

## **Bridging the politician-citizen divide? Interaction on SNS during the Danish parliamentary election 2011**

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### **Abstract**

In Denmark, like in many other places in the world, support for political parties is declining, making political parties more eager to engage with citizens in order to narrow the politician-citizen divide. However, some researchers fear that social media might be polarizing political debate online. This general study examines how politicians can successfully encourage vertical interaction and debate with citizens through social media and whether polarization is taking place horizontally user-to-user. The interaction between politicians and citizens are analyzed using a dataset recording politicians' Facebook activity during the Danish National Election 2011.

### **Keywords**

politics; social network site; social media; election

### **Introduction**

Politicians have always had a natural interest in meeting the citizens or voters where they are, either on a busy street offline or, now more than ever, through the Internet highways or hubs of citizen debates online. In Denmark the national election campaign every fourth year have increasingly spread to digital platforms, and in 2011 Facebook was by far the preferred online social medium for politicians according to own studies (Hoff, Jensen, Klastrup, Schwartz, & Brügger, 2012). Politicians are eager to engage with citizens but the support for political parties seems to be declining in Denmark (Elklit, Møller, Svensson, & Togeby, 2005) like many other places in the world (Coleman & Blumler, 2009) increasing a politician-citizen divide. However, the Danish voting percentage in 2011 was one of the highest in many years nationally as well as being one of the highest in the world (OECD, 2011). Apparently then lack of party support from Danish citizens is not equal to a general lack of interest in politics. This study examines how politicians engaged with citizens through their Facebook page during the election and analyses which communication styles successfully encouraged interaction and debate. However, social media has been criticized for potentially polarizing political debates or producing echo chambers (Conover et al., 2011; Munson & Resnick, 2010; Sunstein, 2009; Yardi & boyd, 2010). Thus this study will both look into the vertical relationship between politician-citizen, but also the horizontal citizen-to-citizen debate. These issues are studied by crawling and analyzing political candidates' (mainly the 9 top candidates from each party) public Facebook page activity including updates, likes and user comments during the Danish 2011 election campaign.

### *The case of Denmark, a Facebook Nation*

Denmark has a very high percentage of Facebook users per capita<sup>1</sup>, but much fewer are active on Twitter and so most Danish political candidates also chose Facebook over Twitter as their preferred social medium (Hoff, Jensen, Klastrup, Schwartz, & Brügger, 2013; Skovsgaard & Van Dalen, 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/> [accessed 14<sup>th</sup> of March 2013]

Blogging was less popular, and since the Danish politicians' blogging heydays of the national election 2007, the number of politicians blogging actively have decreased from 249 to only 83 in 2011 (Hoff, Jensen, Klastrop, Schwartz, & Brügger, 2013). Our studies show that in 2011, around 475 candidates had a personal profile<sup>2</sup> on Facebook while 297 had a Facebook page. In comparison, only 107 had a Twitter-profile and many of these were inactive, with low activity or were merely duplicating Facebook activity. Facebook therefore seems to be a good platform for politicians to engage the citizens where they are and also the obvious choice for researchers to analyze Danish politician-citizen interaction.

I am conducting analysis of the debates that took place on politicians' Facebook candidate pages in order to give insight into the potential benefits and issues of choosing Facebook as a mean of communication with potential voters. I wish to conceptualize different communication styles on social media from the study of candidates' Facebook pages by taking a qualitative approach of coding text moving from open codes to focused codes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). This includes looking into what types of messages and type of candidates seems to be most successful in generating user/citizen activity both likes and comments.

In addition to codifying the politicians' communication from a strategic perspective, my study also examines the users' reactions and engagement with each other. This allows for an evaluation of whether echo chambers or polarization seem to be prevalent user-to-user, or whether a more distributed and inclusive debate seems to be taking place. Here, Facebook is an interesting platform to study since the boundary between private and public is more converging than on Twitter, a public-by-default platform. Communication on a mixed public and private platform might be corrupted by private agendas, life politics (Giddens, 1999), life style (Bennett, 1998) or other narcissistic projects. On the other hand more people might be exposed to political debate in their daily life and consequently might also interact in debates that they normally would not engage in. Sunstein's warning of political polarization (2002) and echo chambers (2009) online might be more relevant to smaller groups as highlighted by Farrell (2012). Whether Facebook's networked structure and political networked sphere encourages or excludes diverse opinions for deliberation is so far unclear since studies of social interaction and political debate on this platform is so far underrepresented in social research (Enli & Moe, 2013) in comparison to the more accessible Twitter platform, which have been studied in various national contexts (for instance see Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013; Larsson & Moe, 2011; Burgess & Bruns, 2012).

#### *Different politician, different style*

This general study is ongoing but preliminary results show that Danish politicians chose very different approaches to citizen engagement on social media during the election best exemplified by very different level of activity from the two top candidates competing for the position of prime minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen (LLR) and Helle Thorning-Schmidt's (HTS). LLR posted about 210 updates during the election campaign from 26<sup>th</sup> of August until the 15<sup>th</sup> of September whereas HTS only posted 33. HTS had much more likes of her page (128.743 against 91.411) but LLR accumulated more likes of his updates in total than she did (92.125 against 50.090). In short LLR encouraged more activity from users probably because of his many updates, even though HTS had a larger audience from the likes of her page.

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<sup>2</sup> This number could deviate when taking into account unsearchable Facebook profiles and profiles made under alias

Another interesting example of social media use is the Danish leading candidate for the Red-Green Alliance Party (DK: Enhedslisten) Johanne Schmidt-Nielsen (JSN) who apparently had considerable success in using Facebook. JSN differed from the other leading candidates in that she had low visibility in traditional media including television (Infomedia, 2011), but high activity on her Facebook page both own activity and from citizens. In terms of election results, she ended up with second most personal votes, surpassed only by the former prime minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen (LLR). She by far surpassed the winning prime minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt in personal votes. JSN was very active on Facebook, posting 110 updates during the election campaign, but part of her high citizen response could also be because her party traditionally has always had a large amount of young supporters, making Facebook an obvious platform for her and her party.

Variations in communication and style might make sense when considering politicians' various audiences, different political candidates and their respective political parties. However, by analyzing the activity and interaction between politician and citizen on Facebook further quantitatively and qualitatively, we should be able to make general statements about what type of communication and style generally encourage activity and response. Variations and commonalities in candidates' communication style are currently being analyzed further including comparisons of more candidates from the 2011 election with a focus on the 9 top candidates from each party. Also users' responses to politicians' updates as well as user-to-user debates are being studied and results from this second part of the overall study are forthcoming.

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