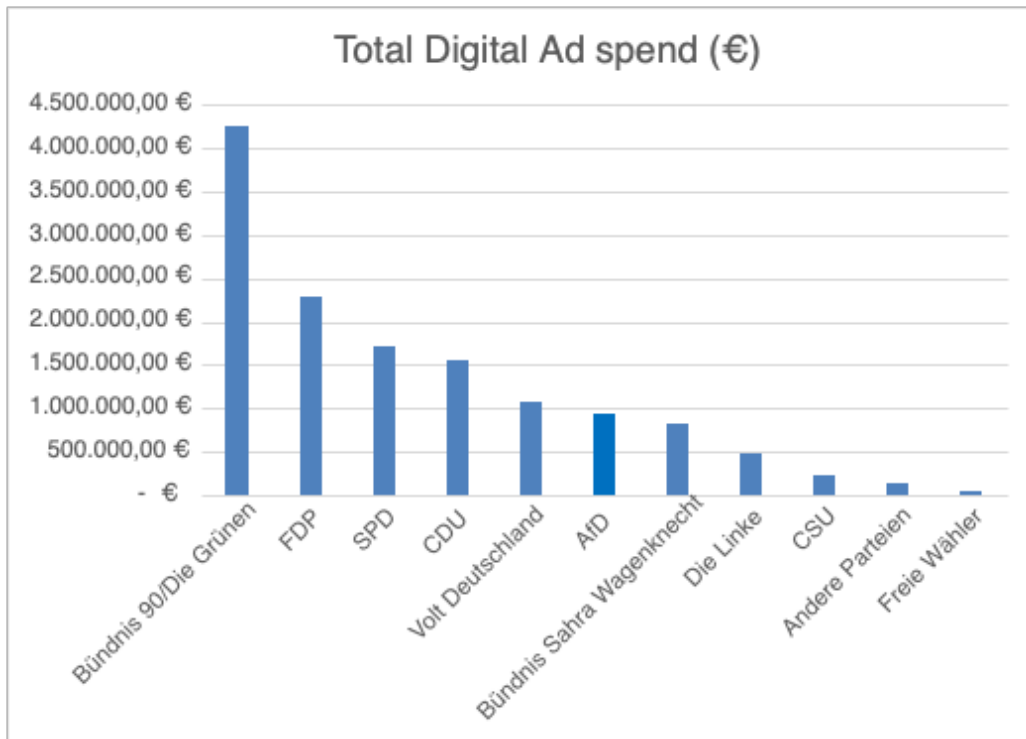


Figure 6 Author's own illustration (Sourced from whotargets.me, 2025, HTML)

*This raises a key question for the case study: how does microtargeting operate when it is no longer driven by direct data exploitation, but by algorithmic environments and strategic message design?*

### 3.5 Personality Traits, Message Alignment and Platform Amplification

Building on the Big Five framework, this case study examines how personality-related predispositions shaped political communication in the 2025 German federal election. Rather than assuming direct psychometric targeting, the analysis focuses on how party messaging and platform dynamics aligned with existing personality traits.

This approach is supported by expert interviews. Simchon (Simchon, 2025, Interview) notes that persuasive effects emerge when

*“a political message aligns with an individual’s personality,”*

an effect that is

*“relatively small, but statistically significant,”*

and becomes strategically relevant

*“when such effects occur at scale.”*

This mechanism does not require individual-level targeting but highlights how message framing resonates differently across audiences.

Conscientiousness is particularly relevant for understanding support for the AfD. Associated with preferences for order, stability and clear social rules, it closely aligns with the party’s emphasis on internal security, control and national sovereignty. Importantly, Conscientiousness does not directly cause support for right-populist parties but operates through ideological self-placement, increasing receptiveness to right-leaning messaging (Jäckle and Hamann, 2025, HTML). The AfD’s strategy can therefore be understood as an implicit alignment with voter predispositions rather than deliberate personality targeting. This interpretation is consistent with Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview)’s observation that parties

*“cannot tell one group one thing and the opposite to another without being exposed,”*

and is further supported by expert interviewee Bouman (Bouman, 2025, Interview), who highlights the practical limits of sophisticated targeting in the German context. As he notes, targeting is often limited to relatively broad categories such as:

*“age cohorts of ten years,”*

postcode-level data or estimated income, while more advanced approaches face clear restrictions due to

*“very strict data protection rules.”*

This alignment was also visible in the AfD’s social media communication. Content frequently emphasised themes of threat, order and rule enforcement, narratives that resonate with conscientious voters. On platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, these messages proved particularly effective. As Simchon (Simchon, 2025, Interview) notes, political content online is

*“clearly emotionally loaded,”*

and

*“moral-emotional language, particularly moral outrage, drives engagement,”*

increasing the likelihood of algorithmic amplification.

At the same time, Jäckle and Hamann (2025, HTML) stress that conscientious voters are not easily manipulated. Rather, they are often goal-oriented and may become disillusioned when established parties appear ineffective. In this context, AfD messaging portraying mainstream parties as weak or inconsistent may have appeared not only emotionally compelling but also justified.

