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Political predispositions, not popularity: people's propensity to interact with political content on Facebook

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ABSTRACT

Social media users are not just potential consumers of political content they are also potential producers and distributors. In this paper, we test whether political predispositions or the popularity of posts best explains users' engagement with political content on Facebook. Using a large-scale survey deployed in Denmark, we utilize a $2 \times 2 \times 3$ survey experiment that manipulates the partisan sponsor of a political message, the number of likes attributed to that message, and the nature of the comments attached to that post. Our findings indicate that individuals are most likely to like, comment, and share political content that aligns with their political predispositions, as the choice to like, share and comment political content on Facebook is largely unaffected by likes and comments from other users. Though we recognize the dangers of obstinacy in democratic discourse, we are somewhat assured by these findings, as it shows that those who engage with political content do not follow a blind herd mentality.

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Introduction

While newspaper readership and TV-news viewership have been declining, the use of social media has increased dramatically in recent years (Newman et al. 2017; Greenwood, Perrin, and Duggan 2016; Leckner and Facht 2011). Social media have consequently become a viable source of political news, with two-thirds of U.S. adults receiving at least some news from social networking sites (Shearer and Gottfried 2017). At the same time, social media

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sites like Facebook and Twitter allow a level of interactivity with news that was not possible with traditional media (Eveland 2003). Because of this potential for interactivity, the shift towards social media has had significant implications for how political information is disseminated to and between citizens (Settle 2018).

The addition of social media sites as another potential news source may simply seem like a continuation of a long-term trend. Historically, mass media consumption used to be limited to a relatively low number of potential media outlets, but the advent of cable TV and the Internet has led to an abundance of choice (Prior 2007). However, the reach of 24-hour political news through these channels has been rather limited, as only those interested in politics tune in (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Levendusky 2013). Social media have changed this dynamic. Social networking sites are characterized by inadvertent exposure to news (Bode 2016; Oeldorf-Hirsch 2017; Mitchell et al. 2013), especially for those typically uninterested in politics (Feezell 2017; Valeriani and Vaccari 2016). This incidental exposure to a broad array of perspectives makes news consumption fundamentally different from previous eras, as evidence indicates that social media users view a fair amount of counter-attitudinal information. Michell et al. (2014), for example, estimate that approximately 85% of those who consume news on Facebook see posts that are not in line with their views.

Much of the research into the differences between social and traditional media focuses on the effects on those consuming information. These studies have shown that social media facilitate exposure to political news (Bode 2016), cause greater media effects among the politically-disengaged (Feezell 2017; Valeriani and Vaccari 2016), facilitate belief in misinformation (Anspach and Carlson 2020), and exacerbate political polarization (Settle 2018). Much less attention, however, has been given to those who produce or share partisan content online. These content distributors deserve scholarly attention as evidence indicates that social ties often drive exposure to political news (Anspach 2017; Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic 2015).

Those uninterested in politics, by their nature, are unlikely to follow news organizations on social media. Instead, their exposure to news likely comes from posts shared by their social media connections. The ability to share is a key distinction between social media and traditional media types, as social media users are no longer simply news consumers. They are also distributors of content, including information created by political actors and media outlets. Social media users can also produce content, such as when adding their own personal commentary. By liking, sharing, or commenting news, social media users become co-responsible for the political content seen by people in their networks. Despite this importance, we still have limited systematic knowledge of why citizens decide to distribute political news on social media. This paper investigates which factors drive social media users

to like, comment, and share political content on Facebook. We harness a large-scale survey experiment conducted in Denmark to evaluate two possible motivations for interacting with political content on Facebook: political signaling and the bandwagon effect, concluding that existing partisan sentiments predict engagement with political content better than the popularity of the posts.

The active audience: political signaling on social media

Even though traditional news media disseminate information via a unidirectional flow, it does not mean that television, radio, and newspaper audiences are (or ever were) merely passive recipients of news. Research from the 1950s onward illustrate the many ways in which new audiences are active (e.g. Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Blumler 1979; Levy and Windahl 1984; Zillmann, Hezel, and Medoff 1980). This research showed that people approach news and entertainment media alike, purposively selecting programming that meets their personal and social needs.

