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THE PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FDP'S
POLITICAL CAMPAIGN IN THE 2021 GERMAN FEDERAL
PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

Dissertation submitted to Universidade Católica Portuguesa
to obtain a Master's Degree in Communication Studies –
Strategic Communication and Leadership

By

Konstantin Florian Toffert

Faculdade de Ciências Humanas

December 2024



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Under the supervision of Prof. João Duarte
Vasconcelos Simão

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Abstract

Contemporary political campaigning in research and practice encompasses a multitude of different challenges and opportunities driven by transformations in digitalisation, globalisation and societal pluralisation. Trends and dynamics such as professionalisation, marketisation, and hypermediatisation have contributed to a variety of strategies and communication tactics by integrating principles from subdisciplines incorporated within the concept of strategic communication. To provide a tangible perspective on this theoretical complexity, it seems valuable to examine a specific and contemporary political election campaign to grasp the evolving nature of political campaigning fully. This research aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on political campaign strategies by examining the political campaign planning, implementation, and execution of the liberal party FDP in the 2021 German federal parliamentary election campaign. This qualitative case study offers in-depth and emic insider perspectives into the FDP's internal processes and strategies obtained through semi-structured interviews with six campaign experts from the liberal party at the parliamentary level. Following the process of thematic analysis, six central themes from deductive and inductive code segments closely align with established theoretical frameworks. The study's findings show a highly strategic and professionalised 2021 federal election campaign by the FDP, shaped by three distinct phases and supported by a federal and state-level alignment of internal and external actors. Two core strategies emerged in the campaign: a personification strategy tailored to the lead candidate and party leader Lindner and the usage of the societal context caused by the coronavirus pandemic to promote liberal values. Hybrid political communication and mobilisation strategies, which were applied both offline and online, completed the election campaign. In summary, this study contributes to the broader discourse of political campaign research, offering significant insights into the strategic process of an election campaign on the federal level in the contemporary German party landscape.

Keywords: *political campaigning, professionalisation, political communication, hybrid campaign strategies, German federal election 2021*

Abstract (Portuguese)

A campanha política contemporânea, tanto na pesquisa quanto na prática, abrange uma multiplicidade de desafios e oportunidades, impulsionado pelas transformações na digitalização, globalização e pluralização social. Tendências e dinâmicas como a profissionalização, mercantilização e hipermediatização contribuíram para o desenvolvimento de diversas estratégias e táticas de comunicação, integrando princípios de subdisciplinas incorporadas ao conceito de comunicação estratégica. Para oferecer uma perspectiva tangível sobre essa complexidade teórica, torna-se valioso examinar uma campanha política eleitoral específica e contemporânea para compreender plenamente a natureza em evolução da campanha política. Esta pesquisa visa contribuir para o corpo de conhecimento sobre estratégias de campanha política ao analisar o planejamento, a implementação e a execução da campanha eleitoral do partido liberal FDP nas eleições parlamentares federais alemãs de 2021. Este estudo de caso qualitativo oferece perspectivas internas profundas e emic sobre os processos e estratégias do FDP, obtidas por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas com seis especialistas em campanha do partido liberal em nível parlamentar. Seguindo o processo de análise temática, foram identificados seis temas centrais na análise dos dados, derivados de segmentos de códigos dedutivos e indutivos, alinhando-se estreitamente com os quadros teóricos estabelecidos. Os resultados do estudo revelam uma campanha eleitoral altamente estratégica e profissionalizada conduzida pelo FDP em 2021, estruturada em três fases distintas e apoiada por um alinhamento federal e estadual de atores internos e externos. Duas estratégias principais emergiram na campanha: uma estratégia de personificação voltada para o candidato principal e líder do partido, Lindner, e o uso do contexto social causado pela pandemia de coronavírus para promover valores liberais. Estratégias híbridas de comunicação política e mobilização, aplicadas tanto offline quanto online, completaram a campanha eleitoral. Em resumo, este estudo contribui para o discurso mais amplo sobre pesquisa em campanhas políticas, oferecendo insights significativos sobre o processo estratégico de uma campanha eleitoral em nível federal no cenário partidário contemporâneo alemão.

