

The “green wave” in the EU Twittersphere during the May 2019 election campaign

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Abstract

This paper addresses the impact of the increased attention to climate issues as expressed in civil society mobilisations in the winter and spring 2019 in the hashtags that were used to discuss the 2019 European Parliament campaign in Twitter. The paper combines quantitative and qualitative methods – network analysis and hashtag framing analysis – to analyse the emergence and circulation of climate-related hashtags in the 120.000 tweets collected during the campaign. The results indicate that environment-related tweets are much more transnational albeit being decentralised than any other subjects, confirming the success of Green activism in Twitter and their ability to impact election agendas. This contrasts with the limited impact of institutional campaigns and suggests that transnational issues can compete for attention with polity contestation issues (Brexit, voting denial). Our results support ideas that Twitter debates can contribute to the policy-centred rather than polity contestation debates, even though they also must be interpreted against the background of the exceptional electoral context of 2019.

Keywords: EU, Elections, citizen participation, social media, twitter, online campaigns, framing

1. Introduction

The public sphere has acquired normative importance for academics and institutions of the EU since it is increasingly understood that a transnational sphere of public exchange between the political system, the mass media and the citizens, could and should be developed (Mazzoleni, 2010).

Digital forms of communication have become central in expectations for the development of European public sphere because of their transnational nature and immediacy. However, social media are also the object of severe criticism because of the disruptions to the European public spheres (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018). This paper analyses the pan-European conversation in Twitter ahead of the 2019 election, providing evidence of its limited ability to establish a substantial transnational conversation of some of the main issues of the election, including climate change and the environment.

In doing so, we expect to make a contribution to the evolution of research on transnational conversations for the EP elections which has focused essentially on election campaigns (Peter et al., 2004; De Vreese, 2009; Grill & Boomgaarden, 2017) tending to neglect bottom up dynamics (Valera-Ordaz & Sørensen, 2019; Ruiz-Soler et al., 2019 might be the exception). We expect to do so by studying the twitter debate on the 2019 campaign as an emerging agenda-setting process where the success of a certain issue is not measured according to its visibility resulting from the number of tweets but via the decisions of Twitter users – including political actors – to incorporate their messages to the repertoires of meaning that hashtags are (more later on in the analytical framework section).

1.1 Uses and functions of Twitter in transnational communication, agenda setting and political discourse in the EU

We are aware that our focus on a single platform, Twitter, is aligned with mainstream choices in studies of the digital European Public Sphere (Sampietro & Valera-Ordaz, 2015; Scherpereel et al., 2017; Larsson & Ihlen, 2015; Vesnic-Alujevic, 2016; Bouza-García & Tuñón-Navarro, 2018). However, this can be justified for different reasons.

Before Elon Musk's takeover, Twitter was seen as the preponderant social network by its very nature both for the debate and implementation of communication strategies of political organisations. Among other issues digital interactions have a notable influence on the offline behaviour of organisations and vice versa (Boulianne, 2015; Elías, 2015; Halpern et al., 2017). Without assuming that Twitter functions as a general public, studying its functioning during a campaign is a way of empirically studying the European public conversation. Firstly, Twitter is a resonance chamber for political communication where political actors can mobilise (Gainous and Wagner, 2014), interact and receive

feedback from the public (Parmelee and Bichard, 2012, Jackson and Lilleker, 2011, Jivkova-Semova, Requejo-Rey and Padilla-Castillo, 2017). Secondly, it has the potential of fostering conversations beyond national barriers (Hänska and Bauchowitz 2019), even though these remain relevant as long as it is limited to forms of discussion and communication that do not entail greater identification with the EU (Kermer and Nijmeijer 2020: 35). Thirdly, it is a public that includes communication intermediaries (Graham, Jackson and Broersma, 2016) as Twitter is the favourite social network among journalists (Jivkova-Semova; Requejo –Rey and Padilla-Castillo, 2017), so resonance in this sphere has a particular potential to reach other publics.

Agenda-setting analyses are far from a novelty in studies of the EU, as these perspectives have been developed since the argumentative turn in the 90s and the narrative turn more recently. However, these studies have mostly focused on policymaking and the ability of actors to frame and prime their preferred issues in the agenda. The rise of digital technologies could be of great interest for developing a European Public Sphere (Koc-Michalska et al., 2016), as they enable direct communication between citizens and their representatives (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2016). However, until the 2019 election few studies addressed questions of the European Twittersphere transcending from the national lens: (Maireder et al. 2014, Barisione and Ceron, 2017, Hänska and Bauchowitz 2018; Ruiz Soler 2018). Among those that focused on the 2014 European Parliament elections, Nulty et al. (2016) suggest that the volume of interactions and conversational exchange between the European Union institutions and their publics is not taking place effectively. The dynamic seems to have changed, as studies on the last election (2019) have addressed how parties, and specially candidates since the adoption of the Spitzenkandidaten process (Gattermann and De Vreese 2020, see next section) have used Twitter to address EU citizens directly. Twitter contributed to the resonance (Stier et al 2020; Rivas-de-Roca

and García-Gordillo 2020) and partisan coherence (Daniel and Obholzer 2020) of the election campaign. However, fewer studies have focused on the topics, frames and agendas mobilised by parties, activists and media in general (see Ruiz Soler 2018) and during the campaign (Elo 2019), demonstrating the need for further empirical research.