Before social media, people could only actively engage news content by choosing whether to consume it as well as how they personally discussed it with others in their social network (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). Apart from yelling at one's television, it was not possible to directly engage with news content. In contrast, social media allows people to directly engage with news content in a public domain: they can post, like, and comment directly on news content created by traditional news organizations. This allows us to observe and measure in a more direct fashion the "active audience."

Interacting with political content on social media can serve multiple purposes. Consistent with theories of selective exposure (Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Stroud 2011) and social endorsements (Anspach 2017; Messing and Westwood 2014; Turcotte et al. 2015), people can use the liking affordance of social media platforms to indicate that they would like the platform's algorithm to display similar content or more posts from that network tie. Liking political posts can also serve the additional purpose of signaling to others the political actors or policy positions that they support. Similar to liking, commenting and sharing content can communicate identification with politically relevant social groups (Settle 2018) or convince others in their social network to adopt a particular viewpoint (Weeks, Ardèvol-Abreu, and de Zúñiga H 2015). In these contexts, we expect these users to "like", "comment" on, and "share" mostly pro-attitudinal content:

H1: Congruency between the user and the post will have a positive effect on the probability to like a post.

H2: Congruency between the user and the post will have a positive effect on the probability to comment on a post.

H3: Congruency between the user and the post will have a positive effect on the probability to share a post.

We appreciate that Hypothesis 1 may seem like a tautology. Of course, people like the things that they like. But in the context of social media, people could also do nothing. There is no requirement to like posts, and our thesis is that people are more likely to like posts in an attempt to signal to others, "I want you to know that this is something I agree with." Moreover, people can use the comment and share functions to communicate what the things with which they disagree. Our contention is that on balance, however, people will use these affordances to make an affirmative case for their politics.

While we expect a simple linear relationship between congruence and tendency to comment and share political content (as H1, H2 and H3 predict), the relationship could potentially also resemble a J-curve, as people might sometimes share or comment on posts, with which they strongly disagree. Thus, those with the strongest attitudes could be likely to comment or share both pro-attitudinal posts (to promote their side) and counter-attitudinal posts (to criticize the other side), while moderates will be unlikely to engage in either behavior. To account for this possibility, we therefore also test for non-monotonic relationships (see Appendix C).

Bandwagoning on social media

We consider the desire to persuade others as one possible reason why users may decide to share political content on Facebook. However, another possible driving force is the bandwagon effect, where individuals rally around what is already popular. Though some doubt the existence of a bandwagon effect (Arnesen et al. 2018), research shows individuals tend to go with what is popular in the contexts of primary (Bartels 1985, 1987) and general elections (Skalaban 1988; Dahlgaard et al. 2017), when revealing political attitudes (Marsh 1985; Mutz 1998; Nadeau, Cloutier, and Guay 1993), and when complying with requests (Cialdini et al. 1999; Hansen and Pedersen 2012).

The bandwagon effect also seems to operate on social media, as users have been shown to modify their behavior based on the actions of their networks. For example, Facebook users have been shown to turn out to vote when they see their social media friends doing the same (Bond et al. 2012), and to select and read political content that has received a large number of endorsements (Anspach 2017; Messing and Westwood 2014). Because reading political news requires time and cognitive resources, social media audiences may use endorsements as shortcuts to reduce the costs associated with discerning quality information from bad.

Here again, however, much of the research into the bandwagon effect investigates its role when *consuming* information on social media. Scant attention has been paid to popularity's role in deciding whether to *share* information. Because social media users may be motivated to present themselves favorably on social media (Carpenter 2012; Seidman 2013), users may more inclined to interact with what is already popular. We therefore hypothesize that social media users will bandwagon onto a post that has already received many likes, because others have already deemed it worthy of attention (H4). Similarly, users may be more inclined to interact with posts that have generated positive discussion. If the comments on a given post are generally supportive of that post, users may bandwagon onto it because the supportive comments may serve as a signal that the post is popular (H5):

H4: Users will be more likely to interact with a post receiving many likes than a post with fewer likes.

H5: Users will be more likely to interact with a post receiving supportive comments than posts receiving no comments or critical comments.