Palavras-chave: *campanhas políticas, profissionalização, comunicação política, estratégias de campanha híbrida, eleição federal alemã de 2021*

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List of Abbreviations

Ads	Advertisements
AFD	Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany)
AI	Artificial Intelligence
CCO	Communicative Constitution of Organisations
CDU	Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (Christian Democratic Union of Germany)
FDP	Freie Demokratische Partei (Free Democratic Party)
IPO	Initial Public Offering
JULIS	Junge Liberale (Young Liberals)
MMPS	Mixed-member Proportional System
MP	Member of Parliament
PAC	Political Action Committee
PR	Public Relations
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany)

1. Introduction

In modern political ecosystems, the planning, implementation, and execution of political election campaigns are accompanied and accelerated by transformations in digitalisation, globalisation and pluralistic democratisation, which has led to significant strategic shifts in political campaigning in engaging with the society, political sphere and media landscape (Davies, 2024; Borgebund, 2019; Goncalves, 2019). Fundamental challenges such as the increased complexity of the media environment, the systematic construction of parallel political online realities through digital social platforms and the inherent volatility of the electorate suggest a new era of political campaigning in which interactive and participatory communication dynamics shape the political campaigning process (Strömbäck & Kiouisis, 2020; McNair, 2018). Trends and dynamics such as Americanisation, professionalisation, marketisation and hypermedia campaigning, among others, have given rise to a variety of different strategies and communication tactics and thereby act as drivers of political election campaigning (Lilleker, 2017; Esser & Pfetsch, 2020; Blumer, 2016). With the fundamental goal of gaining voter favour through persuasive communication, political campaigning as a cross-disciplinary field of research integrates principles and elements from political communication, marketing, public relations, public affairs and political advertising, all of which can be classified under the holistic umbrella concept of strategic communication (Baines, 2011; Strömbäck & Kiouisis, 2014; Holtz-Bacha, 2022a; Röttger, 2022).

Considering the complexity and diversity of these interdisciplinary theoretical approaches in a highly diversified political communication system, it seems valuable to examine a specific and contemporary political election campaign in more detail to fully capture the evolving nature of political campaigning as a discipline. A review of the existing scientific literature on political campaigns indicates that US-centred research approaches continue to influence the international research landscape as the origin of comparative and country-specific campaign analyses. Despite transnational digitalisation and globalisation trends, country-specific and individualised cultural, social, and political factors still play an important role in the process of a national election campaign. In this sense, it also seems advantageous from an academic viewpoint to conduct an in-depth qualitative study of a specific contemporary political campaign at a national, non-US level, in which overarching theory-based constructs are applied and compared (Holtz-Bacha, 2004; Strömbäck & Kiouisis, 2014; 2020).

The 2021 federal election in Germany provides an exemplary setting to study the dynamics of contemporary political campaigns. The election was shaped by challenges of global scope, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, alongside national concerns, including social security and digital transformation. These multilayered agendas unfolded in an extraordinarily pluralistic and competitive German party landscape, illustrating the complexity and diversity of modern election campaigns. The liberal party FDP offers a compelling case for analysis due to their successful election campaign, which earned them 11.5% of the vote (+0.8% compared to 2017). Having successfully navigated these challenging dynamics by effectively employing a range of campaign strategies in its planning, implementation and execution, the FDP campaign may serve as a relevant and revealing example of how modern political parties are adapting to evolving trends and dynamics in the political ecosystem, presenting valuable lessons for both academic research and practical application.

An overview of the existing research on political campaigning in Germany covers a wide range of different studies and research areas, yet it reveals some notable gaps, underlining the relevance of this study. First, much of the existing literature that refers to overarching campaign strategies in the German political system is outdated concerning digital communication and mobilisation strategies. Studies such as Althaus (2008), Holtz-Bacha (2007) and Leggewie (2009) neglect the newest trends and dynamics in the ongoing transformation of contemporary political campaign research. Second, political campaign strategies at the national level in Germany are predominantly examined from a quantitative and more superficial meta-perspective, exemplified by the studies of Angenendt et al. (2022), Langenbacher (2022), and Borucki & Kettman (2024). Specific campaign characteristics in the individual campaign phases receive little coverage; rather, general tendencies regarding election results or the influence of digitalisation are analysed. Finally, in contrast to meta-level studies, there is a simultaneous trend towards conducting research for specific facets of political campaign strategies. Several studies have examined the role of social media strategies in political campaigns (Haßler et al., 2023; Kelm et al., 2023; Righetti et al., 2022), the effects of campaigns on voting behaviour in Germany (Angenendt & Bukow, 2024; Leitner et al., 2024) and comparisons between traditional and digital advertising (Steffan & Venema, 2020). While these studies provide valuable insights, the broader strategic planning and implementation processes employed by a particular party to a specific election campaign often remain unclear.