Openness plays a contrasting role. While associated with political flexibility and a higher likelihood of switching preferences, it remains negatively correlated with far-right support. In the 2025 election, this contributed to broader electoral volatility rather than directly benefiting the AfD (Jäckle and Hamann, 2025, HTML).

### 3.6 Persuasion Knowledge and the Role of “Organic” Political Content

Whereas the Big Five Model explains why different voters are more or less receptive to certain messages, the PKM shifts the analytical focus to how voters recognise, interpret and respond to persuasive intent. Insights from the expert interview with Simchon (Simchon, 2025, Interview) reinforce this transition, showing that persuasion becomes more effective when message style aligns with individuals psychological predispositions. Simchon (Simchon, 2025, Interview) reports that:

*“when the same message is framed differently to match individuals personalities, those messages are perceived as more attractive and more persuasive.”*

highlighting that persuasive effects can arise from message framing alone, without requiring the use of explicit psychometric profiling in real-world campaign practice. Consistent with this, Simchon (Simchon, 2025, Interview) emphasises, as beforementioned, that online political persuasion is strongly shaped by emotional dynamics. More generally, Simchon (Simchon, 2025, Interview) notes that:

*“more polarized language leads to higher engagement on political social media accounts,”*

and that such language is

*“often moral and emotional in nature and closely tied to group identities.”*

Bouman (Bouman, 2025, Interview) provides a complementary view that supports this PKM related claim. He argues that

*“a voting decision...is an emotional decision that is rationalised afterwards,”*

and that campaigning is

*“something deeply emotional, something that is meant to evoke emotions,”*

with rational arguments functioning as post-hoc justification. This logic helps explain why emotionally charged content can dominate attention and shape interpretation before persuasion knowledge is activated.

Importantly, Simchon's (Simchon, 2025, Interview) interview supports the claim that persuasive effects do not require overt or individually verifiable psychometric profiling in campaign practice. Instead, personality alignment can operate indirectly through language, framing and emotional cues, while platform algorithms reward precisely these forms of affective communication. From a PKM perspective, these matters because such indirect alignment can reduce recipients recognition of persuasive intent, thereby lowering scepticism and resistance compared to more overt forms of personalised political advertising.

Moreover, from a PKM perspective, this dynamic is further reinforced by the fact that a large share of political content on social media during the 2025 election circulated in ways that appeared "organic," rather than being encountered primarily as formal party advertising. Fan pages and supporter accounts associated with parties such as the *AfD* and *Die Linke* frequently produced short-form, meme-style content, short video clips and visually simplified posts designed to provoke emotional reactions and encourage sharing. In this context, memes can be understood as short, easily shareable media contents, such as images, text, or videos, that spread primarily online and rely on humour, satire, or emotional prompts to comment on social and political issues (Wetzel and Kiess, 2025, p. 3) . Within the PKM framework, such formats represent an advanced layer of political persuasion: because meme-style content is often perceived as humorous or user-generated rather than strategic, audiences are less likely to interpret it as intentional persuasion and therefore less likely to activate persuasion knowledge.

Memes and supporter-driven content are particularly relevant here because they can appear non-strategic while still performing strong identity work. Bouman (Bouman, 2025, Interview) explicitly links memes to identity boundaries:

*"Memes always have a separating function...A meme has an in-group and an out-group. There are people who understand a meme and people who do not understand it,"*

and he adds that this in-group logic

*“can be used very effectively in microtargeting.”*

Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview) offers an analogy to illustrate this diffusion dynamic:

*“If the local butcher is a member of the CDU, the probability that his customers will occasionally be addressed politically by him in that direction is relatively high. And this works in the same way in the digital space, just with a certain amplification through platforms and their algorithms, meaning that messages are more likely to be transmitted to like-minded people.”*

At the same time, the seemingly “organic” character of meme-based political content should be treated with caution. While much content is produced by supporter or fan accounts, Simchon (Simchon, 2025, Interview) highlights coordinated influence tactics that explicitly exploit the same engagement mechanisms:

*“political trolls, particularly Russian troll accounts, systematically use moral-emotional language to amplify their messages and increase engagement.”*

Simchon (Simchon, 2025, Interview) further warns, that in Romania for example:

*“elections were reportedly affected by influence operations conducted via TikTok.”*

The PKM implication is straightforward: when political content is emotionally engaging, identity-coded and distributed through peer networks or seemingly organic accounts, recipients are less likely to interpret it as persuasion and therefore less likely to activate coping knowledge. This raises the question of how organic such content really is, particularly in algorithm-driven environments that tend to reward outrage, fear and strong emotional reactions. From a PKM view, this uncertainty makes it even harder for users to recognise persuasive intent. When political messages appear to come from ordinary users rather than organised actors, recipients are less likely to question their purpose or perceive them as targeted persuasion.

To illustrate how such relevant dynamics unfold in an actual campaign context, the following subsection examines *Die Linke*’s late campaign surge during the 2025

German Federal Election as an empirical case of platform-mediated, indirect microtargeting.

