

Can't buy me love? Analisando a dinâmica de equalização-normalização nas Eleições Nacionais Portuguesas de 2022

Can't buy me love? Analyzing the equalization – normalization dynamics in the Portuguese 2022 National Election

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Resumo

O debate sobre se as redes sociais têm um efeito normalizador ou equalizador na dinâmica do poder político persiste há mais de duas décadas e continua a ser altamente relevante. Este estudo contribui para esta discussão ao examinar como a longevidade dos partidos e os níveis de recursos influenciaram tanto a utilização estratégica do Facebook como o envolvimento dos utilizadores durante as eleições nacionais portuguesas de 2022. Utilizando uma abordagem de análise das redes sociais, analisámos todas as publicações do Facebook (n = 1.383) publicadas pelos partidos políticos com representação parlamentar no mês que antecedeu a eleição. Adotando uma perspetiva multidimensional, o estudo considerou tanto o lado da oferta (atividade partidária e número de seguidores) como o lado da procura (métricas de *engagement* dos utilizadores). Quando a longevidade partidária é utilizada como critério, os resultados sugerem uma tendência para a equalização: os partidos mais novos cultivam audiências mais elevadas, geram níveis mais elevados de envolvimento e demonstram uma forte presença no Facebook. No entanto, quando são considerados os recursos partidários, surge uma clara correlação entre os gastos de campanha e o sucesso online, suportando

Abstract

The debate over whether social media networks have a normalizing or equalizing effect on political power dynamics has persisted for over two decades and remains highly relevant. This study contributes to that discussion by examining how party longevity and resource levels influenced both the strategic use of Facebook and user engagement during the 2022 Portuguese national election. Using a social media analytics approach, we analyzed all Facebook posts (n = 1 383) published by political parties with parliamentary representation in the month leading up to the election. Adopting a multidimensional perspective, the study considered both the supply side (party activity and number of followers) and the demand side (user engagement metrics). When party longevity is used as the criterion, the results suggest a trend toward equalization: newer parties cultivate larger audiences, generate higher levels of engagement, and demonstrate a strong presence on Facebook. However, when party resources are considered, a clear correlation emerges between campaign spending and online success, thus supporting the normalization hypothesis. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

assim a hipótese da normalização. As implicações teóricas e práticas destes resultados são discutidas.

Palavras-chave: equalização; normalização; **Keywords:** *equalization; normalization; digital political communication política digital; campanha eleitoral. communication; electoral campaign.*

1. Introduction

Around 25 years ago, Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) introduced the third age of political communication, noting that “not only are the avenues of political communication multiplying in a process that is becoming more diverse, fragmented, and complex, but also, at a deeper level, power relations among key message providers are being rearranged” (p. 209). At the time, the influential researchers could suspect – but not know – how much more multiple, diverse, fragmented, and complex political communication would become. Later, Blumler (2016) added a fourth age, whose main feature was the exponential use of internet resources and its role in the intersection between politics, citizens, and media. Indeed, traditional media have been losing prominence in their gatekeeping role in favor of digital technologies, which now constitute the fifth estate (Perloff, 2021). In the words of Jungherr and Schroeder (2021), “digital media have thus become a highly influential source through which social and political reality gets mediated and acted upon” (p. 30).

The quick circulation of new technologies pressures political actors to adapt their strategies to digital communication's complex, multidimensional, and disruptive logic (Chadwick, 2017). We can pinpoint Web 2.0 and social media as the technological breakthroughs that revolutionized the world of politics: they introduced a complex, disintermediated communication process that enables political actors to pursue objectives such as managing their visibility, reestablishing a direct connection with voters, monitoring their opinions, and influencing the media agenda (Figueiras, 2019).

If it is clear that in Western democracies digital platforms have moved from the periphery to the center of electoral campaigning (Gibson, 2020), it is less consensual what its impact is on electoral competition, particularly on the gap between larger or more resourceful parties, and smaller or less resourceful players (Vanden Eynde, Put, & Maddens, 2022). This dichotomy is the basis of the normalization-equalization debate, which, despite being around since the end of the 20th century (Corrado & Firestone, 1996; Margolis & Resnick, 2000), is yet to be settled. On the contrary, its relevance has been reinforced by the extensive scientific literature produced on the subject in various parts of the world over the years up until today (Bene, 2021; Gibson, 2020; Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2008; Jacobs & Spierings, 2016; Koc-Michalska, Lilleker, Smith, & Weissmann, 2016; Larsson, 2016; Lev-On & Haleva-Amir, 2018; Ramos-Serrano, Fernández Gómez, & Pineda, 2018; Rosa et al., 2022; Vanden Eynde et al., 2022; Zamir, 2023).