As previously noted, interaction with a Facebook post may be in the form of liking the post, commenting the post, or sharing the post. We investigate all three types of interactions when testing Hypotheses 4 and 5.

Experimental design

To test our competing hypotheses, we conducted two large-scale survey experiments, each including a status update from a prominent politician. Both experiments were embedded in the same survey, which was fielded by the survey company *AnalyseDanmark*.[1] Thus, participants in the survey participated in both experiments. Members of the panel were invited by email to participate, with 3,667 respondents starting the survey and 3,012 respondents completing both experiments (a completion rate of 82%). More importantly, drop-off after exposure to the experimental stimuli was almost non-existent (1.4%, $n = 42$). Our panel was quota-sampled on gender, age group, place of residence, and vote in the latest parliamentary election. Though participants are not perfectly representative of the entire Danish population on all characteristics, the sample exhibited ample variation on basic demographics variables and political attitudes (see Appendix A for details). It is also worth noting that treatment effects in survey experiments tend to be similar across

[1]The survey was in the field 23 March to 11 April 2017. The data collection was done in full accordance with all relevant regulations, including regulations at [blinded] and legal regulations in Denmark. Under these regulations, ethical approval for survey studies is not required. All participants had given informed consent prior to their participation in the study.

Table 1. Veterans experiment design (Translated from Danish).

Sponsorship (2 conditions)	Lars Løkke Rasmussen [Then Prime Minister and head of party, *Venstre]*		Mette Frederiksen [Then leader of largest opposition party, *Social Democrats]*
Content (No variation)	*By now, I have met many veterans who have honored Denmark, and I am always deeply impressed. Some pay the ultimate price: their life. Others come home from deployment with physical or psychological injuries. Therefore, we need to acknowledge the efforts of veterans, and support them more when they return home. This means improved psychological assistance and assistance with housing and jobs.*		
Number of Likes (2 conditions)	2		957
Comments (3 conditions)	None	[Supportive:] *"I agree completely." "[Sponsor], once again, demonstrates that she/he understands what is going on in society."*	[Critical:] *"I disagree completely." "[Sponsor], once again, demonstrates that she/he does not understand what is going on in society."*
Behavior Measures (No variation)	If you saw this post on Facebook, would you:		
		Yes	Maybe	No
	Like?	❑	❑	❑
	Comment?	❑	❑	❑
	Share?	❑	❑	❑

probability and non-probability samples (Mullinix et al. 2015; Coppock, Leeper, and Mullinix 2018).

The survey contained questions on demographics, political attitudes, personal traits, media use, and use of social media. After answering these questions, respondents were exposed to the two experiments. In the experiments, we present respondents with a Facebook post containing a statement on either veterans or immigrants (Table 1). The order of the two experiments was randomized such that approximately half of the respondents first participated in the experiment regarding veterans and then the experiment regarding immigrants, while the order of the experiments was reversed for the other half of the respondents. Within each experiment, the content of the post is held constant. The veteran experiment features a pro-veteran message calling for increased support for those reintegrating to civilian life. The immigration message, on the other hand, calls for restricting access to several types of assistance currently available to immigrant populations. Both messages reflect mainstream policy positions within the Danish political environment. While the post on immigrants is more contentious than the post on veterans, both messages could credibly be attributed to a majority of the Danish political parties.[2]

Because these messages are held constant, the experiment does not test the effect of different arguments or frames of the issues. Instead, we

[2]While the Social Democrats have historically had a less restrictive policy on immigrations, they had started to move rightwards on this issue some years prior to our experiment. By the time of our experiment their positions on immigration were therefore relatively similar to the policies of the Danish center-right parties Kosiara-Pedersen 2020; Stubager et al. 2021).

manipulate three factors testing the roles of attitude congruency and the bandwagon effect: the partisan sponsorship of the post, number of likes for the post, and the nature of the comments on the post. We randomly assign one of two options for the partisan sponsorship of each post: the then-current Prime Minister of Denmark, Lars Løkke Rasmussen (head of the center-right party, *Venstre*, at time of the experiment) or Mette Frederiksen (head of the largest opposition party, the center-left *Social Democrats*). We also randomly assign one of two Like conditions to each post, either a few Likes (*2* or *3*) or many Likes (*957* or *964*).[3] Finally, we also randomly assign one of three comment conditions to each post: no comments, comments supportive of the post, or comments critical of the post. Together, these conditions create a $2 \times 2 \times 3$ experimental design, with each subject randomly assigned to one of the 12 possible combinations.

