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Usage Of Social Media For Political Communication

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USAGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

Social media enable individuals to share knowledge, experiences, opinions, and ideas among each other. With regard to political sector, social media can be an enabler for participation and democracy among citizens. As the 2008 U.S. presidential election campaigns have shown, social media platforms such as social network sites (SNSs), microblogging services or weblogs can also be successfully used by political actors to disseminate information to voters as well as to contact and discuss with them. In this study, we seek to gain insight into the political communication based on social media in Germany by conducting an analysis of social media presence of German political parties on Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube as well as a survey of members of the German parliament regarding their social media use. Based on the results, we present an overview of the relevance and potentials of as well as obstacles to the usage of social media for political communication from the perspective of political institutions. Further, we derive implications regarding the need for social media monitoring in political context as well as research implications in information systems. 

Keywords: Social Media, Political Communication, e-participation.
INTRODUCTION

In democratic countries, political parties feel responsible to canalize and participate in public political discussion. Traditionally, politicians and journalists bring up and moderate those political discourses. However, the traditional structure of mass communication in the political context has changed (Chadwick 2006; Gil De Zúñiga et al. 2012). Based on the rapid development of Web 2.0 technologies and associated social media, internet users are enabled to create content on their own. By using political blogs or discussion forums, people express their opinion, participate in discussions or find politically like-minded individuals. As a consequence, professional journalists act no longer as an institutionalized “gatekeeper” who measures and selects information for publication in newspapers or television. It has been argued that the diffusion of the usage of social media as well as other factors (e.g., discussion culture, average age, etc.) have a strong impact on the relevance of public internet-based discourses within the political landscape in specific countries (e.g., Howard 2006; Papacharissi 2002; Tewksbury 2006).

Recently, more than 900 million people worldwide are members of the Facebook network (Facebook 2012) while Twitter counts more than 500 million users in total (Forbes 2012). With this tremendous growth, these platforms allow both citizens and politicians to participate in political discussions or to share political content publicly. Furthermore, it is argued that from the perspective of politicians and political parties it is important to actively join social media based political communication, in particular during election campaigns. Already, U.S. politicians are said to have a leading role in this regard with the most prominent example of Barack Obama being able to successfully employ social media within his last election campaign (Wattal et al. 2010).

However, the relevance of social media for political actors in other countries than the U.S. is unclear. It seems that most politicians are reluctant to integrate the use of social media into their daily business. For example, studies have shown that a majority of German politicians do not support political communication by social media (e.g., Beckedahl et al. 2008; Christmann et al. 2010). However, there is a lack of academic research investigating the reasons for this reluctance of politicians as well as the problems politicians might face to contact (mostly young) voters via the internet. In general, the research field on social media in the political context is still young and has been focusing mostly on the political landscape of the U.S. Little is known about the relevance of social media for politics in other countries as well as factors of success for the application of social media for political purposes.

In this paper, we seek to contribute to this research field by examining the relevance of social media in political communication from the perspective of German political institutions including political parties and politicians. More specifically, we explore their social media activities during the last two years. In another step, we identify key aspect for a successful usage as well as concerns that might impede a wider adoption of social media in political context. Based on our findings, we derive implications, particularly regarding information systems research on social media in political context. As an additional contribution, we provide an extensive review of the relevant literature not only from the field of information systems but also political science, communication studies and sociology.

This paper is structured as follows. The next section provides a literature review on social media and political communication. In section 3, an overview of current activities of German politicians in social media is provided. Further, results of a two-year exploratory survey of members of the German parliament (Bundestag) with regard to the use and potential of social media are reported in section 4. In section 5, we discuss our findings and derive research as well as practical implications. Section 6 concludes and gives an outlook for future research.
2 RELATED WORK

The growing relevance of the internet or, more generally, new information and communication technologies (ICT) regarding political issues has been analyzed and documented by researchers since the 1990s (Davis & Owen 1998; Davis 1999; Römmel 2003; Chadwick 2006). Originating mostly from the disciplines of political science, communication and sociology, studies for example focus on the impact of internet access on voting (Tolbert & McNeal 2003), the use of websites to reach voters (Jansen 2004; Foot & Schneider 2006), the role of the internet as a medium for political communication during election campaigns (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan 2012a; Kilinenberg & Perrin 2000), visions of digital democracy and the role of new media (Hacker 2002; Howard 2006; Papacharissi 2002; Tewksbury 2006).