This study addresses these gaps by providing a holistic analysis of the FDP's political campaign strategies for the 2021 federal parliamentary election. Therefore, this research approach not only seeks to address the challenges of the academic discourse by updating and expanding the understanding of political campaign strategies in Germany but also attempts to reframe theoretical campaign research so that it constitutes an asset for practical application. By focusing on the FDP campaign for the 2021 federal election, this study provides profound and detailed insights into the evolving strategic landscape of political campaigning. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how parties operate in complex, multi-dimensional political ecosystems, deploying both traditional and digital approaches. Furthermore, this work proposes a reference framework from a practical point of view to adapt to current trends in modern campaigning and optimise the dynamic campaign process in its strategic orientation. The study thus serves as a valuable resource for researchers, political campaigners and strategists, enriching the interdisciplinary field of political campaigning.

My research aims to comprehensively explore the political campaigning strategies of the FDP in the 2021 federal parliamentary election by revealing in-depth insights into the internal processes and strategies of the involved FDP's key actors. A qualitative single-case study relying on semi-structured interviews enables me to gather enriching data on subjective interpretations and meaningful actions in the complex social dynamics and decision-making processes within the federal election campaign of the liberal party. This method facilitates a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics underlying the FDP's campaign, contributing to the broader study of political campaigning.

This dissertation is divided into ten chapters. Whereas Chapter 1 introduces the research problem, comparative studies, including deficiencies and the purpose statement, Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 constitute the theoretical foundation of my thesis. Following a holistic perspective, Chapter 2 first identifies strategic communication as an overarching umbrella concept while also considering specific components of the strategic process. Chapter 3 examines political communication as a hybrid subdiscipline before outlining the current political communication ecosystem with its three spheres of politics, the public and the media. Political campaigning, as Chapter 4, establishes the theoretical core of my literature review. It identifies the trends and dynamics in current political campaign research, introduces four theoretical campaign models and sets out a general political campaign plan. Chapter 5 reaches a more specific level and examines the political electoral system at the federal level in Germany, as well as providing an

understanding of the political environment and the political position of the FDP. Chapter 6 details the methodological framework of this thesis, in which the research question and objectives are elaborated, the research design is presented, the procedures and techniques of data collection and analysis are explained, and ethical considerations and quality criteria are outlined. Chapter 7 presents the key findings from the collected interviews, focusing on six core thematic areas directly aligned with the research question and objectives. These findings are further discussed and interpreted in Chapter 8. Chapter 9 explores practical implications, addresses study limitations, and offers recommendations for future research. Finally, Chapter 10 concludes by addressing the research question and providing a brief outlook.

2. Strategic Communication

This chapter examines strategic communication as a holistic metatheoretical framework and defining it as the purposeful use of communication to achieve organisational goals. It investigates the multidisciplinary nature of the concept, referring to definitions from the fields of public relations, marketing, and management. The chapter highlights strategic processes, including issues management and the scaling of complexity, and discusses deliberate, emergent, and agile approaches. This theoretical foundation sets the stage for comprehending the strategic planning and implementation processes applicable to political campaigns.

2.1 Defining Strategic Communication within the concepts of Communication

Prior to taking a detailed look at political communication or, more specifically, political campaigning, it seems to be beneficial to determine the overarching concept of strategic communication itself. As a multi-faceted and layered concept, strategic communication can be defined from different research perspectives applying a variety of possible narratives (Falkheimer & Heide, 2022; Heide et al., 2018; Alghasi & Falkheimer, 2024). The publication of the article "Defining Strategic Communication" by Hallahan et al. (2007) in the first issue of the *International Journal of Strategic Communication* is regarded as one of the pioneers in defining this umbrella concept. In their seminal work, strategic communication is described as "the purposeful use of communication by an organisation to fulfil its mission" (p. 3). Based on this definition, the intentional nature of communication strategies to achieve entity goals becomes apparent (van Ruler, 2018). Furthermore, Hallahan et al. emphasise the role of human interactions, which "will be engaged in deliberate communication practice on behalf of

organisations, causes, and social movements” (2007, p. 4). As pointed out by Falkheimer and Heide (2022), the underlying core within the communication process in strategic communication is determined by the purposefully-directed character of all interactions that emerge between and within the entities and with their environment.