### **3.7 *Die Linke's* Late Campaign Surge and the Role of Social Media**

Only a few months before the 2025 German Federal Election, hardly anyone, including members of the party itself, believed that *Die Linke* would manage to re-enter the Bundestag. As late as 20 January 2025, national polling placed the party at around 4 percent, well below the five-percent electoral threshold (Dawum, 2025, HTML). At that point, a parliamentary comeback appeared highly unlikely. Yet on election day, *Die Linke* achieved roughly 8.8 percent, more than doubling its polling level from just one month earlier. This dramatic reversal raises a central question for this case study: how was such a late and unexpected surge possible?

To answer this question, it is necessary to examine *Die Linke's* digital campaign strategy, particularly its use of social media, by looking at key developments in the months preceding the election.

#### **3.7.1 From “Mission Silberlocke” to Digital Visibility**

In October 2024, *Die Linke* presented the campaign initiative “Mission Silberlocke”, a strategy centred on securing the party’s parliamentary presence through direct mandates won by three veteran politicians: Gregor Gysi, Bodo Ramelow and Dietmar Bartsch. The idea was that at least three constituency victories would allow the party to enter the Bundestag even if it failed to cross the national threshold. At the time, the initiative was widely met with scepticism and ridicule. Many observers dismissed it as a PR stunt or a last-ditch effort. Criticism also emerged from within the party, as *Die Linke* had increasingly become younger and more female, while the three senior male politicians did not appear representative of this transformation. (Palzer, 2025, HTML) However, rather than positioning “Mission Silberlocke” as a purely defensive manoeuvre, the party creatively repurposed the initiative for digital mobilisation. Gysi, Ramelow and Bartsch appeared in humorous and self-ironic short videos on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, often interacting with younger party members, dancing,

or engaging in playful performances (see fig. 7) most notably Ramelow's appearance as a costumed metal singer (see fig. 8). These clips deliberately subverted expectations and re-framed the "old guard" as approachable and culturally aware figures (Bouchet, 2025, HTML). In this way, *Die Linke* transformed potential liabilities into viral assets within platform-native communication formats.



Figure 7 Video of "Team Silberlocke" singing a humorous song on X(screenshot) (Ramelow, 2025, HTML)

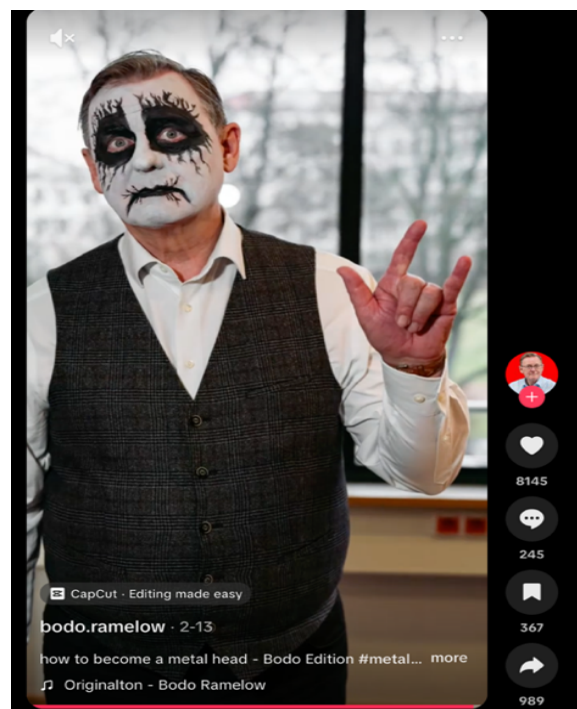


Figure 8 Bodo Ramelow dressed as Metal singer on TikTok (screenshot) (Ramelow, 2025, HTML)

### 3.7.2 Youth-Oriented Social Media Strategy

A central factor behind *Die Linke*'s resurgence was its explicit focus on young voters, a group often characterised by political dissatisfaction and high social media use. The party's leading candidate, Heidi Reichinnek, emerged as a key figure in this strategy. By election day, she had accumulated over 600,000 followers on TikTok, significantly

more than other mainstream candidates such as Robert Habeck or Friedrich Merz, and second only to Alice Weidel. Importantly, Reichinnek's online presence was not primarily built around detailed policy positions. Instead, the campaign strategy aimed to introduce her first through her personality and everyday presence, with political positioning becoming salient only at a later stage. As one internal campaign logic suggested, the goal was for voters to "get to know Heidi Reichinnek as a person before engaging with her political positions (Müller, 2025, HTML)".

This approach aligns with the party's broader strategic objective, articulated in internal material associated with the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, to "not leave digital spaces to fascists and neoliberals (Nevermann, 2025, p. 3)", thereby actively contesting online attention structures. This sequencing of personal identification before policy articulation corresponds closely with Bouman's (Bouman, 2025, Interview) understanding of political campaigning. As he emphasises, voting decisions are:

*"fundamentally emotional and only rationalised afterwards,"*

and campaigns are therefore designed to evoke emotional identification first, with rational policy arguments serving primarily as post-hoc justification. Bouman (Bouman, 2025, Interview) illustrates this logic with reference to the Greens electoral peak between 2020 and 2022, where many voters supported the party because they felt they were:

*"on the good side"*

and aligned with the right moral causes.