In general, literature reveals different views on the role of the internet in politics. On the one hand, according to the democratization thesis, the internet’s interactive potential is seen as transformational (e.g., Barber 1998). On the other hand, proponents of the normalization thesis (Davis 1999; Margolis & Resnick 2000) of the institutional adaptation thesis (Chadwick 2006) foresee no internet induced change in the fundamental political inequalities of the present system. West (2005) takes an intermediate position by suggesting that slow but steady incremental changes become significant as these changes accumulate over time. Further, Bimber and Davis (2003) argue that the role of the internet is supplemental rather than to displace traditional media.

In recent years, the rise of Web 2.0 technologies (O’Reilly 2005; Sester et al. 2006; McAfee 2005) has further increased the relevance of the internet for political communication. The potentials of SNSs, blogs, microblogging (in particular, Twitter), wikis, as social software (Bächle 2006; O’Reilly 2005; Green & Pearson 2005, Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan 2012b) appear to be most promising in political context as social software can be an enabler for more participation and democracy. Creighton (2005) defines public participation as the process by which public concerns, needs and values are incorporated into governmental and corporate decision making. The so-called “e-participation” focuses not only on this process but also on using the internet as an additional or exclusive instrument to create dialogues between the elected and the electorate. Related to this, Karpf (2009) introduces the notion of “Politics 2.0,” which can be understood as the harnessing of the internet’s lowered transaction costs and its condition of information abundance, toward the goal of building more participatory, interactive political institutions.

There is a rich body of research focusing on the role of Web 2.0 technologies in political election campaigns. The recent U.S. presidential campaign in 2008 has shown that Web 2.0 has become an important tool for political communication and persuasion (Towner et al. 2011; Hoffner & Rehkoff 2011). It became obvious, that particularly social networks could be successfully adapted to contact and discuss with voters as well as to disseminate important information to them. Especially young people were inspired to political topics after getting in touch with them by using social software as the communication platform (Chen 2009; Kushin & Kitchener 2009). Wattal et al. (2010) investigate the contingent impact of related Web 2.0 technologies on the campaign process. Their results show that in particular the blogosphere can influence the campaign process and the election outcomes. They also argue that information systems as a discipline has an important role to play in understanding e-politics. One approach is to leverage the traditional strengths of IS in comparative-technology, process-oriented empirical research and to apply that perspective to larger society. In this section, we give an overview of related work on social media in political context. In particular, we focus on previous studies dealing with the three major type of social media: SNS, microblogging services, and weblogs.

2.1 Social Network Sites

Previous works have specifically focused on SNSs and their use in the political context. Williams and Gulati (2007, 2009) investigate the extent of Facebook use by Congressional candidates during election campaigns. They find that the number of Facebook supporters can be considered a valid
indicator of electoral success. In the context of the 2006 Dutch elections, Utz (2009) shows that SNSs provide an opportunity to reach individuals less interested in politics. Thereby, viewing a candidate’s profile further strengthens existing attitudes. On the other hand, politicians who react on the comments of users are perceived more favorable. Kushin and Kitchener (2009) explore the use of Facebook for online political discussion. Their results indicate that Facebook is a legitimate location for discussion of political issues and, to some extent, the discussion appears to have succeeded in overcoming polarization of online discussion that has pervaded online political discussion in the past.