With the Facebook post visible onscreen, we asked respondents whether they would like the post, comment the post, and/or share the post. Respondents were subsequently asked about their attitudes towards immigrants and veterans (see Appendix D). Following completion of the two experiments, respondents were debriefed and told that the survey was part of a research project, and that the Facebook posts had not actually been made by the two politicians. The entire survey questionnaire is found in Appendix B.

Results

We test our hypotheses using logistic regressions, where we include as explanatory variables the experimental treatments, respondent characteristics and interactions between treatments and respondent characteristics. We only include respondent characteristics, which are directly pertinent to our hypotheses, i.e. party sympathy and policy position. These respondent characteristics are obviously not experimentally manipulated, and our analyses are not attempting to estimate the direct causal effect of such characteristics. Rather, our analyses are focused on how these personal characteristics modify the effects of the experimental treatments (c.f. Keele and Stevenson 2020 on the distinction between causal interaction and effect modification).

While additional covariates are not necessary to achieve unbiased effect estimates from an experiment, covariates with substantial explanatory power can be included in the analyses of experiments to decrease the level

[3]The exact number of likes chosen for our "many likes" treatments were based on the number of likes, which posts from these two politicians would typically end up with at the time of the experiment. The number of likes for our "few likes" treatment mimics the number of likes a post would have received almost immediately after being posted. In the period since our experiment, the number of users responding to Facebook posts from these two politicians has increased markedly, and their posts now typically receive far more likes and reactions.

of unexplained variance in the model and thereby provide more precise effect estimates (Mutz 1998; Gerber and Green 2012). However, as we had no *a priori* expectations regarding the explanatory power of other covariates, we abstain from adding additional covariates from our models (c.f., Mutz, Pemantle, and Pham 2019).

Responding to the political of the post

We start our analysis by investigating the degree to which congruence between subjects' political predispositions and the sponsorship of the Facebook post influence Facebook behavior.

We test hypotheses 1–3 using a number of logistic regressions, where we include the following explanatory variables: partisan identity of the poster (treatment variable), the respondents' sympathy for that party, and the interaction term for these two variables. While the partisanship of the poster is a binary variable, we treat our measures of sympathy as continuous variables with a scale range of 0–10 (to check for non-monotonous relationships, all analyses were also repeated with measures of sympathy as a categorical variable. These additional analyses did not reveal any non-monotonous relationships, see appendix C).

It should be noted that the survey contained measures both of party sympathy as well as party leader sympathy (i.e. personal sympathy for the two politicians used in the experiments). However, we chose to focus on part sympathy, as the Danish political system is generally characterized by strong political parties. This is also reflected in our data. Party sympathy is a stronger predictor of vote choice than party leader sympathy. Intention to vote for the *Social Democrats* correlates slightly stronger with party sympathy for this party ($r = .52$) than party leader sympathy ($r = .45$). Similarly, intention to vote for *Venstre* correlates strongly with party sympathy ($r = .51$), and slightly less with party leader sympathy ($r = .44$). Because of the party-centered nature of Danish politics, we therefore focus on the effect of party sympathy rather than party leader sympathy (sympathy for the two parties are only weakly correlated, $r(2774) = -0.11$, $p < .001$).