While the communication process was primarily shaped by the transmission model by Shannon and Weaver (1949) until the latter part of the 20th century, which rooted in one-way, symmetrical, and highly hierarchical interactions within an organisation, the “rejection of linearity” has led to a wide range of approaches that characterise strategic communication as an inherently two-way or even omnidirectional process that is interactive and participatory at all stages (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015, p. 7). This paradigmatic shift from a pure sender-receiver orientation to an asymmetrical flow of social interactions within and outside an organisation changes the communication process aiming at the transmission and construction of shared meaning within environmental uncertainty (Johnston & Everett, 2015; van Ruler, 2018). Building on the idea of how individual and shared meanings are shaped through this process of communication, the Communicative Constitution of Organisations (CCO) perspective, as one of the leading approaches in contemporary research, considers strategic communication from a holistic, multi-disciplinary standpoint that includes a range of theoretical frameworks (van Ruler, 2018). As suggested by Heide et al. (2018), the CCO framework posits that communication is not merely a tool but the foundational process through which organisations and social realities are constituted. Rather than focusing on how communication serves organisational goals, CCO emphasises how meanings are continuously negotiated and constructed within and around organisations. Van Ruler (2018) argues for an extension of CCO principles by viewing communication as an omnidirectional, ongoing societal process, thereby establishing a constitutive view of communication as a guiding metatheory for research.

In addition to this metatheoretical explanatory framework, further perspectives and (sub-)concepts derived from specific research domains can be highlighted for strategic communication. A key concept that has gained considerable importance in current research on strategic communication is the alignment within the communication process towards organisational objectives. Volk and Zerfass (2018) classify alignment into *primary* and *secondary*. The former highlights the importance of aligning the communication strategy with the overall strategic direction to ensure that strategic communication effectively supports the organisation's objectives through purposeful communication. The latter focuses on aligning

communication activities with both the communication strategy and between each communicating entity, consistent with an integrated communications approach.

From an applied and normative perspective, Jarzabkowski et al. (2007) provide a management-centred approach by defining strategic communication as “actions, interactions, and negotiations of multiple actors and the situated practices that they draw upon in accomplishing that activity” (2007, p. 8). This perspective focuses on the dynamic interplay between the discourse and the social practice of strategy formation, aiming at the interaction and exchange between the various actors in the process of strategic communication and is closely intertwined with the organisation's overarching strategy “to enhance its strategic positioning” (Argenti et al., 2005, p. 83). The term can be considered as a management function or instrumental approach for corporate communication, determined both by the objectives and the communication of these (vision and mission within an organisation) to its employees (Hallahan et al., 2007; Alghasi & Falkheimer, 2024). Cornelissen (2020) extends this notion of managerial integration of communication with the intention of maximising efficiency while optimising brand perception and reputation towards stakeholders.

Furthermore, refocusing on the organisational role within strategic communication, a combination of the research of Heide et al. (2018), Winkler & Etter (2018), Macnamara & Gregory (2018), and van Ruler (2018) do suggest that the concept can be regarded as every “communication activity by any member of an organization (...), and those activities should be geared and evaluated towards the goals of the organization, as well as all of its stakeholders” (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 492). Similarly, a fundamental dilemma can be discovered in the previous conceptualisations of the term and the discipline of strategic communication. With regard to a holistic and universal definition, Zerfass et al. (2018) criticise the lack of consideration of the inherent complexity and versatile contextuality in which strategic communication is applied. The attempt by most researchers to encapsulate such a multi-faceted concept in a single definition may result in neglecting important aspects, such as the “complex human process of interpretation” or oversimplifying the rich and diverse field (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014, p. 134). However, as observed by Heide et al. (2018), an overly narrow and one-sided definition of strategic communication may also be regarded as limiting “towards fulfilling this holistic and interdisciplinary ambition” (p. 465). The authors substantiate their position with the definition of the management-centred approach. The distinctive research perspective with its own narrow scope of methods, players, and objectives, in which the discipline's own research position including its findings is favoured, permits no or limited space for further perspectives from alternative research fields. Another valid contrary argument

refers to its pluralistic character, which might cause a problematic eclecticism and lack of coherence. A fragmentation of knowledge caused by pluralism implies that any interaction and communication process could be interpreted as strategic communication (Nothhaft, 2016). In addition to the lack of definitional clarity in finding an overarching classification, strategic communication can also be recaptured as a variant of application and recurring paradigm in a multitude of disciplines linked to communication, which will be further elaborated in the following section.