By examining two years of posts on the Facebook walls of the three major contenders for the U.S. Presidency in 2008: Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and John McCain, Robertson et al. (2010a) analyze participation patterns of usage along dimensions of breadth and frequency, and interpret them in terms of the concept of the “public sphere.” They conclude that SNS are currently the socio-technical environments that most closely enable public sphere discourse for those who choose to enter the online “salons” of political candidates. However, it remains an open question whether the outcome of this dialog is informed political decision making in the form of votes. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2010) show that reliance on SNS such as Facebook and MySpace was positively related to civic participation but not to political participation or confidence in government. Rather, interpersonal discussion would foster both civic participation and political activity.

2.2 Microblogging

The role of microblogging services such as Twitter for politicians has been examined by several studies. For instance, Golbeck et al. (2010) examine the use of Twitter by U.S. Congress members. They find that Congress members are primarily using Twitter to disperse information, particularly links to news articles about themselves and to their blog posts, and to report on their daily activities. Twitter is rather seen as vehicles for self-promotion. However, Twitter is also facilitating direct communication between Congress members and citizens, though this is a less popular activity. In a similar study, Lassen and Brown (2010) find that U.S Congress members are more likely to use Twitter if they belong to the minority party, if their party leaders urge them to, if they are young, or if they serve in the Senate. Another study by Ammann (2010) focuses on the use of Twitter by U.S. Senate candidates and the content of their tweets during the 2010 midterm election season. Results show that candidates use Twitter as a part of their political campaigns. However, the amount of use significantly varies by the level of resources a candidate possesses, state size, and the competitiveness of the congressional race. Also, the content of the tweets is largely related to candidate type and in some cases political affiliation of the candidate.

Other works focus on the use of Twitter by citizens in political context. Applying social network and sentiment analysis on the data collected during the 2009 German federal election, Tumasjan et al. (2010) show that Twitter is extensively used for political deliberation and that the mere number of party mentions accurately reflects the election result. In other words, microblogging messages on Twitter validly mirror the political landscape offline and can be used to predict election results. Conover et al. (2011) examine two networks of political communication on Twitter, comprised of more than 250,000 tweets from the six weeks leading up to the 2010 U.S. congressional midterm elections. Using a combination of network clustering algorithms and manually-annotated data the authors demonstrate that the network of political retweets exhibits a highly segregated partisan structure, with extremely limited connectivity between left- and right-leaning users. Surprisingly, this is not the case for the user-to-user mention network, which is dominated by a single politically heterogeneous cluster of users in which ideologically-opposed individuals interact at a much higher rate compared to the network of retweets.

2.3 Weblogs

There are different strands of literature focusing on blogosphere in political context. The first one deals with the uses and benefits of political blogs. In a survey of 3,747 blog readers, who were
generally young in age and highly educated, Kaye (2005) finds the trend that blogs were basically a medium for political information seeking and participation. McKenna and Pole (2007) report that the contents of political blogs are composed of information about news articles from the mass media, introductions to other blogs’ postings, and criticism about mass media coverage on political affairs. In another paper, McKenna (2007) also reports that political bloggers construct their blogs from the motivation of voluntarism and not for commercial purposes. In the light of the 2008 U.S. presidential election, Wattal et al. (2010) investigate the contingent impact of political blogs, among other Web 2.0 technologies, on the campaign process. Their results show that in particular the blogosphere can influence the campaign process and the election outcomes.

Another strand of blog research concerns structural or network analysis of political blogosphere, particularly in terms of social network analysis (Rosen et al. 2011). Farrel and Drezner (2008) argue that the blogosphere is of significant importance for political communication. By conducting case studies, they show that political blogs which attract much attention - so-called “focal points” - have an influence on the agenda setting as they attract a high level of attention from journalists who act as multipliers. In an empirical work, Adamic and Glance (2005) study the linking patterns and discussion topics of U.S. political bloggers and provide evidence for a divided blogosphere: liberals and conservatives primarily link within their separate communities, with far fewer cross-links exchanged between them. Regarding political discussions, liberal and conservative blogs focus on different news, topics and political figures. Also, conservative bloggers tend to link to other blogs (mostly other conservative blogs) than their liberal counterparts.