The normalization theory claims that social media rewards established political parties because the exposure provided by traditional media offline boosts the attention, they receive online (Koc-Michalska et al., 2016). Also, due to greater resources, larger parties will likely be the most innovative in their use of social media, generating more content and traffic and engaging more audiences (Lev-On & Haleva-Amir, 2018). On the other hand, the equalization approach suggests that by being almost

universally accessible and fairly cheap (Vanden Eynde et al., 2022), the digital sphere makes it possible to redistribute political power. Through the original use of social media, weaker political actors can bypass traditional media, strengthen their positions, and equalize their status (Zamir, 2023). Recently, another factor was added to the debate: social media reach. One possibility is that smaller or new political actors can reach increasingly wider audiences, surpassing established parties (equalization); the other is that dominant parties maintain their higher reach also on social media (normalization) (Van Aelst, van Erkel, D'heer, & Harder, 2017).

Although the majority of the studies point to a normalization effect (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016; Klinger, 2013; Koc-Michalska et al., 2016; Lam, Cheung, & Lo, 2021; Lev-On & Haleva-Amir, 2018; Ramos-Serrano et al., 2018; Sobaci, 2018; Van Aelst et al., 2017; Zamir, 2023), there is also evidence of equalization patterns (Bene, 2021; Gibson & McAllister, 2015; Larsson, 2016; Vanden Eynde et al., 2022). Another possibility recently proposed is that the two phenomena occur intermittently throughout different phases, in which recent and minor parties are the first to experiment with new technologies and formulas of communication (equalization), which are later adopted and further refined by established parties (normalization) (Gibson, 2020).

In this study, we consider the possibility that at least part of these contradictory results (or the perception that results are contradictory) may be related to where we draw the line between the "major" and the "minor" parties (Gibson & McAllister, 2015, p. 529). For example, Lev-On and Haleva-Amir (2018) distinguish "peripheral and smaller players that lack resources" from "established and resourceful players" (p. 736); Rosa et al. (2022) mention "major" and "newer or smaller parties" (p. 129); Gibson (2020) describes the "major parties" and the "smaller and newer parties that lack resources" (p. 222), Koc-Michalska et al. (2016) differentiates between "rich parties" and "smaller parties" (p. 129). The literature seems to assume a strong association between size, longevity, and resources, which may not always exist.

Recently, Bene (2021) also called out the general conceptual confusion around these theories. Following theoretical recommendations by Wright (2011) – who warns that “if researchers wish to frame their research with the revolution/normalization dichotomy, they must be explicit about what they mean by the terms” (p. 257) – in this study, we analyze the effects of normalization and equalization in Portuguese politics by two clearly stated criteria: longevity and resources.

2. Digital political communication in Portugal

In Portugal, the development of digital political communication had a slow start. At the beginning of the 21st century, in an analysis of the level of sophistication of political party websites in 15 European Union countries, Portugal got an average score of 34.7 points, the lowest placement, well below the European average (59.2) and the average of the neighbour Spain (48.6) (Norris, 2003). Ten years later, in a study on the 2009 National Election, Lisi (2013) identified a “rather low” level of campaign professionalization without “any significant use” (p. 272) of digital technologies in Portugal, unlike the political scenario in Western Europe. The author associated the traditional character of Portuguese political campaigns with a high dependence on television as a communication channel and a competitively low electoral system level, among other factors.

The idea that there was much to be done regarding the use of social media by political actors in Portugal persisted over the years. Regarding the 2013 Local Election, Santos and Bicho (2016) concluded that the online campaign followed a Web 1.0 instead of a 2.0 logic, replicating the logic of traditional media communication. Analyzing the performance of the two main Portuguese parties – the Socialist Party (PS) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD) – in the 2015 National Election, Berta García-Orosa, Vázquez-Sande, and López-García (2017) found a low level of innovation based on the lack of content adaptation to different platforms, the lack of specific copywriting (with information being replicated from press releases), low content sharing from other pages, low interaction with users, and failure to take advantage of the benefits of mobile communication.