Social media can contribute to restructure power relations by empowering civil society and political actors traditionally less involved in EU politics and by enhancing the politicization and contestation of EU issues (Barisione and Michailidou, 2017, Ruiz Soler 2018). Some of the existing research associates critical discussion on social media with the social movements promoting the politicization of the issue (see Barisione and Michailidou 2017 on austerity protest, Ruiz Soler 2018 for the case of TTIP). However, this research focuses more on the discussions on social media as a digital movement (Barisione and Michailidou, 2017) and the networks that structure the discussion (Ruiz Soler 2018), rather than on the role of social movement activists and organisations in the online discussion.

This paper intends to make a contribution to the growing literature the resonance of environmental issues in the European public sphere in a context of growing transnational and national politicisation of the EU (Braun & Schäfer, 2022). The assumption behind our approach is that with the transformation of the economic and financial crisis into a polycrisis (Guiraudon, Ruzza and Trenz 2016) and the strong entry of populist Eurosceptic forces in the EP and national governments together with Brexit and an increasingly unstable international context, political actors favourable and contrary to further EU integration have increased the stakes of the 2019 EU elections. Additionally, Brexit not only changed what is at stake, but also transformed the framing, as both Europhile and Eurosceptic actors tried to challenge frames of more and less Europe by

trying to argue that the elections were about models of Europe (Haapala and Oleart 2021). This context has created a fertile ground for new political and academic debates about the new structures of political conversation on Europe (Hooghe and Marks 2018), such as the substitution of second order national elections by truly pan-European contests around common issues, the emergence of EU-specific cleavages opposing, winners and losers of the euro-globalisation or the responsiveness of national governments to public opinion when considering their positions on EU politics.

1.2 EU public opinion and the Green wave within the 2019 EU elections context

The polycrises have intensified the level of partisan competition in European elections, increasing the level of politicization of European affairs and paving the way for the emergence of an ideal scenario for critical social movements, increasingly Europeanised national quality media (Statham 2008) and more recently populist or extreme right parties contesting the EU (Caiani & Guerra, 2017, Ivaldi, 2018). This is an especially favourable context for the radical-right populist parties, who base their communicative strategy on questioning the principles and the functioning of the current European Union (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2020; or Tuñón & López, 2022). However, on the other hand, the election also empowered new pro-European forces. Following the contributions in Haapala and Oleart (2021) we are interested in the specificity of the Green positions, the ability of Green issues to simultaneously compete with populists and with other European forces.

In other matters, the second-order character of elections to the European Parliament is uncontested throughout the scholarly literature (but see Galpin and Trenz 2019 and Wiesner in this special issue). However, the 2019 EU elections were framed differently and show higher stakes both by Eurosceptic and pro-EU forces: the “election was about

the EU's fundamental values, not only with respect to multiculturalism, but also gender equality and LGBTQ" or environmental rights (Galpin and Trenz 2019: 664).

Indeed, the European election campaign 2019 has marked a significant change in the public's relation with the EU. Not only did these elections break with a 40-year trend in the decline in turnout, but also the campaign and election result seemed to mark a stop in the progress of the far-right Eurosceptic forces. Whereas the result of these parties remains the best in their history in the European Parliament, they arrived short of the expectations, in particular considering that a few months before the election, migration featured as the key policy on which the vote was to be decided.

In fact, the surprising increase in EU-wide voter turnout in the 2019 EP election has been largely attributed to increased political conflicts (mostly: the economy, environment/climate change, immigration, and European integration itself) over key European issues and a greater degree of politicization in these elections (Braun & Schäfer, 2022). Besides, one of the main findings of this recent research points out that "the particularly pronounced effects of environmental and climate change issues reveal that issue mobilization is not homogeneous across all political issues. We believe that the differential effects might be a consequence of the great political urgency felt by people who worry about climate change. This sense of urgency was also expressed in the 'Fridays for Future' movement and, subsequently, in the 'green wave' during the 2019 EP election in many" (Braun & Schäfer, 2022: 133-134). It has been shown that the 2019 EP elections were the first European elections in which the environmental debate played a salient role. Indeed, Galpin & Trenz (2019: 669) argue that "the so called 'green wave' of the 2019 EP elections was also driven by social media mobilization".

Never until 2019 have environmental issues a political priority for either pan-European

parties or European public opinion. In fact, other issues defined the agenda during previous European elections: such as the austerity and the economic crisis in times of the 2014 EP elections (Maireder et al (2014), de Wilde et al. (2015). Moreover, the refugee crisis that had monopolized the European media agenda since 2015, together with the growth of populism and extreme right-wing parties, did not predict good results for the Greens in the 2019 EP elections. However, as the elections approached, some indicators improved for the Greens to the point where the notion of the "Green Wave" was coined in terms of communication. The good results of the Greens in the national elections in Belgium, Germany and Luxembourg were joined by the growing visibility of "environmental issues" on the political agenda. In fact, European schoolchildren on strike and protesting against inaction on climate change, or Greta Thunberg herself addressing the EP and visiting major European capitals, weeks before the elections, ended up (unexpectedly) putting the green issue at the top of the European public agenda.

In fact, the good results of the green parties in the May 2019 elections, which gained up to 55 seats, a significant advance from their 37 seats in 2014, endorsed the "Green Wave" phenomenon. Indeed, Pearson and Rüdig (2020) argue that the increase in environmental awareness among European public opinion can be identified as a decisive factor in their electoral success. However, Toshkov (2019) points out that this growth in the importance of environmental issues had begun before 2019, but that it grew exponentially during the months leading up to the elections. This is confirmed by the Standard Euro-barometer of spring 2019, which placed "climate change" as one of the two most important problems facing the EU right after the European elections, only behind migration itself. 20% of Europeans considered it as such in June 2019 (European Commission, 2019, -EB 91-), a figure which even increased in November (European Commission, 2019, -EB 92-), to

24%, in contrast to the 5% of Europeans who considered it as one of the two main problems of the EU before the 2014 elections (European Commission, 2014 -EB 81-).