Figure 1 shows the probability of liking the post, conditional on sponsor and party sympathy. The top two graphs show results from the experiment on veterans, whereas the lower two graphs show results from the experiment on immigrants. As one can see from Figure 1, the respondents' propensity to like the posted message is clearly positively dependent on their sympathy for the party behind the message. As illustrated in the top left corner of Figure 1, the probability of liking a post from the *Social Democrats* increases markedly when respondents have a high level of sympathy for the party. Based on this model, a respondent with a level of sympathy one standard deviation below the mean has a probability of 15.5% of liking

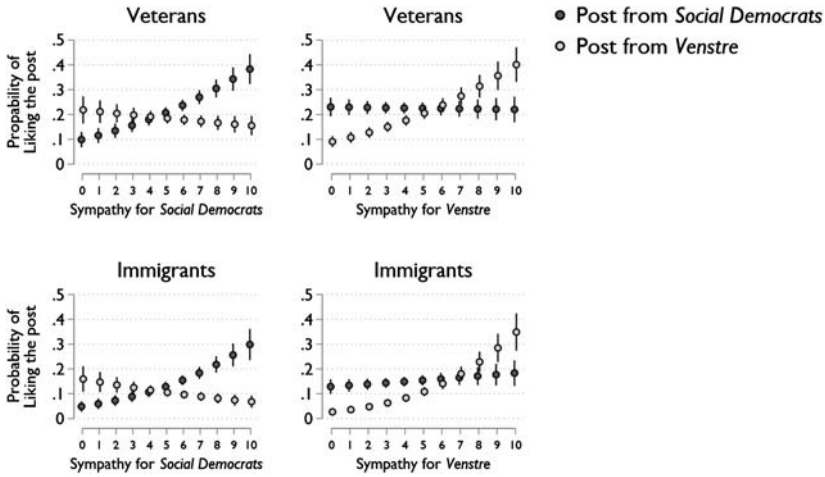

Figure 1. Liking as a function of sponsorship and party sympathy. Estimates with 95% confidence intervals (n = 2,802/2,803).

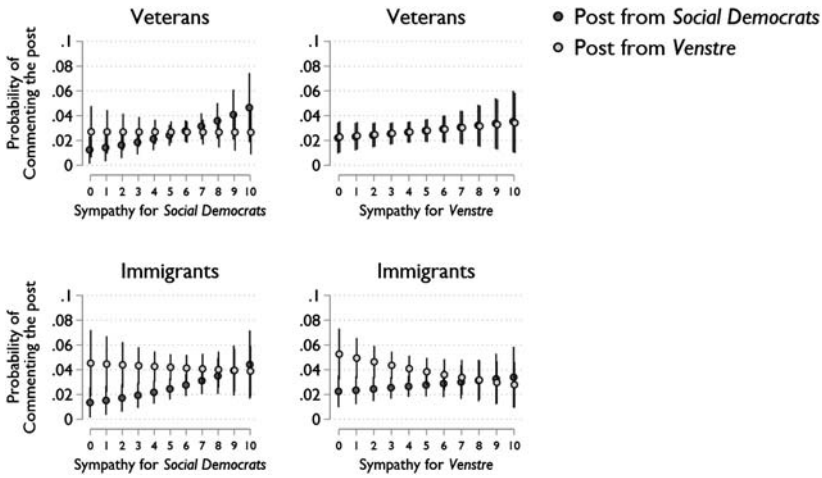

Figure 2. Commenting as a function of sponsorship and party sympathy. Estimates with 95% confidence intervals (n = 2,802/2,803).

the post, while a respondent with a level of sympathy one standard deviation above the mean has a 30.0% probability of liking the post ($p < .001$). In contrast, sympathy for the *Social Democrats* has a negligible and insignificant effect on the probability of liking a post from the opposing party, *Venstre*. We see very similar patterns in the remaining three remaining graphs; across both parties and both experiments, sympathy for the party of the post's sponsor strongly predicts respondents' probability of liking that post, indicating strong support for H1.

Next, we look at the probability of commenting a post, again conditional on party sympathy (Figure 2). The first thing to notice in Figure 2 is that the respondents' stated probabilities of commenting on a post are rather low, regardless of experimental condition and level of sympathy. Across all conditions and levels of sympathy, the probability of commenting is less than 6% of the respondents. Accordingly, there is also very limited variation across the experiments and levels of sympathy. For example, if we look at the top left graph, the probability of commenting for respondents with a level of sympathy for the *Social Democrats* one standard deviation below the mean is 1.8% and 3.5% for respondents with a sympathy one standard deviation above the mean. This difference is just shy of significance ($p = .054$), and comparisons in the three other graphs also yield insignificant differences. Here, we find no support for H2.