Based on the myriad of definitional assumptions and approaches, the question therefore arises as to which attributes and conditions must be satisfied in order to validate the concept of strategic communication from a scientific perspective. Referring to Falkheimer and Heide (2022), strategic communication can only be regarded as a fully comprehensive field of research and knowledge if specific research objects and specific research perspectives are supported by academic and scientific institutions such as publications, study programs and conferences. Accumulated empirical findings such as theories and concepts enable the formation of an independent scientific discipline of strategic communication. Despite well-founded criticisms of a holistic and interdisciplinary approach to strategic communication, which integrates various research disciplines and perspectives, an integrative lens is needed „to fully grasp the richness and nuances of organizational life and communication” (Heide et al., 2018, p. 465). As Zerfass et al. (2018) and Heide et al. (2018) conclude, a critical examination and constructive engagement with resistance is essential if strategic communication is to be accepted as an independent academic discipline. According to Szostak (2013) and Werder et al. (2018), it is pertinent to incorporate findings through an interdisciplinary approach to improve the understanding of the specific research focus, yet delineating and establishing a clearly defined domain of research is essential to attract researchers and receive accreditation. As suggested by van Ruler (2018), the CCO approach, which is prevalent in contemporary research, serves as a viable starting point for capturing the complexity of strategic communication. Whereby the collective definitional basis of the *purposeful* use of communication is extended by an omnidirectional process of meaning development, which incorporates human behaviour as the core of strategic communication (Heide et al., 2018).

2.2 The Strategic Communication approach across disciplines and practice

As indicated by Falkheimer & Heide (2022), Zerfass et al. (2018) and Werder et al. (2018), strategic communication gained popularity and wide recognition in both academic research and

across practice as an overarching notion to analyse and solve any kind of entity related issues with a goal-oriented communication process. Therefore, this section is going to deal with different approaches to understanding strategic communication, each contributing to its complexity and width. Based on the scientific justification of strategic communication as an independent discipline, the proximity and overlap with the disciplines of media/communication theory, organisational theory, business/management theory and social theory are evident (Werder et al. 2018, Falkheimer & Heide, 2014). These four disciplines are complemented by sub-disciplines specialised in research and practice, such as public relations, marketing communication, corporate communication, political communication, and several other interrelated research streams (Zerfass et al., 2018). Strategic communication hereby represents an interdisciplinary umbrella concept that can be perceived as a further development of integrated communication, as noted by Heide et al. (2018). In some scientific literature on public relations, a symbiosis has evolved with the terminology of strategic communication, whereby strategic communication has been adopted as an alternative label (Zerfass et al. 2018). According to Werder et al. (2018), this is in part a result of the disciplinary emphasis on integrating strategic communication within published public relations articles, driven by an expanded requirement profile that extends beyond traditional public relations work to include the examination of societal impacts. Furthermore, both a progressive negative connotation of public relations, synonymous with propaganda, as well as linguistic challenges in translation and meaning across cultures have led to an increased usage of strategic communication as an alternative term for the discipline (Zerfass et al. 2018; Nothhaft & Zerfass, 2022). Similarly, Falkheimer & Heide (2014, 2015) and Heide et al. (2018) set clear limitations on any disciplinary assimilation of strategic communication. While public relations and marketing are primarily restricted to external communication and organisational communication to internal communication processes, the holistic and conceptual approach of strategic communication breaks through these limitations and expands as "a transboundary concept that captures [...] the complex phenomenon of an organisation's targeted communication processes" (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014, p. 124). In view of strategic communication as a practical field, the concept takes a strategic and decisional function in modern, private, transnational, listed companies and addresses the question of how strategic communication can help to define, implement, and achieve goals (Zerfass et al., 2018). A further perspective highlights the role of strategic communication in military and national power, as a more cost-effective and morally appealing alternative to physical force. Emphasised by Bloom (1991) and Nothhaft & Schölzel (2015) strategic communication may be considered as integral to warfare and diplomacy, influencing

international relations. As recognised by Falkheimer and Heide (2022), strategic communication itself acts as a soft power advancing the institutionalisation of the concept. Furthermore, it necessitates the differentiation between strategic and operational communication, especially in contexts like terrorism, counterterrorism, and public diplomacy (Botan, 2018). To conclude, the importance of strategic communication as a transdisciplinary umbrella concept is clearly evident from its holistic and inclusive character, which transcends the nuances and complexities of different fields of research and application (Nothhaft & Zerfass, 2022). Its evolving role is transforming research perspectives in various disciplines and practices. With regard to the strategic character of my research question, the subsequent section aims to thoroughly examine the circumstances and conditions under which strategy is adopted in the communication process.