Nevertheless, green awareness has not proved to be homogeneous across Europe. As in past European elections, there has been a strong link between the green vote and the Gross Domestic Product per capita (Rüdig, 2019; or Pearson & Rüdig, 2020). Despite the pan-European campaign of the European Greens in support of green parties in Eastern and Southern Europe, the "Green wave" of 2019 was substantiated by the mobilisation of voters in Northern and Western Europe. Only in countries with a high standard of living such as Sweden, Austria or Malta was there a green backslide in 2019; furthermore, campaigns from the opposition were identified as other factors that played a leverage effect on the green advance (Germany, Belgium, Finland, France, Ireland or the United Kingdom).

The objective of this paper is to contribute to a better understanding of the conditions in which the "green wave" agenda setting occurred: the assumption presented so far that stakes were higher because of the polarised politicisation of the campaign. We do so by focusing on social media, and in particular in the Twittersphere by analysing the hashtags relating to climate change during the campaign. We assume Twitter to reflect better a change of tendency in the dominant subjects of conversation than quality or popular media because of various reasons. Firstly, the dominant issue in the agenda – migration – before the campaign is more divisive for the general public, even though it may be more salient for individuals from rural and peri-urban areas perceiving to assume higher costs (Arndt et al 2022) as shown in the yellow vests mobilisations, and coincides with the lines of politicisation between pro-European liberals and Eurosceptic far-right parties than the traditionally consensual concerns about environmental issues for mainstream left and

right parties. Put differently, even though Green issues are part of the Green, Alternative and Libertarian cleavage they were less salient than migration before the campaign. Secondly, environmental issues are relatively transversal to most EU parties and they are a niche only to a small party not equally represented across the EU, so traditional media are likely to have fewer incentives to address a potentially small readership. Finally, climate related issues are usually seen as a "future issue" and thus likely to be given less attention, coupled with the smaller readership of traditional media by young publics.

2. Analytical approach and Methods: Using hashtags to frame transnational online conversations.

We intend to focus precisely on the issue of the resonance and framing of green issues and demands during the May 2019 campaign. In particular, we analyse to what extent green issues are framed in opposition or alternative to populism, associated with pro-European positions or rather focus on promoting specific policy proposals. In line with the arguments above about the distinct nature of these EU elections our expectation is to find more EU specific debates (that is, less second-order nationalisation) and that this would create a more fertile ground for EU-related online conversations. This does not mean that online conversations would address the issues, topics or proposals of the pro-Europeans – and thus, the Greens – more, but that the said debate would contribute to frame these conversations.

In this sense our first expectation is that the more successful hashtags associated with the EU election will be more informed by EU campaign themes than by national issues. This is related to the issue mentioned above in the literature review: Twitter is a more fertile ground for cause entrepreneurs, social movements, NGOs and in general actors challenging incumbents – both pro and anti-EU – rather than for incumbent leaders and

parties (Barisione and Michailidou 2017, Ruiz Soler 2018). Overall, we expect to find a contentious use of Twitter, where hashtags questioning the frames of EU institutions leaders and European parties have more salience than pro-European ones. This does not necessarily mean that Eurosceptic framings are more salient, as one of the possible uses of social media is for other actors (NGOs' journalists, national parties etc) to challenge established issues and for civil society to use dissensus in an empowering way (Bouza, Oleart and Tuñón 2019) by proposing frames critical of EU institutions but supporting European integration.

Secondly, and as a consequence of what was just said, we expect to find critical usages of Green framings rather than one siding on the defence of the EU versus Eurosceptics or populists. By this we mean that promoters of Green issues and causes will tend to take distance from *both* these poles by pointing out that none of them addresses climate change as a prime issue. The reason for this expectation is double. Firstly, in line with the abovementioned expectation, we think that the Green wave is strongly related to the transnational movement Fridays for climate impersonated by Greta Thunberg, which is characterised by frames of anger and crisis against transnational elites. This means that entrepreneurs of this cause have little to gain from siding with sitting EU incumbents. Secondly, focusing on substantial issues of the Green agenda contributes to solidify a political family that is strongly divided on issues such as neoliberalism, national sovereignty etc.

Analysing framing in Twitter is difficult: messages are short (280 characters) thus making it virtually impossible to develop elaborate resignifications. Secondly, it is difficult to sustain a disciplined message because of rapid turnover of issues, the combination of genres etc. Furthermore, the hierarchy in this community is different from the general

public sphere in that the role of media and journalists is less decisive in establishing frames effectively. However, we can use one of the features of this social media to analyse one type of framing: hashtags (see Elo 2019 for a good discussion of the role of hashtags in structuring online conversations during elections). The purpose of hashtags is not primarily to frame but to collect different messages under a common and searchable key tag. However, when users decide to include a given tag in their message, they are not only facilitating searches, but they are also choosing to include their comment within a given repertoire, in the literal sense. As a result, hashtags are a certain way of framing conversations, either by regrouping hashtags with a common subject or by using evaluative words or short sentences.

In order to do so we have downloaded 120.000 tweets from the two weeks before the EP election (from 14 to 27 May) obtained through Gephi's tweet streaming app (it comprises 37.693 nodes and 200.616 links). Tweets were selected by searching for the hashtag #EP2019. This implies an obvious limitation, as we have opted for a hashtag in English that will limit tweets in other languages. This is for two reasons, essentially. Firstly, English is the main language of transnational conversation in the EU. Secondly, because this short and relatively neutral hashtag could be used by transnational-minded users even tweeting in other languages.