2.4 Other Social Media Platforms

A few studies have examined the role of video-sharing platforms such as YouTube in elections explicitly. Gueorguieva (2007) identifies benefits (as well as challenges and discusses the influence of YouTube on the 2006 U.S. mid-term election. On the one hand, the benefits include, for example, increasing the potential for candidate exposure at a low cost or no cost, providing lesser-known candidates with a viable outlet to divulge their message and allowing campaigns to raise contributions and recruit volunteers online. On the other hand, the most important challenge is the reduced level of control that campaigns have over the image and message of the candidate, which is of critical importance to election outcomes. In an empirical study, Carlson and Strandberg (2007) find that the use and role of YouTube in the 2007 Finnish elections was rather marginal. Moreover, candidate-related videos did not in general attract much interest. With some notable exceptions, most of the videos failed to attract large numbers of views and comments.

3 CURRENT SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVITIES OF GERMAN POLITICAL ACTORS

Regarding social media use, German politicians and parties are still behind their counterparts in the U.S. until recently (Christmann et al. 2010). Also, in contrast to the election campaigns in the U.S. social media did not play an important role in the last election campaigns in Germany (Beckedahl et al. 2008). However, the awareness and relevance of social media haven been steadily rising among politicians (Kaufmann 2010; Effing et al. 2011). In this section, we seek to gain a most recent overview of the German social media landscape in political context by conducting an exploratory website analysis of the most frequently used social media platforms: (1) Facebook (SNSs), (2) Twitter (microblogging), (3) Flickr (image sharing), and (4) YouTube (video sharing). For each of the five big political parties in Germany (CDU, SPD, FDP, Linke, Grüne), we track statistics regarding their social media activity and popularity. While activity measures include number of posted tweets, pictures on Flickr, and YouTube videos, popularity is captured by number of Facebook fans, Twitter followers, and YouTube followers (see Table 1).
Statistics are retrieved as of March 2012 and compared to those in January 2011 and June 2010. The numbers in general indicate the increasing relevance of social media from the perspective of political institutions as well as citizens. For example, the average number of Facebook fans for all parties rise from 4,065 (2010) to 20,627 (2012) fans showing an amazing boost of 407% (see Figure 1). This also holds for Twitter (301% more followers) and YouTube (103% more followers). On the other hand, in 2012 German political parties have become more active in social media by posting 198% more tweets, 73% more pictures on Flickr, and 190% more Youtube videos compared to 2010. This is consistent with findings by Kaufmann (2010) showing that German politicians have started to follow the ongoing social media trend.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>CDU</th>
<th>SPD</th>
<th>FDP</th>
<th>Grüne</th>
<th>Linke</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># tweets posted</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>1,562</td>
<td>3,933</td>
<td>1,318</td>
<td>3,159</td>
<td>5,502</td>
<td>3,095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>857</td>
<td>1,948</td>
<td>1,186</td>
<td>2,454</td>
<td>2,851</td>
<td>1,859</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>461</td>
<td>889</td>
<td>611</td>
<td>1,813</td>
<td>1,421</td>
<td>1,039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># pictures posted on Flickr</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3,804</td>
<td>3,067</td>
<td>632</td>
<td>1,952</td>
<td>1,891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3,585</td>
<td>2,263</td>
<td>972</td>
<td>2,022</td>
<td>1,768</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2,121</td>
<td>1,379</td>
<td>712</td>
<td>1,260</td>
<td>1,094</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># YouTube videos posted</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>449</td>
<td>482</td>
<td>909</td>
<td>1,058</td>
<td>1,524</td>
<td>884</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>321</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>614</td>
<td>827</td>
<td>920</td>
<td>605</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>627</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># followers on Twitter</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>18,673</td>
<td>23,419</td>
<td>19,292</td>
<td>41,963</td>
<td>3,781</td>
<td>21,426</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>10,202</td>
<td>11,952</td>
<td>10,351</td>
<td>20,156</td>
<td>1,908</td>
<td>10,914</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>5,315</td>
<td>5,448</td>
<td>5,494</td>
<td>9,225</td>
<td>1,211</td>
<td>5,339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Facebook fans</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>17,706</td>
<td>25,357</td>
<td>15,927</td>
<td>29,768</td>
<td>14,375</td>
<td>20,627</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>9,100</td>
<td>15,916</td>
<td>9,285</td>
<td>15,913</td>
<td>6,596</td>
<td>11,362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>1,787</td>
<td>5,418</td>
<td>5,428</td>
<td>5,039</td>
<td>2,652</td>
<td>4,065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># followers on YouTube</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>2,645</td>
<td>3,132</td>
<td>2,554</td>
<td>3,653</td>
<td>6,474</td>
<td>3,692</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2,220</td>
<td>2,558</td>
<td>2,519</td>
<td>2,991</td>
<td>4,871</td>
<td>3,032</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>1,727</td>
<td>1,950</td>
<td>2,208</td>
<td>1,932</td>
<td>1,260</td>
<td>1,815</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Statistics on political social media landscape in Germany from 2010 to 2012.