2.3 When does Communication become strategic?

As in any scientific discipline, strategic communication likewise requires a particular perspective in order to observe certain events or phenomena. Based on their scientific engagement strategic management scholars Kirsch (1997), Müller-Stewens & Lechner (2005), and Nag et al. (2007), the authors Zerfass et al. (2018) established a definition to determine whether communication is to be perceived as strategic:

“Strategic communication encompasses all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity. Specifically, strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals” (p. 493)

Drawing on this approach, the following assumptions can be derived. Firstly, according to Zerfass et al. (2018), not all purposeful communication is strategic at heart, operational communication for instance, although contributing to the achievement of objectives, may not be labelled strategic. Van Ruler (2018) asserts that purposeful communication can only be considered strategic if the communication pursues "the intention to advance an organisation's mission" (p. 372). It is not the quality of the communication that determines its strategic nature, but the purpose of optimising the strategic goals of an entity. Moreover, the significance of objective factors in strategic communication becomes clear when the inability to identify trends and external developments at the decision-making level results in adjustments in its core strategic direction. As van Ruler (2018) argues, strategy is to be seen "as an ongoing process

that needs to be reflected upon in order to adapt to internal and external emergent changes, and to determine whether one is still doing the right things in the right way" (p. 378). According to Marchiori and Bulgacov (2012; 2015), strategy is not a static construct, but rather is performed as part and as a result of the communication process, continuously evolving and reflected in the interactions of permanent relationships between each organisational member. Furthermore, conversations of strategic significance can unfold across various platforms, from the vast spaces of mass and social media to more intimate discussions among consumers, employees, or analysts. This multi-faceted nature requires organisations and their respective communications teams to closely monitor the changing dynamics of communications, including technological trends, a wide array of media channels and influential personalities within its landscape. The concept of an *entity* in the introduced definition is understood in a broad sense and encompasses corporations, governments, nonprofits, social movements, and public figures. Entities are characterised by their sphere of responsibility, purpose, and limited resources, often operating in competitive or contested spaces, both spatial and temporal, where strategic decisions have enduring effects that are difficult to reverse. What other assumptions can be made about the strategic sphere within the field of strategic communication? Strategic communication must at least have a minimum level of complexity and uncertainty, with the prerequisite demanding at least one focal entity as the initial point of the strategic process (Nothhaft et al., 2018; Nothhaft & Zerfass 2022). Zerfass et al. (2018) expand the term *substantial* to encompass a subjective and objective dimension, demonstrating that from that perspective it is not restricted to a one-sided principal-agent interaction. The subjective dimension determines the significance of a strategy and functions according to a top-down approach. If the executive level considers an issue to be strategic, it usually becomes strategic for this reason alone. Conversely, the objective aspect of substantiality is based on the real effect of an issue on an organisation's circumstances, future objectives, and core mission. The full extent of an issue's strategic importance often becomes apparent only in retrospect, although signals of environmental shifts can be detected early on, leading to a reactive approach from the bottom up (Heide et al., 2018). This shows how important it is to integrate the discourse of employees/ entities at all levels (concept of alignment) when shaping the strategic direction. The determination of strategic significance according to a subjective vs. objective dimension furthermore impacts modern strategy development and is expanded with the attributes *deliberate*, *emergent* and, most recently, *agile* - which will be further examined in subsection 2.4.1 in the concretisation of the strategic process (van Ruler, 2018; 2021). Based on the classification of when an issue is considered substantial or significant for the growth,

existence or identity of an entity, the subsequent section introduces issues management as a strategic dimension to communication in the achievement of organisational objectives (Coombs & Holladay, 2017).

2.3.1 Issues Management within Strategic Communication

Originating from Chase (1984), issues management focused on minimising conflict and promoting better relations between organisations and their stakeholders. Similarly, Hainsworth and Meng (1988) referred to it as an approach to managing and influencing the impacts of environmental change. While issues management was initially regarded as a further development of public relations (stakeholder relations) and public affairs (issue and policy reporting and counselling), issues management is proving to be an integrative approach that crosses the entire range of the organisational structure (Grunig & Repper, 2013; Coombs et al., 2019). In current research, issues management refers to a systematic process that, through the coordinated interaction of strategic planning and communication functions, aims to proactively identify, analyse, and prioritise internal and external issues that may constrain strategic decision-making (Ingenhoff et al., 2022). It also seeks to actively influence these issues through strategic decisions and subsequently evaluates their effectiveness. Due to its strategic impact on the communication process, issues management is considered a "proactive strategic communication function that helps management achieve larger organisational goals" (Coombs & Holladay, 2017, p. 81).