As discussed above, we are interested in the ways in which users frame their messages as part of an online conversation. We are hence interested in activist and performative usages of twitter, which require need to consider that “hashtags and mentions imply complex social contingencies” (Murthy 2017: 561). In doing so we follow Poynter (2010: 163-175), in the consideration of the Twitter as a new ethnographic field where new technologies imply three specific challenges a) the incorporation of new tools for

production, registration and collection of sociological information and data; b) the extension of the field of analysis to all online phenomena as social phenomena; and c) the creation of a more reflective research context in which the researcher has a greater and more permanent accessibility to the object of study, which facilitates him/her being able to be part of it, with the (ethical) implications that this involves (Murthy 2017). Some of these contingencies imply coordinated agency to associate topics, mobilising constituencies, reaching beyond already mobilized communities or react to opposing campaigns. A second issue to consider is that we are interested not on a single national or local issue but on an entire multinational campaign. Social interaction in this context is more likely to experience associations, transformations, challenges and reactions. However, the large amount of data 120.000 tweets with more than 37.000 nodes and almost 4000 hashtags makes it materially impossible to code them meaningfully. Our analysis will proceed in two levels. The first level is the entire network, where we will use individual (closeness and betweenness centrality) and structural measures (density and modularity) to identify the basic structures of the conversation. The second level of analysis will be the hashtags. Since hashtags have not outdegree (they are not senders, but receivers) analyses in terms of centrality, as useful as they are to distinguish the issues that articulate the entire network (closeness centrality) and those that connect users and communities that are farther apart (betweenness centrality) become less relevant.

Instead, in line with the previous general expectation that hashtags regroup communities (Elo 2019) we will analyse the hashtag density of the main communities in the entire network in order to analyse their degree of cohesion. Firstly, we use Gephi to calculate the modularity of the network (partitions of the network where the density of the

contacts is higher than in the rest of the network) using the Louvain method (Blondel et al 2008). We then analyse the number of salient hashtags within each community: our assumption is that the higher the number of high degree hashtags the more cohesive communities are, whereas least cohesive communities will have less salient hashtags. We will measure this salience by measuring the indegree of the hashtags and consider that salient hashtags are those with an indegree higher than the average (52 tweets per hashtag). Finally, and as a follow up from the previous expectation we will analyse the repertoires of the main communities to understand how hashtags are associated, what meanings are articulated or opposed. Whereas individual hashtags provide insufficient information for a qualitative analysis, the association of hashtags in communities provides a corpus of how tweets are associated between them and with certain keywords that in this case act very concretely as frames.

3. Results and analysis

Figure 2 below represents the total sample of hashtags in the form of a network graph grouped by communities of users. Overall, the first significant finding, as shown in greater detail in subsequent figures, is a fragmented network (355 communities) but where only 28 communities include more than a few dozen nodes (figure 1). Descriptive statistics also provide interesting findings: the network includes 3809 hashtags (some of which are descriptive, like the #EP2019 or typing mistakes as suggested in repeated hashtags. As mentioned above, the average degree of hashtags is 52, but only 265 hashtags are situated above the average count. This suggests that the network is relatively connected and clear hierarchies exist within and among the different communities.

Size Distribution

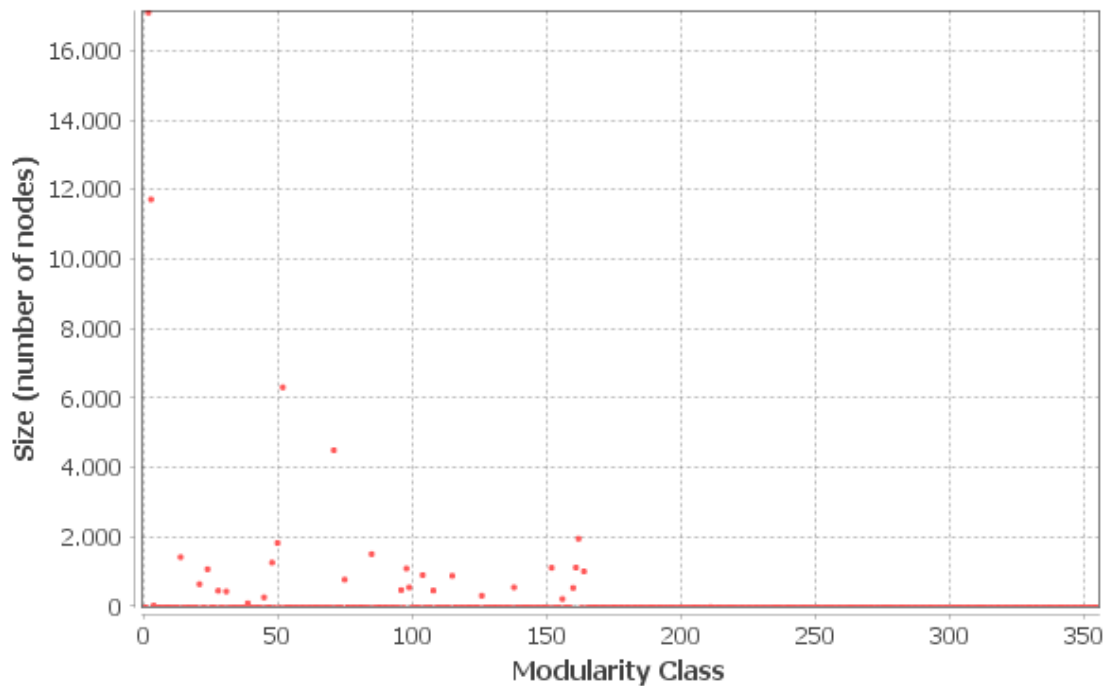


Figure 1 Gephi modularity report

Most communities and hashtags contain very few users, whereas a few communities and hashtags concentrate most of the interaction. This is further confirmed by the analysis of salient hashtags per community (annex 1): only 22 communities include at least one salient hashtag. All in all, the network is clearly articulated around 200 salient issues (excluding descriptive hashtags), whereas most other issues obtain relatively little attention.