Furthermore, as Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview) observes in the expert interviews:

*"many were looking for a channel through which to express dissatisfaction and that dissatisfaction was then reflected in what, for example, Heidi Reichinnek was doing on TikTok, on her smartphone."*

Social media thus functioned not only as a communication channel, but as a space in which political frustration could be articulated in a personalised and emotionally resonant way. Empirically, this strategy proved particularly effective among younger

voters. 27 percent of first-time voters supported *Die Linke* in the 2025 election. Among voters aged 18–24, the party received 25 percent of the vote, representing an increase of 17 percentage points compared to the 2021 election (see fig. 9) (rbb24, 2025, HTML). Even among under-18-year-olds, *Die Linke* led with nearly 21 percent, underscoring the effectiveness of a youth-oriented campaign that prioritised personal connection, authenticity and social media communication over traditional programmatic messaging (Bouchet, 2025, p. 1, HTML).

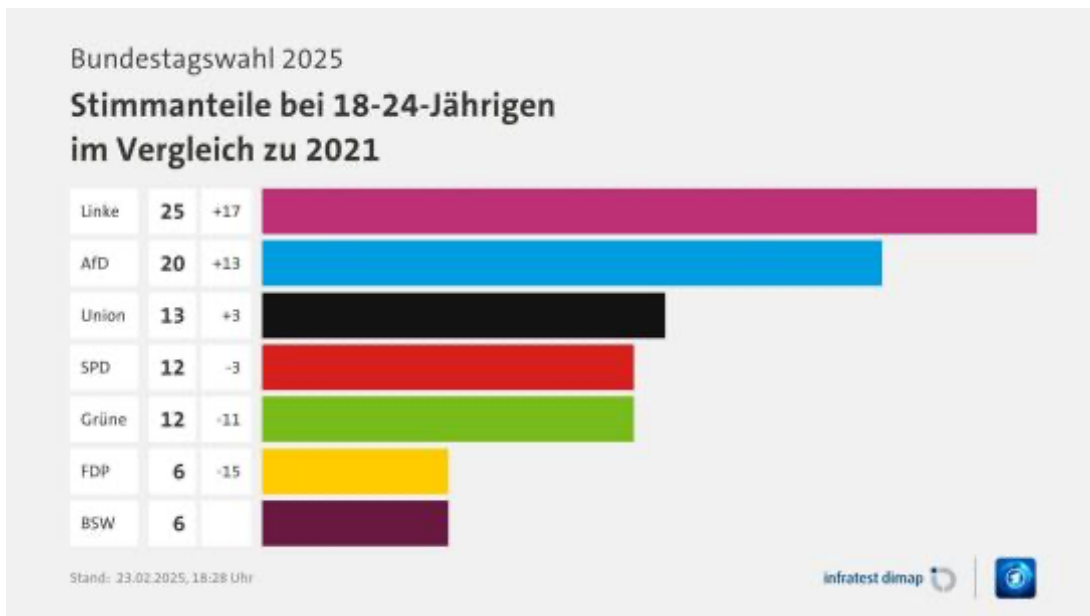


Figure 9 Vote share among 18-24-year-olds in 2025 compared to 2021 (rbb24, 2025)

### 3.7.3 January 2025: A Viral Turning Point

A decisive moment in *Die Linke*'s campaign occurred in January 2025, following a controversial migration proposal introduced by the *CDU/CSU* parliamentary group. Migration has long been one of the most polarising issues in German politics and the proposal triggered widespread debate. In this context, Heidi Reichinnek delivered a forceful and emotionally charged speech, sharply criticising the Union's position (Reichinnek, 2025, VIDEO). The speech rapidly went viral across social media platforms, gaining tens of millions of views and interactions. For many young users, Reichinnek's tone, angry, direct and morally assertive, stood in stark contrast to the generic style of mainstream political communication. This moment marked a clear drift

in the party's visibility and momentum, positioning Reichinnek as a central symbolic figure of resistance and authenticity. Importantly, this moment did not occur in isolation. Reichinnek's broader TikTok strategy consistently combined parliamentary content, such as Bundestag speeches and committee work, with easy to understand explanations of social policy and more personal elements. This approach was explicitly aimed at younger audiences, reflecting a strategic effort to lower barriers to political engagement and to align political communication with the everyday experiences of younger users. (Vorreger, 2025, HTML)

A notable characteristic of Reichinnek's most widely viewed videos was their frequent reference to the AfD. By reacting to provocations and controversial statements in parliamentary debates, she framed these moments as evidence of democratic and social shortcomings, while simultaneously linking them to Die Linke's own positions on social and family policy. While such reactions might have caused controversy or sanctions in traditional parliamentary settings, they generated exceptionally high engagement on TikTok, where similar clips received hundreds of thousands of likes (Vorreger, 2025, HTML). The strategic significance of this development was acknowledged even by political opponents, with Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview) stating that:

*“their extensive use of TikTok was especially noted by other parties, many of which have since tried to replicate it, even though doing so is difficult when the political ‘product’ does not naturally fit the platform“*

Thorsten Frei, Parliamentary Managing Director of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group, even agreed that parties must be present on platforms such as TikTok, stating: “If we are not there, we will not reach an important group of voters” ,illustrating how Reichinnek's success contributed to cross party recognition across parties that political visibility and reach are increasingly shaped by social media communication (Vorreger, 2025, HTML).