By having a closer look at the activities of different parties, it can be observed that left-leaning parties have shown more presence and gained more attention from citizens in social media compared to conservative ones. For example, while the left-wing parties Grüne, Linke, and SPD posted 4,198 tweets on average in 2012, the average number of tweets posted by the conservative parties CDU and FDP is only 1,440. In addition, Grüne, Linke, and SPD have also more followers on Twitter (23,054 on average) than CDU and FDP in 2012 (18,982 on average). These results are in line with findings from Mono and Catalfamo’s (2010) “Digital Democracy Study” of politicians in Europe. They pointed out that the web is generally more left-leaning (Mono & Catalfamo 2010, Efron et al. 2006).
EXPLORATORY SURVEY OF MEMBERS OF GERMAN PARLIAMENT

4.1 Data Collection

During the last two years, we conducted two surveys of the members of the German parliament (Bundestag) to examine the relevance of social media for politicians. More specifically, we investigated their motivation and usage as well as success factors of social media.

The first survey was conducted in June 2010 and the second in October 2011. For each survey, we contacted 622 parliament members asking them to participate in a short online survey which aims at capturing the familiarity of politicians with social media, their assessment of the relevance of social media for political communication in general, and for their own job in particular, as well as how they use social media for what specific purposes. Moreover, participants were asked to report potential concerns, which might impede the use of social media on a broader scale. In total, the questionnaire of each survey comprises 18 questions of different types including 5-point Likert-scale and multiple-choice questions.

We closed the survey after having obtained responses from 109 participants in 2010 and 88 participants in 2011 in total. This yielded response rates of about 18% (2010) and 14% (2011), respectively. A large fraction of the 2011 survey participants have also taken part in the 2010 survey. The distribution of party affiliation (CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, Grüne, Linke) among respondents is highly correlated with that among all parliament members. The average range of age in both samples is from 41 to 50 years. The allocation of the gender is also identical for both samples with 35% females and 65% males. This suggests that in essence our samples might well resemble the German politicians.

4.2 Results

Results of the surveys show that a majority of participants are at least moderately familiar with social media. They acknowledge the relevance of social media and expect them to become even much more important for political communication in the future (2010: 75%; 2011: 85%). Accordingly, a large number of politicians report that they are planning to use social media for political communication more intensively (2010: 49%; 2011: 55%). Many participants use their favorite social medium or media (mostly Facebook and/or Twitter) several times a day (2010: 28%; 2011: 40%) to report political activities from their job (2010: 70%; 2011: 72%), for self-presentation purposes (2010: 50%; 2011: 56%), to keep in touch with their group members/fans/followers (2010: 49%; 2011: 65%) and to inform those about current political events (2010: 38%; 2011: 44%).
use social media to directly communicate with people in their local electoral district (2010: 39%; 2011 35%).