Its integrative nature and close alignment with the organisation's objectives place the issues management process at the centre of organisational communication by utilising communication strategically to identify and process the significance of a perceived internal and external situation or issue (Wiedemann & Riess, 2007; Grunig & Repper, 2013; Coombs et al., 2019). Research has offered several systems for effectively categorising different types of issues, such as the catalytic model developed by Crable and Vibbert (1985), and the problem management process of Chase (1984), both of which focus in several steps on identifying and prioritising issues and providing direction for their resolution. As noted by Kent et al. (2011), the preceding theories lack convergence and omnidirectional interchange of communication within the organisation and with its environment. Therefore, Zerfass et al. (2018) classify the strategic plannability and relevance of issues for the entity's overall alignment from the interplay of two key variables: the substantiality of an issue to an entity and the recognition of this significance by the entity. In this regard, the complexity of distinguishing between genuinely strategic issues and those perceived as such due to managerial emphasis or oversight is pointed out. Zerfass et

al. (2018) present a taxonomy (Figure I.) that categorises strategic issues based on perceived and actual significance, highlighting the importance of accurate issue identification within organisations. The framework emphasises the interplay between management and lower-level employees, as well as the influence of external factors, showing how strategic importance can be either correctly or incorrectly prioritised (Nothhaft & Zerfass, 2022). It underscores the role of omnidirectional communication, both bottom-up and in response to external pressures, in shaping what becomes strategically relevant, and highlights the risks of misjudgment in issue prioritisation.

TAXONOMY OF STRATEGIC ISSUES		
	Substantiality of Issue	
Identification of Issue	Insubstantial Retrospective Analysis Objective Dimension	Substantial Retrospective Analysis Objective Dimension External Constitution
<u>Identified as Substantial</u> Subjective Dimension Internal Constitution	STRATEGIC ISSUE Top-down Incorrectly Prioritized	STRATEGIC ISSUE Bottom-up & Top-down Correctly Prioritized
<u>Not Identified as Substantial</u> Subjective Dimension	NONSTRATEGIC ISSUE Operational or Tactical Correctly Deprioritized	STRATEGIC ISSUE Bottom-up Incorrectly Deprioritized

Figure I.: Taxonomy of Strategic Issues, Source: Zerfass, A., Verčič, D., Nothhaft, H., Werder, K. P. (2018). Strategic communication: Defining the field and its contribution to research and Practice. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4), p. 4

In terms of the thematic focus of my dissertation on political campaign planning and execution from a strategic perspective, issues management in politics can be related to the process in which “politicians, campaigns, parties, and other political groups identify, prioritize, develop, and convey positions on key issues” (Kiousis & Strömbäck, 2015, p. 389). Fundamental to effective issue management in strategic political communication and therefore part of the campaigning process is formative research, where parties investigate the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours of key voter groups concerning policy preferences and issues (Waymer & Heath, 2020).

2.3.2 The factors behind the scaling of strategic complexity

After emphasising the significance of entity-related issues and exploring the subjective and objective dimensions of their identification and resolution through issues management in the previous chapters, it seems worth shedding light on the scale of strategic complexity in communication strategies. Strategic issues consist to a high degree of complexity. They relate

to situations that are characterised by a multitude of different elements with diverse relationships, changeable causal linkages, and a variety of options for response, as Schoeneberg (2014) assesses. As already outlined in section 2.3, strategic complexity arises when situations, issues or behaviours depart from the set norm without a predefined plan of action (Zerfass et al., 2018). The present section focuses on the patterns and drivers that provide a rationale for changing the strategic orientation of communication. In terms of planning and executing political and strategic campaigns, the *drivers* could provide the first sign for determining when an institution or organisation should address an issue, challenge or situation from a strategic perspective (Zerfass et al., 2018; Nothhaft & Zerfass, 2022):

- **Resource-driven factors:**

implicate critical decisions about high-value assets, such as initial public offerings or military assets, which demand strategic consideration due to their potential irreversible costs.

- **Competition-driven complexity:**

emerges from entities striving to outperform their competitors, seeking indirect ways to gain advantage. This is reflected in the findings of Porter (1998) and Liddell-Hart (1991) on competitive strategy.