Next, we turn to the probability of sharing a post (Figure 3). As one can see in Figure 3, the probability of sharing is also relatively low in all cases. Nevertheless, there is a clear positive relationship between greater sympathy for the sponsor of the post and higher propensity to share, i.e. subjects are generally more likely to share content that is sponsored by a party for which they have a greater sympathy. This relationship is statistically significant for each experimental condition, except for the lower-right graph, where the difference in probability of sharing between a one standard deviation change above and below the mean falls just outside of significance ($p = .052$). Figure 3 illustrates that the relationship between sympathy and the probability of sharing is generally positive, indicating support for H3.

The evidence thus far shows that congruency operationalized as party sympathy does influence respondents' propensity to like (H1) and share (H3) posts, but not comment on them (H2). What about congruency measured as policy positions? Because we have a pre-treatment measure of policy attitudes toward immigration, we focus specifically on the immigration experiment to answer this question. We measure this policy attitude as agreement with the statement *Immigration is a serious threat to Danish culture,* using a 5-point Likert agreement scale. Figure 4 below illustrates tendency to like, comment, and share the post regarding immigrants, conditional on respondents' policy position.

The top set of graphs illustrate the results from models in which policy position is treated as as continuous variable. These graphs all indicate a strong relationship; skepticism towards immigration increases the likelihood of liking, commenting, and sharing the hardline immigrant post, consistent with H1, H2, and H3. However, this is not all of the story. The lower graphs illustrate the results, when policy position is treated as a categorical variable (i.e. allowing for non-monotonic relationships). These models reveal a distinct "inflection point" when it comes to the likelihood of commenting on a post. Those on the opposite sides on the immigration debate are the ones most

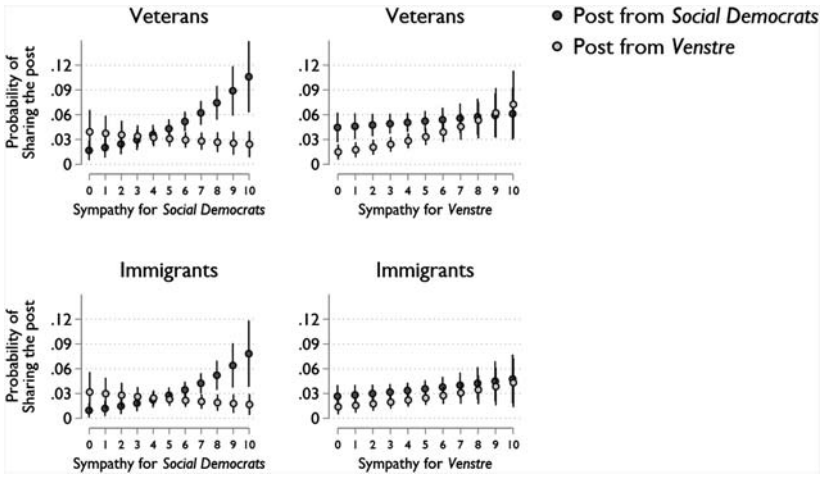

Figure 3. Sharing as a function of sponsorship and party sympathy. Estimates with 95% confidence intervals ($n = 2{,}802/2{,}803$).