More recent studies report advances regarding the parties' digital performances, although they highlight some shortcomings. Considering a period of seven years (2010-2017), Serra-Silva, Carvalho, and Fazendeiro (2018) observed a rise in the posts' volume and increased use of newer, fancier multimedia content. The authors note that “it is indisputable that Portuguese parties are investing in social media communication and trying to take advantage of its possibilities and potential” (p. 208). Likewise, in an analysis that includes the Portuguese parties with parliamentary representation in 2021, Beatriz García-Orosa (2022) registers an increased use of audiovisual content and image-based platforms, such as Flickr and Instagram, as well as advances in information segmentation. Both studies identify asymmetrical top-down communication as a bottleneck, which distances itself from more transactional modes of communication based on dialogue and co-creation of content (Beatriz García-Orosa, 2022; Serra-Silva et al., 2018).

However, there is less consensus regarding the debate between normalization and equalization in the context of digital platforms in Portugal. Despite admitting that Portuguese parties are not equal in their performance in the digital world, Braga, Rocha, and Carlomagno (2017) reject the normalization theory, arguing that the internet does not simply reproduce offline patterns. On the contrary, analyzing the 2015 National Election, Pina (2018) strongly points to a normalization effect, concluding that the social media activity by the two major parties in Portugal is twice that of the smaller parties in communicative production and supporters' adhesion. Recent studies also offer conflicting evidence: while Rosa et al. (2022) concludes that newer and smaller parties receive more user engagement, Santana-Pereira (2023) argues that, in Portugal, “online campaigning is scarce and competition between major and minor parties presents a pattern of normalization, with the former being able to invest more resources and run more successful digital campaigns” (p. 271).

These divergent findings highlight the need for further empirical analysis of how party characteristics shape digital communication strategies and audience interaction. To address this gap, the present study poses the following research questions:

RQ1: How did party longevity (new vs. established) and resource levels (more vs. less resourced) affect the strategic use of Facebook during the 2022 Portuguese national election campaign?

RQ2: How did party longevity (new vs. established) and resource levels (more vs. less resourced) affect the user engagement during the 2022 Portuguese national election campaign?

This study offers several contributions to the literature. First, there is a notable scarcity of research on this topic within the Portuguese context. As Serra-Silva et al. (2018) point out, “Portugal is somewhat

marginalized in the study of parties' online communication strategies" (p. 187). Second, the study introduces a novel approach to the Portuguese debate on equalization and normalization by directly comparing the influence of party longevity and resources – two central but often separately examined variables. Third, considering that political communication is highly context-dependent, it is crucial to account for specific political, economic, and media environments (Salgado, 2019).

The 2022 Portuguese national election presents a particularly compelling case: it was an early election triggered by the rejection of the state budget and occurred amid a global pandemic. Moreover, and perhaps most significantly, new parties were gaining traction. In particular, the rapid rise of a far-right party signalled a potential structural shift in the Portuguese political landscape – one long considered "immune" to such movements (Fernandes & Magalhães, 2020, p. 1046). Additionally, following the logic that electoral competitiveness can foster campaign professionalization (Lisi, 2013), the election's unpredictable outcome may have prompted a more intense use of social media by political actors.

3. The political context

After years of political alliance, the so-called "Geringonça" (which means an improvised or unstable thing) between the Socialist Party (Partido Socialista/PS), the Portuguese Communist Party (Partido Comunista Português/PCP), and the Left Bloc (Bloco de Esquerda/BE) came to an end. The left-wing allies joined the right-wing parties and rejected the Socialist minority government's budget bill for 2022, which led to the scheduling of early elections. Without Geringonça's support, António Costa, the Socialist Party's leader, wanted to secure a majority government. On the other hand, the Communist Party and the Left Bloc had a lot at stake, given they had lost votes in the previous elections due to their association with the Socialists and were currently being blamed by the incumbent for the collapse of the budget and the resulting political crisis.

At the same time, there was a crisis in the traditional right wing of the Portuguese political spectrum. After a heavy defeat in the 2019 National Election and minimal representation in Parliament, the People's Party (Centro Democrático e Social - Partido Popular/CDS-PP) struggled to maintain its political relevance. The attempt to rejuvenate the party's image and appeal to new generations collided with the party's Christian and conservative character. On the other hand, the Social Democratic Party (Partido Social Democrata/PSD), one of the largest political forces in the country and the main opposition to the government, was going through internal divisions that weakened its political strength. If, on the one hand, its leader Rui Rio's opposition style was considered too moderate, on the other hand there was speculation about the possibility of a right-wing alliance that would include a new rising far-right political party, which became a red flag for some voters.