The size of the different hashtags in figure 2 represents their network degree, that is the number of tweets or retweets one tag refers to. Obviously the more general and descriptive the tag (such as #Europeanelections2019) the more tweets it accumulates. Overall figure 2 below shows a densely populated and hashtag network where the only very salient hashtags are strictly descriptive (the first “content-laden” hashtag is #brexit with 14.000 references). In the context of an agenda setting process ahead of an election a proliferation of hashtags is a way for policy entrepreneurs to attract attention to specific

proceeded to regroup salient hashtags from different communities into common issues that refer to the same debate, verifying the content of the hashtag manually and by association to the same community. Like Elo (2019) we identify 5 salient issues of debate, but our qualitative interpretation takes us in a different sense when organising them. The community that includes by far more tweets is the debate about Brexit, with about 30000 tweets, suggesting that, as Galpin and Trenz (2019) have put it, these elections were celebrated under the shadow of Brexit. These tweets concentrate in the green area of the graph in figure 2. The second more salient issue with around 5000 tweets, refers to what we have called the “Green wave” in the purple and blue areas of figure 2. The third issue in number of tweets is what we call “transnational politics” in that includes references to national leaders, the Spitzenkandidaten process but also to transnational political campaigns like Volt, the Pirates or DIEM25. Given the fragmented references, these tweets are mostly located in the turquoise and gray areas in the centre of the graph. The fourth more salient issue, with about 1300 tweets, refers to migration, and they are the gray area on the left upper corner. Finally, about 300 tweets refer to social rights, such as LGBT+ or feminism.

In order to relate the quantitative and qualitative approaches we compare the number of communities involved in each salient issue. The Brexit debate reaches 6 communities, the “Green wave” reaches 9 communities, the transnational politics debate reaches 8 communities, the migration issue groups 5 communities and the social rights issue reaches 2 communities.

The descriptive statistics suggest that Brexit dominates the conversation. This is coherent with the findings of Elo (2019) and Galpin and Trenz (2019). However, this finding must be interpreted with caution, since the purple community where most of the Green issues

are regrouped is the largest one and more fragmented. As an example only a few tweets below the average of 52 we can find tweets such as #feministeurope; #greenparty; #biodiversityday#; #taxjustice; #biodiversity; #environment; #biodiversityweek2019; #climatevoter. This is not explained necessarily only because of the fragmentation since all these hashtags are represented in modularity class 1 (although table 2 in annex 2 demonstrates that green issues are more fragmented) and suggests that the tweeting strategy of the green community focuses on the production of more diverse tweets and hashtags instead of a more intense use of a single hashtag.

The way in which tweets are grouped in annex 2 provides an interesting perspective on the way in which the debate is framed. Table 1 in annex 2 suggests that the reference to Brexit in table is relatively descriptive and dominant tweets associated with it in its community (2) such as #European or #voteforEurope suggest this debate is associated with critical tones. In the other communities that discussed Brexit a critical tone dominates too, with the third most used hashtag in the network being #deniedmyvote with more than 2800 tweets. This is confirmed in that two critical hashtags (#stopbrexit and #remain) are more salient than the first pro-Brexit community (#projectsmearandfear). The interpretation of the critical tone of Brexit is fairly simple: the pan-EU election mobilised Britons and other Europeans critical of Brexit.

If we examine the hashtags of the “Green wave” debate, descriptive hashtags (#climatechange) share top positions with institutional or partisan ones such as #GreenNewDeal and social movement or protest ones such as #greenwave or #climatestrike. There are a number of hashtags directly associated with the Fridays for Future movement, such as #climateaction #climateemergency #climatestrike #voteforclimate or #occupyforclimate. This confirms that the Green agenda setting ahead

of the EU election was not limited to partisan actors but that transnational activists were equally strongly involved. This also illustrates the empowering dimension of the ability to mobilise dissent. The framing of these hashtags illustrates the support for contentious forms of collective action denouncing the lack of institutional action, albeit in the context of an electoral campaign. This means that past experiences of contestation are used to request supporters to then act on the electoral repertoire. The role of activism and contingency is suggested in the more organic nature of environmental issues: it includes more communities (8 to 6) and more salient hashtags (27 to 18) than those pertaining more salient Brexit debate, suggesting that whereas the “Green wave” did not dominate the agenda it may have been in a sense a more European concern than Brexit. Put differently: even though more users tweeted about Brexit, Green issues reached more communities with a greater diversity of demands expressed in salient hashtags.

That being said, the hashtags reflect clearly that the agenda is set in the context of an election campaign where issue priming is vital but where actors still need to ensure that the visibility they attract to their issues favours them on election day. This is visible in the #wantgreenvotegreen that implies that environmental issues are a priority only for green parties whereas the others may have an environmental offer but do not share the broader frame of climate urgency.

Finally, as anticipated above the table also confirms that users employed hashtags to articulate the contents of their policy demands, such as in the #wastereduction and #biodiversity tags. The specificity of this framing in distinction of the GAL/TAN debates provides strong confirmation for our second expectation.