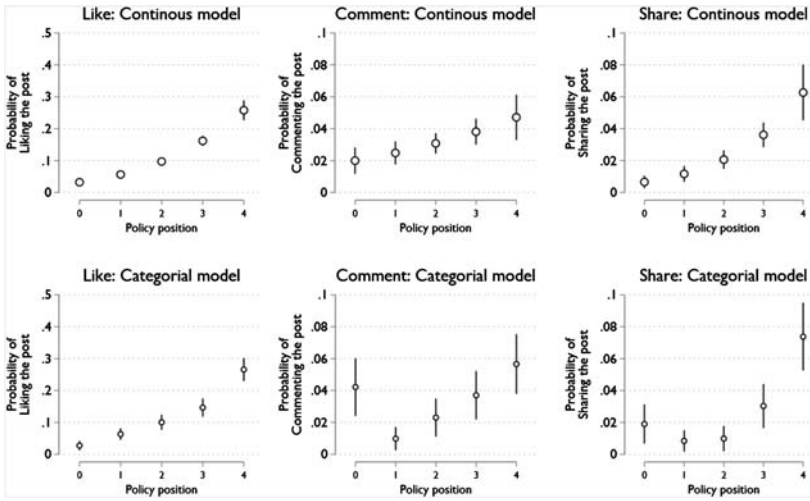

Figure 4. Liking, commenting, and sharing post on immigrant as a function of policy position. Estimates with 95% confidence intervals ($n = 2{,}972$).

likely to comment on a post. We also see an indication of a similar inflection point when analyzing the propensity to share, but this is much smaller and not significant.

Responding to the popularity of the post

We start the bandwagon analysis by looking at how respondents reacted to the number of likes from other users. As illustrated in Figure 5, the number of

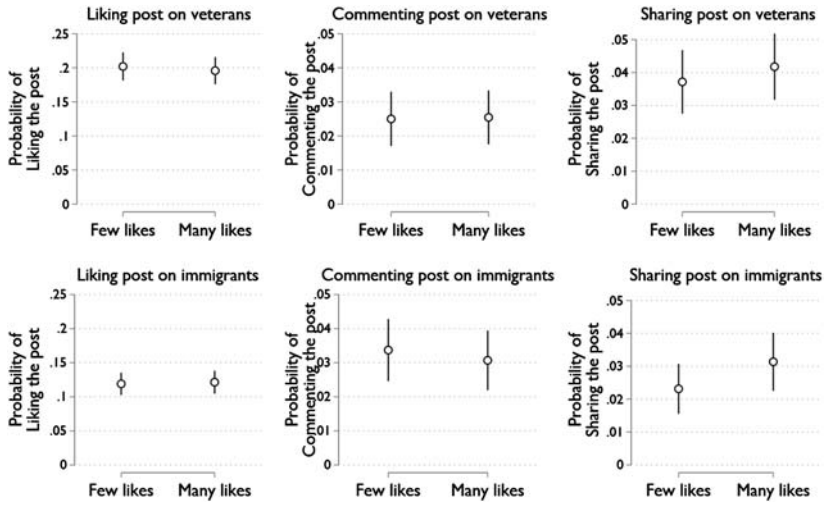

Figure 5. Number of likes has no effect on liking, commenting, and sharing. Estimates with 95% confidence intervals ($n = 3{,}012$).

likes already given to a post had no significant effect on the respondent's propensity to like, comment, or share the post. In this, H4 finds no support in any context.

Finally, we look at how respondents reacted to other people's comments. As illustrated in the top half of Figure 6, respondents were less likely to like,

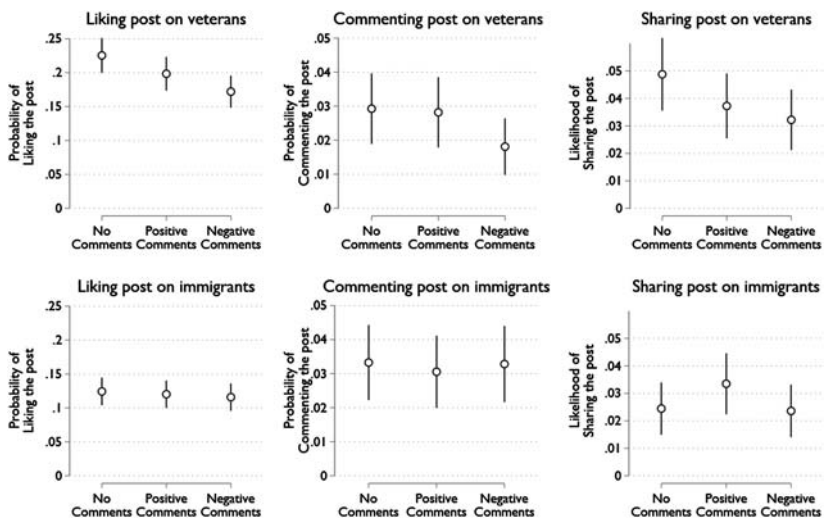

Figure 6. Comments have small effects on liking, commenting, and sharing. Estimates with 95% confidence intervals ($n = 3{,}012$).