Indeed, the 2022 National Election was also characterized by a more diverse political landscape than ever in Portugal. After the rise of the environmentalist/animalist party People-Animals-Nature (Pessoas-Animais-Natureza/PAN) in 2015, the 2019 National Election was marked by the parliamentary entry of three new political forces: the far-right populist Enough (Chega / CH), the economically libertarian Liberal Initiative (Iniciativa Liberal / IL) and the left-wing libertarian Free (Livre / L) (Lisi, Sanches, & dos Santos Maia, 2020).

In an interview prior to the election, political scientist Pedro Magalhães described a scenario of "total uncertainty", in which the "closer proximity between parties" translates into high competitiveness (SIC

Notícias, 2022). In addition, the researcher identifies several extra doubts. On the one hand, the most contested elections are usually mobilizing because "people feel that their vote can be more decisive"; on the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic meant hundreds of thousands of voters would be in isolation, which could be a demobilizing factor. Also, while competitiveness can encourage tactical voting – in which one votes against the victory of a particular party – the polls revealed the potential rise of some new parties. All things considered, the relevance of this electoral moment is clear.

4. Method

This study aims to contribute to the debate on normalization and equalization by comparing the use of Facebook and user engagement of (1) new and established parties and (2) more resourceful and less resourceful parties during the 2022 National Election in Portugal.

Regarding longevity, in line with Rosa et al. (2022), we consider new parties those that emerged after the Web 2.0 advent. If we consider that Facebook became publicly available in 2006, there is a clear distinction between parties formed pre-social media (established parties) and post-social media (new parties). Table 1 presents the parties' foundation years and the division between established and new parties.

Table 1: Established and new parties

	Parties	Foundation year
Established	Portuguese Communist Party + Ecologist Party (CDU)	1974 / 1982
	People's Party (CDS-PP)	1975
	Social Democratic Party (PSD)	1975
	Socialist Party (PS)	1975
	Left Bloc (BE)	1999
New	People-Animals-Nature (PAN)	2011
	Free (L)	2014
	Liberal Initiative (IL)	2017
	Enough (CH)	2019

Regarding resources, we used the campaign expenses in the Portuguese 2022 National Election as a proxy, which is publicly available information. Since we found no theoretical recommendations for the division between parties based on resources, and due to the existence of extreme values, we chose to use the median to find a central value and then divide the parties into two groups. In this case, the median value is equivalent to the Left Bloc (BE) campaign expenses, so we had to decide which group to place this party in. Considering its closer proximity to the budget of the Liberal Initiative (IL) than the Unitary Democratic Coalition (CDU), this party was placed in the group of wealthier parties. Table 2 aggregates the information regarding the parties' campaign expenses and their division into more and less resourceful parties.

Table 2: More resourceful and less resourceful parties

Parties		2022 National Election Campaign expenses (€)
More resourceful	PS	3 388 778
	PSD	1 858 865
	CH	615 390
	IL	599 002
	BE	590 428
	Total	7 052 463
Less resourceful	CDU	551 771
	CDS-PP	299 660
	PAN	252 030
	L	59 650
	Total	1 163 111

(Source: Entidade das Contas e Financiamentos Políticos / Secretaria-Geral do Ministério da Administração Pública¹)

We adopted a social media analytics approach, analyzing all the posts published by every party with parliamentary representation ($n = 1.383$) during the 28 days before the election (3rd January – 30th January 2022). Data was collected using CrowdTangle, a public insights tool from Meta. In line with recent research (Bene, 2021), we approach Facebook performance as a multidimensional concept by analyzing activity (number of posts), number of followers, and level of user engagement (likes, reactions, comments, and shares). Despite the recent decline in Facebook use by younger generations, this platform is still the most used network in Portugal, especially among older groups (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, Eddy, & Nielsen, 2022), which vote significantly more (Magalhães, 2022).

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Activity

The first level of analysis is activity. Table 3 presents data regarding the parties' foundation year, the year of Facebook adoption, and the number of posts during the electoral campaign for the 2022 National Election.

Table 3: Facebook activity

Parties		Number of posts	Posts/party
Established	CDU	208	168.00
	CDS-PP	103	
	PSD	201	
	PS	169	
	BE	159	
Total		840	

¹ Available [here](#).