Another interesting dimension of the core community is that its second characteristic is its strong Irish component as evident in tags such as #rtept (the prime time programme of

Irish public broadcaster RTÉ), #irelandsouth or #fine Gael, although peripheral within the central community (see also the Ireland table in Elo 2019). The importance of environmental issues in Ireland is confirmed by the historical result of the Greens in the 2019 EU election where they reached 11.4% of the vote (their best result in any Irish national election to date) winning two MEPs. This European success was followed by their best result in an Irish general election in 2020 (7.1% of first preference votes) entering the cabinet as a result. That however does not contradict our first expectation. Although the strong presence of Green policy demands and frames is part of a national campaigns, these are not framed in Irish terms but in generally transnational ones: justice, action, emergency and no references to local environmental issues or national framing of green issues; as is in any case typical of a transnational issue like environment.

This shows the strong interrelation between the transnational activism involvement in European campaigns (Fridays for Future), in European partisan politics (the activism of European green parties paid off with their best collective result to date) and national activism (albeit made stronger by our methodological decision to collect tweets in English only). This is coherent with the background to our first expectation, the growing tendency of European cause entrepreneurship to be rooted and able to communicate in both national and transnational activism (see Bouza, Oleart and Tuñón 2019 for a similar case of Twitter activism in the case of @NoAITTIP). This is in contrast to the disconnection between European professional civil society and grassroots movements (Buth 2012) before the EU polycrisis.

The importance of activism could be challenged by pointing out that the very diversity of hashtags (their fragmentation, multiple sense-making strategies and absence of a single dominant hashtag) suggests that the “Green wave” in Twitter was the result of an organic

growth. However, the analysis of specific moments of the two weeks' period confirms the existence of an organised campaign. The best example of this is the debate between Spitzenkandidaten (pan-European party families leading candidates for the office of Commission president) which, as previous research has shown, had specific effects in awareness (Gattermann and De Vreese 2020) and social media resonance (Stier et al 2020; Rivas-de-Roca and García-Gordillo 2020) on the election campaign.

We did this by analysing the tweets produced on the evening of 17 May 2019 when candidates to the office of Commission president engaged in the first ever pan-European televised electoral debate. On that evening the frames that dominated the conversation in Twitter had much more to do with climate change and young people's opportunities than migration (see figure 4 below). This clearly appears in the number and centrality of the green frames (in black) in contrast with Eurosceptic frames (in blue) and pro-European ones (in green). Not only does this provide further confirmation for our second expectation (a specific green framing of injustice and urgency in opposition to both the more-less Europe and liberal – illiberal) and a similar strategy of pointing out key policy issues (biodiversity, water), rather than engage in the pro-anti EU debate. As in the broader two-week campaign, this strategy grants green activists (both partisan and civil society) centrality in the conversation by their ability to bridge different political and transnational communities.

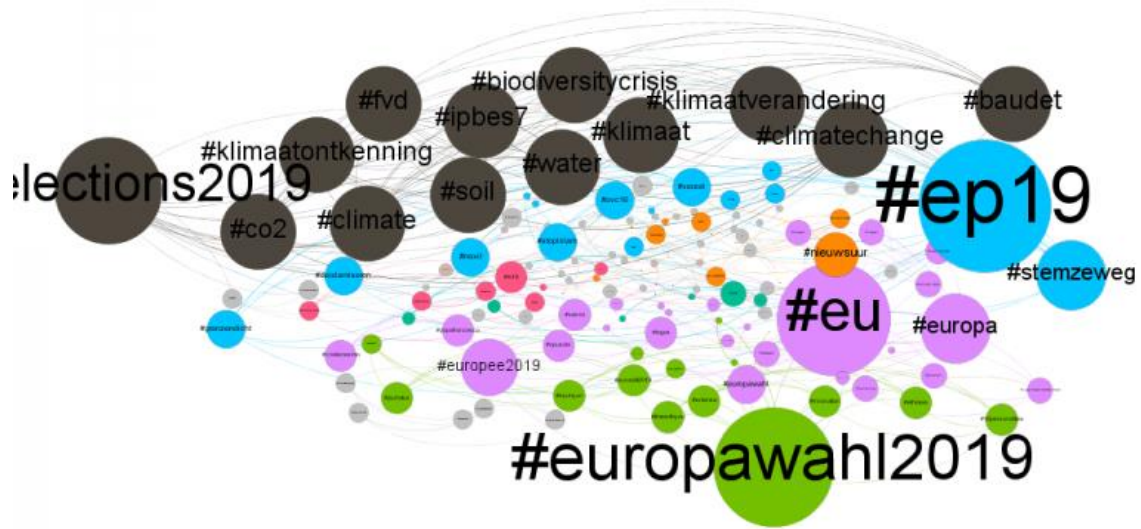


Figure 4 Live tweeting during the Spitzenkandidaten debate 17/05/19

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has shown that a transnational conversation on EU policy issues happened in Twitter in the weeks before the EU election and that environmental demands were important in these conversations. Even though environmental concerns were not the most prevailing in numerical terms their presence in different communities in the network of conversations across two weeks demonstrates the ability of the promoters to bridge across different transnational communities and the pro-anti EU divide. Given the high stakes nature of the election – consistently portrayed as a decisive clash between pro-Europeans and Eurosceptics – this result is even more interesting considering that Green issues are traditionally addressed as a future and relatively consensual issue.