comment, or share when exposed to critical comments on the veteran posts. For respondents exposed to a post with no comments, the probability of liking is 22.5%, which is significantly higher ($p = .003$) than the 17.2% probability among respondents exposed to critical comments. Similarly, respondents' probability of commenting on the veteran post drops from an already low 2.9% among respondents exposed in the no-comment condition to 1.8% among respondents exposed to critical comments ($p = .098$). Finally, the propensity to share the post on veterans also drops from 4.9% to 3.2% when exposed to negative comments ($p = .058$). However, because comments on the immigration post have no significant effects on the respondents' propensity to like, comment, or share, we consider these results to provide only partial support for H5.

Discussion

In this project, we studied both political signaling and bandwagon effects in the context of social media. Social media have become a powerful medium for the distribution of news about politics, and given the level of interaction possible, social transmission of news is possible today on a scale unimaginable just a few decades ago. Our experiments show that people are more likely to like and share posts when this post come from a party they like. However, when it comes to commenting on posts, we find that people with extreme policy attitudes – in either direction – tend to be the most likely to engage with political posts.

The finding that social media users are more likely to like and share ideologically-congruent content contrasts with evidence indicating that most social media users consume a balanced media diet (Guess 2021; Scharkow et al. 2020), perhaps because social endorsements mitigate partisan selective exposure (Anspach 2017; Messing and Westwood 2014). However, it is important to note that the present study's design differs from those in potentially meaningful ways. First, we reemphasize that the current article addresses the decision to *interact* with political content on social media, as opposed to previous research's focus on *exposure* to such content. Additionally, we attributed the treatment posts in our experiment to political elites rather than mainstream media outlets (Messing and Westwood 2014) or close network ties (Anspach 2017). It may be that posts from political elites elicit more selective behavior than those made by other actors. Finally, our Danish sample may behave differently from the American samples used in many similar studies. We therefore look forward to more comparative work in this area to better understand country-specific contexts.

When interpreting these results, it is of course important to take into account the experimental setting versus real-life use of social media. One

important difference is that while participants in our experiments were exposed to just one social media post at a time, real-life use of social media usually entail scrolling through multiple post. As such, the choice to engage actively with a post might be rarer in real-life setting. It is important to note, however, that while stated behavioral intentions are not always great predictors of actual behavior, self-reported intentions on social media behavior seem to be fairly strong predictors of actual behavior on social media (Mosleh, Pennycook, and Rand 2020).

At first blush, these findings seem to fuel concern that social media create echo chambers. However, we do not take such a pessimistic view from these findings. First, while some studies of social media have found that "birds of a feather tweet together," several other studies have shown that people are exposed to ideologically diverse sources (Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic 2015; Barbera et al. 2015; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Thus, the propensity to share ideologically congruent information does not in itself lead to echo chambers as long as people are connected to an ideologically diverse network.

Second, the finding that people's choices are driven by their own political predispositions, rather than the number of likes or comments from strangers a post receives, seems to us a normatively reassuring finding. It shows that Facebook audiences are relatively principled in what they decide to endorse and share. Of course, outright obstinacy and the inability to compromise are dangerous for democracies, but we argue that a blind herd mentality where citizens endorse whichever policy is currently trending on Facebook would be deleterious to good governance.

Finally, the findings presented here are important for understanding how political news is disseminated in the modern era. Though the uses and gratifications literature has roots in the mid-twentieth century, its theoretical underpinnings are perhaps more relevant today than ever before. In television and newspaper contexts, most individuals forego political news in favor of entertainment options (Prior 2007). However, because social media feature entertainment and news in the same space, the potential is there for sites like Facebook to inadvertently inform audiences. This may give modern opinion leaders outsize power to influence the media narrative that their social media networks receive. Our findings suggest that these opinion leaders are strategic in what they share (see Weeks, Ardèvol-Abreu, and de Zúñiga H 2015), creating new avenues for the two-step flow of communication and partisan media effects.

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