New	PAN	174	135.75
	L	92	
	IL	97	
	CH	180	
Total		543	
More resourceful	PS	169	161.20
	PSD	201	
	CH	180	
	IL	97	
	BE	159	
Total		806	
Less resourceful	CDU	208	144.25
	CDS-PP	103	
	PAN	174	
	L	92	
Total		577	

Theoretically, more active parties can communicate more messages to their audience and establish a more robust connection with their followers (Bene, 2021). In this case, we found that established parties posted more frequently than new parties, and more resourceful parties were also more active than less resourceful parties, both in absolute and relative terms.

Despite not being a substantial difference, we would expect newer and less wealthy parties to be “comparably more ardent in their posting to their Facebook Pages” to attempt to compensate for the limited access to traditional media (Larsson, 2016, p. 288). Therefore, the activity dimension favors the normalization perspective. One possible explanation is that old players have more content due to their routine political activity – and new parties can find it hard to produce comparable volume (Lev-On & Haleva-Amir, 2018), and also that parties with a higher budget can afford to have a more sophisticated activity (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016).

5.2. Popularity, commitment, and virality

Increased user engagement on social media indicates that parties perform better and have a successful digital communication strategy (Magin, Podschuweit, Haßler, & Russmann, 2017). Table 4 presents the Facebook reach and user engagement data for every party during the Portuguese 2022 National Election.

Table 4: Followers, reactions, likes, comments and shares

Parties		Followers (mean)	Reactions	Likes	Comments	Shares
Established	CDU	19 797	39 627	36 172	1 445	25 108
	CDS-PP	42 005	15 706	14 470	1 574	2 786
	PSD	164 097	136 626	123 236	20 193	19 134
	PS	99 945	105 170	92 536	23 855	12 322
	BE	8 808	17 772	14 060	1 512	5 842
	Total	334 652	314 901	280 474	48 579	65 192
New	PAN	166 651	18 597	14 236	4 199	3 502
	L	30 982	6 742	5 958	857	993
	IL	117 544	96 662	89 075	8 054	10 939
	CH	143 875	163 439	144 064	31 169	22 916
	Total	459 052	285 440	253 333	44 279	38 350
More resourceful	PS	99 945	105 170	92 536	23 855	12 322
	PSD	164 097	136 626	123 236	20 193	19 134
	CH	143 875	163 439	144 064	31 169	22 916
	IL	117 544	96 662	89 075	8 054	10 939
	BE	8 805	17 772	14 060	1 512	5 842
	Total	534 266	519 669	463 971	85 783	70 153
Less resourceful	CDU	19 797	39 627	36 172	1 445	25 108
	CDS-PP	42 005	15 706	14 470	1 574	2 786
	PAN	166 651	18 597	14 236	4 199	3 502
	L	30 982	6 742	5 958	857	993
	Total	259 435	80 672	70 836	7 075	32 389

First, we can compare the number of followers since this dimension indicates a political actor's level of exposure and interest (Zamir, 2023). Considering longevity, new parties have substantially more followers than established parties (459 052 vs. 334 652), and this value is even more significant in relative terms (average followers per party: 114 763 vs. 66 930). An independent t-test confirms that new parties maintain significantly more followers than established parties ($t(1342.88) = -19.342, p < 0.001$). It is particularly noteworthy if we consider the difference in account longevity: it would be expected that established parties have developed dedicated communities over time (Lev-On & Haleva-Amir, 2018). Thus, this result suggests an equalization movement.

However, looking through the lens of resources, it is observed that more affluent parties have more followers than parties with fewer resources (534 266 vs. 259 435; average followers per party: 106 853 and 64 858, respectively). An independent t-test confirms that the mean difference between more wealthy and less wealthy parties' followers is statistically significant ($t(1121.567) = -12.134, p < 0.001$). This result points towards a normalization dynamic.

Secondly, we must analyze the four main types of engagement on Facebook: liking/reacting, commenting, and sharing. According to Kim and Yang (2017), these represent increasing levels of

involvement: a like or reaction is the lowest level, requiring only one click; commenting is assumed as an intermediate level, as it requires extra cognitive effort and can appear publicly in the news feed; sharing is considered the highest level of involvement, as it appears on the user's page and, therefore, is seen as a strategic behavior related to self-presentation and identity. Other authors also conceptualize likes in terms of popularity, comments in terms of commitment, and shares in terms of virality (Bonsón & Ratkai, 2013; Serra-Silva et al., 2018), a terminology we adopt here.