The paper demonstrates that promoters of environmental issues during these two weeks were able to achieve this by using a form of “empowering dissensus” communication (Bouza, Oleari and Tuñón 2019) and linking national and transnational mobilisation. This requires attention to activism, dissent and transnational linkages. Firstly, and coherent

with theoretical expectations, the EU Twittersphere is also a fertile ground for activist agenda setting. This has been confirmed by the systematic usage in different moments of the two weeks of frames linked with the global Fridays for Future agenda with Green policy priorities.

Secondly, and also as expected, the conversation has shown a strong potential for mobilisation of contentious and protest frames. Polity contestation on subjects such as Brexit exists together with polity endorsement such as the denunciation carried by #deniedmyvote as well as with policy debate on migration. The position of green activists in this controversial policy discussion may be surprising in relation to traditional assumptions about the consensual nature of environmental issues but is fully coherent with the “empowering dissensus” assumption: policy entrepreneurs and activists are able to frame EU policy issues in a way that frames EU issues in critical terms albeit avoiding the polity debate on the EU while favouring transnational policy action and thus providing support for EU involvement in the issues. This framing allowed Green issues to obtain a central and specific space differentiated from pro-EU liberal campaigns and anti-EU populists, thus somehow blurring the direct applicability of the GAL/TAN cleavage.

Thirdly the paper has also shown that the framing of Green issues strongly interacted with the Irish political debate on the EU. Far from contradicting the general expectation about the way in which framing of environmental issues escaped second-order nationalisation this is compatible with the empowering dissensus conceptualisation: the ability to communicate using political dissent that expects European and transnational policy solution is a fitting strategy for political outsiders at the national level – such as to a large extent Greens in Ireland – to use EU and transnational issues to foster their position both at EU and national level.

The paper's main conclusion is that the Twittersphere provided a forum – albeit segmented, non-representative and strongly self-referential – for specific agenda setting strategies during European campaigns, including elections. The relevance of these findings must be interpreted correctly: we have no evidence about its impact on election behaviour or in other media in the campaign. However, it is clear that there were sustained processes of sense making via the use of hashtags that succeeded at making Green issues visible across more diverse communities than debates on constitutive debates such as Brexit. This is significant because it demonstrates that social media conversations on Europe are not limited to reproduce dominant agendas in the public sphere and instead can promote specific issues. This is even more relevant as environmental activists created an opportunity to develop their own framing during a high visibility campaign where pro and anti-Europeans emphasised the dual nature of the clash. More research will be needed to specifically compare the nature of the conversation in Twitter to the similar framing in other media, but this finding is coherent with the literature on the opportunities for political activism in Twitter: as the higher-than-usual stakes clash of the pro-anti EU of the EU election was covered by traditional media this seems to have created an opportunity for the centrality of alternative agendas in social media.

It must be clear that we do not make any assumptions about the effect of this agenda on the electoral result, nor do we anticipate any similarities with the incoming election. At the time of writing this conclusion, March 2024, Green parties are predicted to lose an important part of their 2019 seat gains. Future comparative studies on the elections should pay attention to the eventual differences between both campaigns, since it seems that Green forces have not been able to avoid the constituent issues of belonging – such as identity or support for Ukraine – to focus on their proposals and channelling empowering dissensus as they did in 2019.

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Annex 1 tables with hashtags aggregated by community

Table 4 Salient hashtags community 1

Hashtag	Indegree
#climatechange	326
#itstime	200
#fbpe	192
#housingcrisis	152
#clima	118
#climateemergency	116

#wastereduction	116
#climateactionnow	112
#wantgreenvotegreen	112
#climateaction	90
#fossilfree	88
#worldbeeday	78
#fffgfo	74
#climatechaos	72
#syriza	70
#dom4europe	68
#firsttimegreen	68
#housing	66
#bollockstobrexit	62
#fbp	62
#prolife	62
#italy	60
#piratesvscorruption	58
#time4unity	58
#mnw	56
#nochild2020	56
#green	54
#right2water	52

Table 5 Salient hashtags community 2

Hashtag	Indegree
#brexit	14308
#european	8774
#europe	3080
#europea	1234
#europeanelections2019	1156
#europawahl2019nnchart	846
#europeanel	480
#ep	474
#e	402
#ep19dk	358
#dkpol	326
#eur	294
#voteforeurope	262
#elezionieuropee	238
#govoten#votetogether	202
#euelectio	198
#elezionieuropee2019	186
#europeanele	108
#electionseuropeennes2019	96

#cyprus	84
#brussels	78
#europeanelections2	70
#wales	58
#ep2014	54
#euele	54

Table 6 Salient hashtags community 3

Hashtag	Indegree
#resettlement	274
#iranianrefugeesinturkey	250
#iranianrefugeesinthailand	50

Table 7 Salient hashtags community 13

Hashtag	Indegree
#euroelec	446
#activesnp	406
#votesnp	384
#ep2	342
#ep20	298
#ep201	258
#scotlandsforeurope	130
#teampaisley	122
#ep2019nremain	92
#partick	74

Table 8 Salient hashtags community 23

Hashtag	Indegree
#stopbrexit	558
#libdems	556
#remain	368
#eucitizens	190
#ep2019nnafter	144
#france	138
#votelabour	106
#neweuropeans	78
#ep2019nnz	66
#voteearly	66
#ep2019nnpeter	56
#leave	52

Table 9 Salient hashtags community 30

Hashtag	Indegree
#euelections	282

#maga	80
#ep2019nntthanks	78

Table 10 Salient hashtags community 44

#ivoted	316
#gary4europe	312
#socdems	186
#purplewave	72
#newvoices	58
#sustainablecommunities	58
#breakingbarriers	54