Interestingly, many politicians by using social media also attempt to look for feedback, suggestions and new ideas from their political peers as well as others for their political work (2010: 30%; 2011: 36%). Moreover, they report the need to detect trends in the shaping of (public) opinion, which is of particular importance for politicians. However, this is a task that requires much effort, appropriate tools and, in particular, a systematic approach, which most politicians cannot afford due to limited resources and capacities. Many participants report that they do not have much time for initiating social-media activities such as posting a “status update” or a “tweet,” and have to get these things done by their assistants. Also, a fraction of participants stated that social media are less eligible to make complex political questions understandable (2010: 33%; 2011: 30%) and to encourage political debates with citizens (2010: 18%; 2011: 20%).

In sum, there are only little differences in the 2010 and 2011 results. However, in general there are increasingly more politicians assigning higher relevance to the use of social media for the current and future political communication.

5 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Discussion

The relevance of social media based online communities for political communication is steadily increasing in recent years. Especially, young voters spend more time online in social networks such as Facebook or MySpace than watching television or reading newspapers (OECD, 2009). As Web 2.0 tools are modern instruments of participation and collaboration, democratic systems may benefit from this development. Therefore, political actors are advised to take part in the communication at these virtual places.

Findings from our survey show that politicians indeed have the need to stay updated about current political discussions and about their own reputation in social media as well as to detect new trends and identify influential users within different social networks. A major goal for future political communication from the perspective of politicians is to increase the degree of “e-participation” by actively engaging in social media while being able to monitor the social web.

This is, however, not a simple task due to time and financial constraints, and, in particular, a large numbers of different social media platforms and vast amount as well as complexity of information and unstructured data.

5.2 Implications for Information System Research

We identify two possible contributions of information systems to political communication in social media. First, information systems research should provide theoretical frameworks as well as technical solutions for monitoring and analyzing social media data in political context. This is also referred to as “social media analytics.” According to Zeng et al. (2010), “social media analytics is concerned with developing and evaluating informatics tools and frameworks to collect, monitor, analyze, summarize, and visualize social media data, usually driven by specific requirements from a target application.” However, as Zeng et al. (2010) also point out, social media analytics faces several challenges such as an enriched set of data or metadata (e.g., tags, user-expressed subjective opinions, ratings, user profile etc.), human-centered computing with their own unique emphasis on social interactions among users, semantic inconsistency/inaccuracies, misinformation and lack of structure as well as dynamic nature of social media data and their sheer size.

Second, information systems research should devote attention to establishing new or improving existing social media related services to enhance “e-participation.” Moreover, human-computer
interaction related features such as design and functionality of social media platforms should also be addressed by information systems research to facilitate “e-participation.”

6 CONCLUSION

The contributions of this paper are as follows. First, this paper provides an extensive literature review on the relevance of social media for political communication. In particular, we identify a number of recent empirical studies related to public social media platforms such as SNSs, microblogging and weblogs. Second, based on our empirical results, we show an increasing interest of German citizens in social media based communication of political parties. We also observe a strong growth of social media usage by German politicians in the last few years, especially left-leaning parties. Furthermore, this study reveals that the majority of politicians are willing to engage more in social media and have the need to stay updated about current political discussions and about their own reputation in social media as well as to detect new trends and identify influential users within different social networks. Finally, we derive implications for information systems research regarding the need for social media monitoring and analysis in political context as well as design and functionality of social media platforms and services to enhance “e-participation.”

As a limitation, our study focuses on German politicians only. Moreover, the surveys were based on online questionnaires, which typically encourage more IT-savvy individuals to participate. This might render bias in the results. Furthermore, the comparison of the results from 2010 and 2011 is based on similar samples containing many participants who have taken part in both surveys resulting in the fact that surveyed politicians did not radically change their opinions during the last years at all. As future research, the survey should be repeated in different legislative periods and with politicians from other countries.

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