In absolute terms, both the longevity and the resources criteria point to a normalization trend. As shown by Table 4, both established and more resourceful parties achieved higher engagement across all metrics. However, this conclusion can be misleading, especially considering that the groups are not constituted by the same number of parties. Therefore, it is essential to analyze the data in relative terms. Table 5 presents the parties' average popularity, commitment, and virality.

Table 5: Popularity, commitment and virality

Parties		Popularity		Commitment		Virality	
		Average number of likes per post		Average number of comments per post		Average number of shares per post	
Established	CDU	187.56	333.90	6.95	57.83	120.71	77.61
	CDS-PP	140.49		15.28		27.05	
	PSD	679.73		100.46		95.19	
	PS	547.55		141.15		72.911	
	BE	88.43		9.51		36.74	
New	PAN	81.82	466.54	24.13	81.55	20.13	70.63
	L	73.28		9.32		10.79	
	IL	918.30		83.03		112.77	
	CH	800.36		173.16		127.31	
More resourceful	PS	547.55	574.41	141.15	105.19	72.91	88.28
	PSD	679.73		100.46		95.19	
	CH	800.36		173.16		127.31	
	IL	918.30		83.03		112.77	
	BE	88.43		9.51		36.74	
Less resourceful	CDU	187.56	122.77	6.95	13.99	120.71	56.13
	CDS-PP	140.49		15.28		27.05	
	PAN	81.82		24.13		20.13	
	L	73.28		9.32		10.79	

Through the analysis of Table 5, we can see that new parties score higher in terms of popularity (466.54 vs. 333.90) and commitment (81.55 vs. 57.83), but established parties are slightly more viral (77.61 vs. 70.63). We conducted independent t-tests to verify if the mean difference was statistically significant. The t-tests confirmed that new parties score significantly higher in terms of popularity ($t(778.537) = -5.063$, $p < 0.001$) and commitment ($t(1255.230) = -2.334$, $p < 0.05$). Regarding virality, unsurprisingly, established parties' superiority in terms of shares is not statistically significant ($t(966.079) = 1.053$, $p = 0.292$). Although the ability of established parties to produce viral content – the highest level of user

engagement – should still be noted, overall, these results suggest an equalization effect. In Portugal, Facebook might indeed be “a leveling force of political competition” (Bene, 2021, p. 16) between old and new parties, as recently reported (Rosa et al., 2022).

However, the interpretation is quite different if we adopt the resources criteria. The results indicate that the wealthier parties receive a lot more likes (almost five times more), comments (seven times more), and shares (88.28 vs. 56.13). Independent t-tests were conducted and attest that parties with more budget are more popular ($t(902.841) = -26.057, p < 0.001$), inspire more commitment ($t(907.062) = -10.559, p < 0.001$), and are more viral ($t(1281.464) = -5.243, p < 0.001$).

To further explore these results, we conducted Pearson correlation tests to examine the relationship between longevity/money and social media success. Regarding longevity, we found only one significant positive but weak relationship between likes and the foundation year ($r = 1.114, p < 0.001$). This data suggests that as the year increases, the popularity also increases, i.e., new parties tend to gather more likes on Facebook. Regarding commitment, the relationship was positive but very weak and, therefore, nonsignificant ($r = 0.044, p = 0.104$). On the contrary, we found a weak, negative, and almost significant relationship between virality and foundation year ($r = 0.052, p = 0.53$), which alludes to the viral potential of established parties.

With regards to money, we found positive, albeit weak, significant correlations between campaign expenses and all the engagement variables: popularity ($r = 0.293, p < 0.001$), commitment ($r = 0.191, p < 0.001$), and shares ($r = 0.074, p < 0.01$). Thus, we find stronger dynamics of normalization rather than equalization, in line with Pina (2018).

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the individual characteristics that the means hide. Scoring high in every engagement metric, Liberal Initiative (IL) and Enough (CH) stand out as the strongest players on social media, which might be related to their somewhat unconventional and confrontational style (Rosa et al., 2022). These results align with research in other countries that indicate that right-wing actors (Larsson, 2020) – as well as populist parties (Larsson, 2022) – are more successful in engaging audiences than their competitors.