Table 11 Salient hashtags community 47

#europeanelectionresults	1196
#euroelections2019	260
#labour	240
#greens	156
#bbcnews	140
#skynews	116
#actnow	108
#euroelections201	108
#euelectionresults	96
#meps	94
#tommyrobinson	90
#cleanbrexit	86
#animalwelfare	66

Table 12 Salient hashtags community 49

#deniedmyvote	2832
#euelection2019	514
#epelections	58

Table 13 Salient hashtags community 51

#brexitparty	622
#netherlands	466
#ep2019nnhttps	388
#brexitparty_uk	270
#projectsmearandfear	252
#milkshake	172
#conservatives	154
#chan	152
#occupyforclimate	136
#voteforclimate	116
#ep2019nn	104

#eu2019	98
#cyberattacks	72
#slovakia	70
#ep2019nnfollow	68

Table 14 Salient hashtags community 74

#thistimeinvoting	620
#teameurope	222
#reneweurope	192
#futureofeurope	126
#eue	90
#euelect	82
#ep2019nn23	80
#europeennes2019	60
#peoplesvote	56

Table 15 Salient hashtags community 95

#greennewdeal	460
#euro	388
#spitzenkandidaten	148
#diem25	136

Table 16 Salient hashtags community 97

#greenwave	1404
#austria	246
#russia	212
#farright	164
#electionsue19	162
#ce	156
#euelections2019n	114
#breakingnthe	96
#euelections2019nn	76
#sheffieldnnwow	70
#climatecrisis	52

Table 17 Salient hashtags community 95

#ukip	104
#ukipswtour	68

Table 18 Salient hashtags community 103

#spain	500
#euelection	170
#sweden	158

#estonia	88
#voting	72
#humanrights	58

Table 19 Salient hashtags community 107

#germany	418
#csu	182
#afd	106
#rezoeffekt	78
#lepen	62
#macron	62

Table 20 Salient hashtags community 117

#racism	200
#ibikeivote	134
#portuguese	78

Table 21 Salient hashtags community 151

#greece	922
#piraty	352
#pirateparty	246
#votepirate	144
#breaking	114
#piraten	112
#pirate	100
#czech	74
#tsipras	58

Table 22 Salient hashtags community 155

#fridaysforfuture	180
#climate	122
#rezo ¹	88

Table 23 Salient hashtags community 160

#malta	184
#dementiapledge2019	104
#feminism	76

Table 24 Salient hashtags community 161

#europawahl2019	1534
#europeanelection2019	862

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/22/german-youtuber-rezo-video-attacking-merkel-party-cdu-goes-viral>

#europee2019	450
#thursdaythoughts	336
#euval2019	254
#europawahl	216
#mar	216
#london	160
#localelections2019	122
#lgbt	90
#ep2019nlesbians	86
#maratonamentana	82
#thebrexitparty	74
#ele	72
#ep2019nn36	60
#dogsatpollingstations	56

Table 25 Salient hashtags community 163

#hungary	834
#thepowerofwe	454
#orban	274
#romania	134
#epelections2019	78
#spitzenkandidat	68
#fidesz	52
#lmp	52
#migration	52
#orb	52

Annex 2 Tables with hashtags

Table 26 Brexit debate - 29838 tweets

Label	indegree	modularity_class
#brexit	14308	2
#european	8774	2
#deniedmyvote	2832	49
#brexitparty	622	51
#stopbrexit	558	23
#libdems	556	23
#remain	368	23
#brexitparty_uk	270	51
#voteforeurope	262	2
#projectsmearandfear	252	51
#fbpe ²	192	1

² <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/jan/17/fbpe-what-is-pro-eu-hashtag-spreading-across-social-media>

#eucitizens	190	23
#milkshake	172	51
#chan	152	51
#scotlandforeurope	130	13
#cleanbrexit	86	47
#bollockstobrexit	62	1
#leave	52	23

Table 27 Green wave – 4990 tweets

Label	indegree	modularity_class
#greenwave	1404	97
#greennewdeal	460	95
#climatestrike	386	74
#climatechange	326	1
#itstime	200	1
#fridaysforfuture	180	155
#greens	156	47
#occupyforclimate	136	51
#ibikeivote	134	114
#climate	122	155
#clima	118	1
#climateemergency	116	1
#wastereduction	116	1
#voteforclimate	116	51
#climateactionnow	112	1
#wantgreenvotegreen	112	1
#actnow	108	47
#climateaction	90	1
#fossilfree	88	1
#worldbeeday	78	1
#climatechaos	72	1
#sustainablecommunities	58	44
#green	54	1
#climatecrisis	52	97
#firsttimegreen	68	1
#animalwelfare	66	47
#fbp	62	1

Table 28 Migration debate - 1292 tweets

Label	indegree	modularity_class
#resettlement	274	3
#iranianrefugeesinturkey	250	3
#russia	212	97
#racism	200	114

#farright	164	97
#maratonamentana	82	161
#humanrights	58	103
#migration	52	163

Table 29 Transnational politics - 3048 tweets

Label	indegree	modularity_class
#thepowerofwe	454	163
#orban	274	163
#pirateparty	246	151
#teameurope	222	74
#reneweurope	192	74
#futureofeurope	126	74
#votevolt	244	84
#europeseverkiezingen	178	84
#spitzenkandidaten	148	95
#votepirate	144	151
#diem25	136	95
#volt	118	84
#piraten	112	151
#pirate	100	151
#purplewave	72	44
#spitzenkandidat	68	163
#fidesz	52	163
#lmp	52	163
#orb	52	163
#piratesvscorruption	58	1
#dementiapledge2019	104	160
#lgbt	90	161
#ep2019nlesbians	86	161
#feminism	76	160