#### **3.7.4 Meme Culture, Storytelling and Participatory Engagement**

Beyond individual viral moments, Die Linke employed a broader repertoire of culturally embedded digital formats. One widely shared post compared the party to Michael

Scott from the U.S. sitcom *The Office*, using the quote “I’m back” in reference to polling results that showed the party crossing the five-percent threshold (see fig. 10). This framing established a recurring narrative of the “comeback of the year” (Bouchet, 2025, p. 3). By drawing on a highly popular cultural reference, the party communicated a clear political message within a shared interpretive framework that resonated strongly with younger audiences, for whom traditional political language often appears inaccessible or inauthentic. As Bouman (Bouman, 2025, Interview) explains:

*“digital political content increasingly “has to be designed to be more TikTok-friendly or ‘Instagram-Reels-friendly,’ while traditional campaign communication and ‘classic PR’ has...lost importance”*

in contemporary online environments.

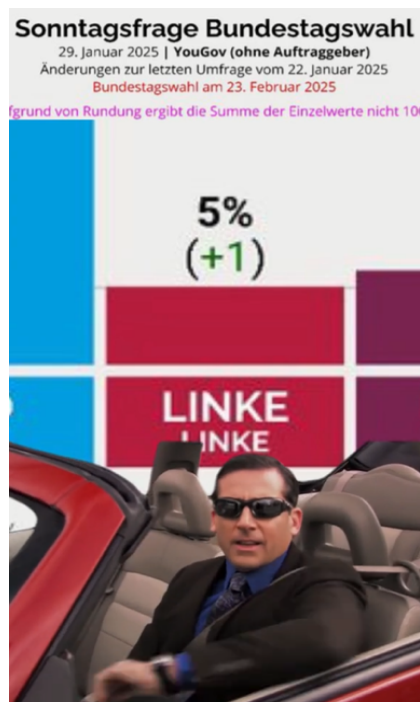


Figure 10 “I’m back” meme by Die Linke (Bouchet, 2025, p.3)

Another prominent example was a video in which Reichinnek rapped key points of the party's manifesto over *Eminem's "Rap God"*. The clip condensed complex policy content into less than 40 seconds and achieved over two million views (Bouchet, 2025, p. 3). While political programmes are typically difficult to communicate on social media due to attention constraints, this creative adaptation demonstrated how substantive content can be translated into platform-compatible formats without appearing overly technical.

Finally, *Die Linke* benefited from supporter-driven meme production, most notably through the Instagram account *die.linke.memes*. Although not an official party channel, a meme competition organised by this account received backing from the party headquarters. This initiative illustrates a further strategic layer of the campaign: the deliberate creation of participatory engagement. Meme competitions not only generate cost-effective visibility, but also create a sense of collective ownership and community. Users who actively contribute content are more likely to remain engaged and to mobilise others, thereby extending the campaign's reach beyond passive consumption (see fig. 11 & 12) (Bouchet, 2025, p. 3-4)."



Figure 11 Meme illustrating escalating surprise in response to increasing polling results for the party Die Linke (*die.linke.memes*, 2025)



Figure 12 Call for community engagement by *die.linke.memes* (Bouchet, 2025, p.3)

### 3.7.5 Key Observations from the Die Linke Case Study

Taken together, *Die Linke's* late campaign surge can be understood as the outcome of a coherent and highly platform-adaptive social media strategy. By combining humour, cultural references, emotional appeals and participatory formats, the party succeeded in reaching young voters on eye level. Rather than relying on extensive advertising budgets, *Die Linke* leveraged organic reach through algorithmic amplification and community engagement. This case illustrates how political visibility and mobilisation in new-age election campaigns can grow from the strategic alignment of modern message design, platform logic and audience participation, setting the stage for the subsequent analysis of indirect microtargeting mechanisms.

### 3.8 Regulation, Democracy and Expert Assessments

The expert interviews show a broad consensus that the current regulatory framework for political advertising and digital campaigning in Europe is ambitious but still unsettled. While recent reforms clearly respond to scandals such as CA, the experts agree that regulation is struggling to keep pace with rapid technological change and evolving campaign practices. As a result, the long-term effects of these rules on democratic transparency remain uncertain.

Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview) highlights a fundamental structural problem of regulation in the European context. Political communication is embedded in national political cultures, while platform regulation and data protection law are largely organised at EU level. As Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview) explains:

*“The core problem in regulating the democratic public sphere is that democratic publics exist within national contexts, while platform regulation, which forms the basis for much of what is communicatively relevant today, as well as data protection law, is largely European in nature. This creates a dilemma, in that we need European regulation for something that lies within national competence.”*

This mismatch between national political practice and supranational regulation makes it difficult to apply and enforce regulatory measures consistently across member states.

At the same time, Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview) points to recent regulatory developments, but emphasises that their concrete effects are still difficult to assess.

Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview) stresses that these frameworks are

*“relatively new”*

and

*“very well intentioned,”*

while adding that:

*“whether they are well designed in practice remains to be seen.”*

According to Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview), this uncertainty is closely linked to the current transformation of the platform environment, as

*“this is a landscape that is very much in flux.”*

Moreover, Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview) observes that major platforms have already begun to change their behaviour in anticipation of or response to regulation. He notes that companies such as Meta and Google have increasingly restricted political advertising, while the future role of other platforms, particularly TikTok, remains open. As a result, Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview) cautions against drawing firm conclusions at this stage, stating: "I would always advise caution when it comes to making rapid evaluations. I genuinely do not yet know where this is heading."

Bouman (Bouman, 2025, Interview) largely shares the assessment that recent European regulation has fundamentally altered the conditions under which political advertising operates. He identifies the EU Regulation on the TTPA as central regulatory drivers, emphasising that their impact will be substantial. Referring to the TTPA, Bouman (Bouman, 2025, Interview) explains that:

*“this is essentially an EU regulation,”*

and that it means

*“paid political advertising will, from 10 October 2025, be effectively discontinued,”*

because

*“both Meta and Google have decided to ban political advertising completely on their platforms.”*

Bouman (Bouman, 2025, Interview) stresses that this development will have far-reaching consequences for political communication, stating that it will have:

*“a massive impact on the entire political advertising sector and on politics as a whole.”*

At the same time Bouman (Bouman, 2025, Interview) highlights uncertainty regarding how political actors, media organisations and advertising infrastructures will adapt to this new regulatory environment. While he expects a

*“complete disruption and reconfiguration,”*

Bouman (Bouman, 2025, Interview) emphasises that it remains

*“still open how other publishers will follow and how programmatic advertising in combination with microtargeting will develop,”*

making definitive assessments premature at this stage. Despite these uncertainties, Bouman (Bouman, 2025, Interview) offers a clear overall evaluation of the regulatory framework. Asked directly whether existing regulation in Germany and the EU is sufficient to prevent misuse, Bouman (Bouman, 2025, Interview) states,

*“I assess the regulations as definitely sufficient.”*

At the same time, his remarks convey ambivalence about the longer-term implications of a regulatory environment in which paid political advertising is strongly restricted. The withdrawal of major platforms from political advertising is likely to push campaigns toward alternative forms of communication, including organic reach and indirect forms of influence that operate beyond the scope of traditional advertising regulation.

Simchon (Simchon, 2025, Interview) further addresses recent regulatory developments in a broader international context. He acknowledges that the EU is playing a leading role in regulating digital political communication, stating that the EU is doing

*“important and evidence-based work”*

and deserves recognition for its regulatory efforts. At the same time, he highlights a fundamental structural problem of regulation, namely the speed at which technological change occurs. As Simchon (Simchon, 2025, Interview) explains,

*“technology develops much faster than regulation,”*

Which, according to Simchon (Simchon, 2025, Interview), results in a persistent

*“cat-and-mouse game,”*

where platforms adapt more quickly than legal frameworks can respond. From his perspective, this is

*“an important step,”*

but it is not sufficient on its own to address the evolving strategies of platforms and campaign actors, highlighting the need for faster and more adaptive regulatory measures. Beyond formal regulation, Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview) stresses the importance of journalistic and academic oversight as essential complements to legal rules in safeguarding democratic accountability. He argues that:

*“as long as nobody engages with these topics, it does not really matter what ethical standards exist. Someone has to look closely,”*

highlighting scrutiny as a precondition for accountability. Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview) emphasises the need for sustained monitoring, access to platform data and long-term research capacity. As an illustrative example, Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview) refers to a case involving the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME), where microtargeted communication on the topic of “chat control” used negative targeting criteria, explicitly specifying which users should not be shown certain messages. This practice triggered significant public

criticism and led to the introduction of internal rules defining how such practices should not be handled in the future. According to Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview), cases like this demonstrate that

*“spotlights will always focus on moments where things go wrong,”*

and that public attention and scrutiny help establish social boundaries for what is considered democratically acceptable.