It is striking that PAN – considered a success case in Facebook communication when it was the newest party (Serra-Silva et al., 2018) – is now one of the least popular and least viral parties. This result contradicts the idea that green parties perform better on social media (Gibson & McAllister, 2015). Some authors attribute this relative decline to PAN’s moderate position in the center-left and the fact that it is the oldest of the new parties (Rosa et al., 2022).

It is also relevant to note the performance of CDU – the coalition which includes the oldest party of Portuguese politics – regarding virality. This result supports the idea that, like the far-right, extreme-left parties perform well on social media (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016) because political extremes tend to use populist communication online (Ernst, Engesser, Büchel, Blassnig, & Esser, 2017).

6. Conclusion

In this study, we aim to contribute to the debate on the potential normalization and equalization of political power on social media by analyzing the Facebook activity of Portuguese political parties during the 2022 National Election. We did so comprehensively by examining four significant dimensions, grouped into two binomials: supply-demand and longevity-resources.

On the supply side, although the difference is not substantial, we found a normalization movement, with older parties and wealthier ones posting more frequently (RQ1). This result contradicts the idea that established parties with more resources invest more in traditional media communication to the detriment of digital communication (Chen, 2010; Magin et al., 2017). Today, Portuguese established parties have caught up with new parties in adopting new technologies, as argued by Gibson (2020).

On the demand side, the results are contradictory (RQ2). Using the criterion of longevity, the results point to an equalization trend, as suggested by Rosa et al. (2022): new parties maintain larger communities, are more popular (in terms of likes), and generate greater engagement (more comments). Still, it is worth noting that older parties excel in the virality field (shares), demonstrating a significant ability to adapt to the logic of social media. You can, indeed, teach an old dog new tricks.

However, adopting the resources approach, we observe a clear normalization pattern: parties with more money have more than double the number of followers, are the most popular, stimulate more interaction, and are more viral. Furthermore, these relationships are statistically more robust than in the case of longevity. These results corroborate the findings of Santana-Pereira (2023) and Pina (2018), who predicted that, in Portugal, "the trend towards normalization will persist, and parties with more resources will achieve better results also online" (p. 244).

These findings depict a landscape of two contradictory yet coexisting realities, which represent well the complex discussion on the broader relationship between social media and democracy. On the one hand, social media have a democratizing effect because they provide new players with a voice – and a louder voice than ever before (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Norris, 2001). On the other hand, social media primarily maintain the status quo (Tormey, 2015) and benefit the richer and more powerful (van Dijck, 2020). Indeed, wealthy parties are expected to become even wealthier through their capacity to invest in social media (Koc-Michalska et al., 2016). The fact that we found a significant relationship between money and success on social media using campaign expenses as a proxy and not ad spending is even more revealing of the dynamics between money and power. It appears that, in contrast to The Beatles' famous lyrics, money can indeed buy political parties some love.

This study contributes to the literature in two main ways. First, it provides evidence from a country understudied in this field – mitigating the "Anglo-American bias of most research on the subject" (Vanden Eynde et al., 2022, p. 749) – using a comparative perspective that adds new layers of complexity and offers new interpretative possibilities.

Second, it seeks to contribute to the international literature by reinforcing the need to clarify the concepts and the criteria used in the normalization and equalization debate. We are by no means the first to use different criteria to study this phenomenon. Magin et al. (2017), for example, also analyzed both the longevity and resources dimensions, although their results were consistent between the two

approaches. Our argument is that (1) there is a tendency to assume a correlation between longevity and resources, which is not always the case, as we have demonstrated; and (2) seemingly contradictory results in the normalization-equalization debate might be due to different criteria.

This study is not without limitations. One of them is that we lacked theoretical guidelines for categorizing parties in terms of resources. It could be argued that the results could be different if the Left Bloc (BE) had been included in the group of parties with fewer resources. To address this limitation and enhance the research robustness, we conducted an alternative version of all the tests, considering BE part of the less resourceful parties group. Not only did the results remain the same, but the gap between richer and poorer parties became even more evident. It could also be suggested that the significant discrepancy in the money spent by parties could justify creating more than two groups. While the significant correlations between money and user engagement reinforce the results found in the differences between means, we would have indeed obtained richer information about the dynamics at different levels. A final limitation is the absence of data on ad spending on social media networks, which could have provided a more comprehensive view of the parties' online visibility. Future studies could consider including this level of analysis and examine the budget explicitly allocated to digital communication.

7. References

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