### **3.8 AI and future outlook**

A report described 2024 as a turning point in German democracy, as AI played a significant role in German state election campaigns for the first time. The AfD in particular made extensive use of AI to produce emotional and polarizing content and thereby strengthen its online presence (Muñoz and Laumann, 2024a, p. 3). Against this background, the growing role of AI in political communication becomes particularly relevant. As online platforms increasingly dominate political information consumption, AI systems provide political actors with new tools to adapt their messaging to these digital environments. In relation to OPM, Carrella et al. (2025) show that the introduction of large language models (LLMs) significantly enhances targeting practices by automating message customisation and enabling the large-scale deployment of tailored political messages. Processes that were previously time-consuming and resource-intensive can now be carried out quickly and efficiently through AI (Carrella et al., 2025, p. 2). Moreover, Carrella et al. find that targeted messages generated by ChatGPT consistently outperform non-targeted messages across different persuasion contexts, even when only minimal prompts are provided (Carrella et al., 2025, p. 2). At the same time, this increasing automation of political persuasion has led platforms to introduce transparency-oriented measures such as X/Twitter’s Community Notes or Facebook’s fact-checking labels. These features aim to provide users with additional context when encountering political content. However, such interventions primarily address misinformation rather than personalised targeting and are applied uniformly to all users rather than being tailored to specific individuals (Carrella et al., 2025, p. 7).

Furthermore, recent academic work by Simchon highlights how advances in artificial intelligence may fundamentally reshape PMT. In another study, Simchon warns that recent technological developments, particularly generative AI combined with personality inference based on consumed text, have the potential to create a highly scalable “manipulation machine (Simchon, Edwards and Lewandowsky, 2024, p.1).” Such systems could target individuals according to their specific psychological vulnerabilities without requiring direct human input. The study further finds that PMT can be an effective persuasive technique and that key elements of this process can already be automated using off-the-shelf generative AI tools (Simchon *et al.*, 2024, p.3).

These concerns were reinforced in the expert interview conducted for this thesis. When asked how AI and machine learning might reshape the next generation of OPM, Simchon (Simchon, 2025, Interview) emphasised that automated systems already play a central role in today’s information environment. As he explained,

*“there is already very little human involvement in much of the content that we currently engage with.”*

According to Simchon (Simchon, 2025, Interview), a substantial share of online content is now generated LLMs, which are often

*“specifically fine-tuned to be more persuasive and to use potentially manipulative techniques.”*

He stressed that such systems are

*“really good at persuading”*

and

*“fully scalable,”*

underlining that this development should not be understood as a future scenario but as an existing reality. As Simchon (Simchon, 2025, Interview) put it,

*“I definitely see not only the future, but currently the present of microtargeted ads generally being generated by LLMs.”*

Political advertising content, as well as political information more broadly, is therefore increasingly produced by large language models or through hybrid human-AI processes, to the point where, as Simchon (Simchon, 2025, Interview) noted,

*“there is no clear way to separate human-generated from AI-generated content.”*

At the same time, Simchon (Simchon, 2025, Interview) described advances in natural language processing as a

*“double-edged sword.”*

While much of his research focuses on the risks associated with AI-driven persuasion, he also highlighted potential countermeasures. In particular, he argued that

*“LLMs could be used in the background to identify and highlight manipulative rhetoric,”*

which could increase transparency when engaging with political content. Nevertheless, Simchon (Simchon, 2025, Interview) cautioned against underestimating the risks posed by these technologies. He warned that

*“personal LLMs may soon know individuals better than any other system,”*

and that if such systems were incentivised to persuade users in specific political directions,

*“this would open new avenues for manipulation.”*

Whether these developments will be effectively regulated before they shape electoral processes remains uncertain, especially given unresolved questions about which AI models will dominate and who will ultimately control them.

In contrast to Simchon’s (Simchon, 2025, Interview) more expansive view of AI-driven OPM, Bouman (Bouman, 2025, Interview) offers a more cautious and regulation-focused assessment, particularly with regard to the German context. When asked about the future role of AI in OPM, Bouman (Bouman, 2025, Interview) stressed that

*“these forecasts are always difficult,”*

and argued that OPM is likely to face significant limitations in upcoming elections.

According to Bouman (Bouman, 2025, Interview),

*“one has to assume that microtargeting in general, due to platform restrictions, will at the current time no longer be possible in the next federal election, or the platform will only allow it in a strongly restricted form.”*

This, Bouman (Bouman, 2025, Interview) noted, represents

*“a major issue”*

for campaign strategy in Germany.

Instead of enabling highly targeted persuasion, Bouman (Bouman, 2025, Interview) suggested that the main use of AI may lie in more supportive and efficiency-oriented functions. As he explained,

*“the leading use of AI can also lie in the fact that debates, content, questions can be answered much faster, perhaps also in an automated way.”*

However, Bouman (Bouman, 2025, Interview) was sceptical about the extent to which AI is already being integrated in a deeper and more strategic manner. He emphasised that

*“the concrete, purposeful, practical use that goes beyond using generative AI for writing captions and so on,”*

meaning a substantive integration of AI into campaign strategy with

*“really concrete and effective possibilities for German campaigning,”*

is

*“still, in this form, very much in its early stages in Germany.”*

While it may be in its early stage, evidence from recent European elections indicates that such dynamics are no longer purely theoretical. During the 2024 European Parliament election, the AfD achieved 15.9 percent of the vote and post-election

analyses point to a highly professionalised digital strategy that included the use of AI-generated visual content and coordinated engagement tactics to maximise algorithmic reach. Surveys further show that all major German parties have already experimented with AI in campaigning, suggesting that AI-assisted content production is gradually becoming a standard (Muñoz and Laumann, 2024a, p. 17).

Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview) takes a more balanced view on the future role of AI in political campaigning and clearly separates it from OPM. While he expects AI technologies to

*“noticeably change the next federal election,”*

he does not believe that OPM itself will be the main driver of this change. Instead, Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview) highlighted that AI tools such as ChatGPT have

*“enormous potential”*

to improve access to political information, especially for groups that have previously been more distant from formal education. This assessment is supported by recent survey evidence indicating a growing openness toward AI-mediated political decision-making: 28 percent of respondents state that they find it “very difficult” or “rather difficult” to understand which party stands for which positions, suggesting substantial orientation problems within the electorate. At the same time, 43 percent report that they would like to consult an AI system before making a voting decision, indicating a willingness to rely on AI-supported information tools (Bitkom, 2025, p. 8). According to Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview), chatbots can lower barriers to political engagement by allowing people to ask basic political questions, such as what a party stands for, without needing direct contact with politicians or party organisations. He described chatbots as

*“a very effective solution”*

and argued that their answers may even be of higher quality than those provided by traditional campaign volunteers, as they often contain fewer campaign clichés.

At the same time, Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview) expressed doubts about a close connection between AI and OPM. He argued that

*“microtargeting and AI are two domains that are currently very difficult to think together.”*

Although he acknowledged that AI could theoretically be used to generate tailored messages for specific target groups, he questioned whether this would be practical in real campaigns. Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview) warned that AI-generated content can be imprecise and that even small mistakes could quickly lead to scandals, making political parties cautious about using such tools for targeted messaging.

While AI clearly allows campaigns to produce large amounts of content quickly, Steiner (Steiner, 2025, Interview) concluded that he does not currently see

*“a clear or logical application case”*

for AI in OPM itself.

Taken together, the findings of this case study indicate that while AI substantially enhances the technical feasibility of PMT, its practical application in German election campaigns remains open. Regulatory constraints, platform policies and reputational risks appear to limit the direct use of AI-driven PMT. At the same time, AI is already reshaping political communication indirectly through content generation and information access.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper set out to examine how political microtargeting operates in a highly regulated democratic context, using the 2025 German federal election as its empirical case. The central argument was that PMT has not disappeared under stricter regulation but has fundamentally changed its form. The evidence supports this claim. Classical, data-intensive voter profiling of the kind associated with CA was largely absent from the 2025 campaign, constrained by the GDPR, the TTPA and an informal consensus among German parties against openly using microtargeting. Yet targeted political communication remained highly present, it had simply migrated from direct data exploitation toward indirect, platform-mediated mechanisms.

The most important finding is that algorithmic recommendation systems effectively performed much of the targeting function that parties themselves could not. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and YouTube systematically amplified content from parties at the political margins, independent of their advertising expenditure. The AfD nearly doubled its posting-to-recommendation ratio on TikTok, while Die Linke achieved a threefold amplification effect among young users despite comparatively low paid spend. Mainstream parties with substantially higher advertising budgets saw their content underperform in recommended feeds. Political visibility in 2025 was therefore shaped less by financial resources and more by alignment with platform logics that reward emotionally charged, identity-coded and platform-native content.

The psychological frameworks examined in this paper help explain why this dynamic proved so effective. The Big Five model shows that message framing resonates differently across voter segments with stable personality predispositions, the AfD's emphasis on order, security and threat aligned structurally with conscientious voters without requiring explicit psychometric profiling. The PKM explains why meme-style and apparently organic content circumvented scepticism: when political persuasion is distributed through peer networks and culturally familiar formats, recipients are least likely to recognise it as targeted communication. Together, these frameworks suggest that the most effective microtargeting in 2025 was largely invisible to those it reached.

The regulatory picture is more ambiguous. The GDPR and TTPA have meaningfully constrained paid, data-intensive OPM and the withdrawal of Meta from EU political

advertising represents a significant structural shift. Yet as all three expert interviews make clear, the blind spots are substantial. Organic content, influencer activity and algorithmic recommendation systems remain largely outside democratic oversight. Regulation has addressed the most visible layer of microtargeting while leaving its increasingly dominant indirect form largely untouched.

Looking ahead, the growing role of AI introduces a further dimension. As Simchon (Simchon, 2025, Interview) warns, the present, not just the future, already involves LLM-generated content that is

*"specifically fine-tuned to be more persuasive,"*

with no reliable way to distinguish it from human-produced material. The conditions under which voters form political opinions are changing faster than the frameworks designed to govern them.

The broader implication is that democratic debates about microtargeting need to shift focus. The question is no longer primarily whether parties are building psychographic databases, but whether commercial platform architectures have become the dominant infrastructure of political persuasion, one that operates beyond party strategy, beyond advertising regulation and largely beyond public awareness. Addressing this will require regulatory attention not only to paid political advertising but to the design and governance of algorithmic recommendation systems themselves.

## Interviews

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