- **Environment-driven change:**

whether political, technological, or ecological, demands strategic adaptation to maintain operational niches and procedures, as indicated by Whittington's (2001) reference to the evolutionary theory of strategy.

- **Risk-driven scenarios:**

further strategic complexity is significantly influenced by risk factors such as high-stakes decisions, unforeseen chances/crises and "black swans" (Weick, 1985; Taleb, 2008; Clegg et al., 2020). These scenarios, ranging from IPOs to unforeseeable disasters, emphasise the challenges of strategic planning. The unpredictability and significant impact of such events highlight the importance of managing strategic risk and underline the need for both flexibility and anticipation in coping with strategic uncertainties and leveraging coincident opportunities.

- **Innovation-driven complexity:**

Innovation comes into strategic focus whenever organisations depart from traditional practices and adopt new approaches (Chadwick, 2013). This pursuit of innovation is transforming strategic communication and forcing organisations to navigate the evolving

landscape of communication technologies and media. As a result, strategic communication is emerging as a critical area that reflects the sector's adaptation to constant change and the merging of old and new media practices.

- **Engagement-driven complexity:**

Unallocated resources have the potential to increase strategic complexity by providing opportunities for significant decisions. The importance lies not only in their optimal utilisation but also the message these investments send. For example, UBER's investment in autonomous driving is both a strategic allocation of resources and a signal of strategic direction to partners, therefore part of an overall strategic alignment, as Zerfass et al. (2018) indicate.

- **Operationally driven:**

Finally, operational changes highlight the dynamic nature of strategic issues. Fundamental changes in the operational framework of an organisation require a strategic response, not only in terms of resource allocation or coping with exceptional circumstances but also in terms of decisions that reshape the core of operational processes.

2.4 The development of Communication strategies

The final section on the overarching topic of strategic communication is intended to shape a theoretical framework for analysing strategic campaign planning in a practical environment. It will therefore be pertinent at this point to outline specific models of strategic communication in more detail. In the section 2.4.1, the deliberate and emergent views on strategic management will be explored, expanded by van Ruler's (2021) concept of agility. Subsequently, in section 2.4.2, an examination of the three-stage model of Zerfass et al. (2018) and the five-stage strategic planning framework of Simerson (2011) illuminates the strategic process in greater detail. After establishing the significance of the *strategic component* in strategic communication, further communication models become pertinent. These models focus on the dynamics of channeling, participation, and interaction between the sender and receiver within the communication process, with the consideration "that communication is what brings a strategic process to life" (Marchiori & Bulgacov, 2015, p. 190).

2.4.1 Deliberate, emergent, and agile approaches in Strategic Communication

As outlined by Zerfass et al. (2018), "strategic communication is most of all seen as a means to engage in conversions of strategic significance to its goals" (p. 493), communicative practice

unfolds in the process of strategy development and implementation at all levels of an organisation and therefore binds strategic communication to the entity's strategic direction (Heide et al., 2018; van Ruler, 2021). While issues management is considered a function of strategic communication, focused on analysing, addressing, and proactively managing issues, situations and challenges, the general strategic pathway within the strategic process requires a more detailed examination. There are different perceptions in strategy research regarding external and temporal effects on the strategic process, which are reflected in a priori analytical and long-term planning or in emergent, situational approaches (Frandsen & Johansen, 2015; van Ruler, 2018; 2021). The prescriptive or deliberate perspective on strategy views it as a linear and rational-analytical process (top-down), that includes static order of phases such as situation analysis, strategy formulation (decision-making), implementation and evaluation (van Ruler, 2021). According to Lynch (2012), this approach assumes that the objectives of a strategy can be defined in advance and its key components developed before implementation. This approach emphasises deliberation, suggesting that management maintains significant control over the allocation of both internal and external resources, strategically directing them to achieve objectives. The primary focus is on forecasting future developments and maintaining control (van Ruler, 2018). In public relations and organisational communication research, the development of strategic communication is commonly portrayed as a systematic, and sequential process. This conventional approach underlines the careful planning and tactical execution of communication campaigns (Johnston and Everett, 2015).

In contrast, the emergent perspective challenges this idea by assuming that strategies often evolve unexpectedly over time due to new opportunities and challenges, organisational learning, or unplanned events. Lynch (2012) argues that, according to the emergent perspective, it is impractical to define the end goal of a strategy or its main elements in advance, as decision-making and implementation are not clearly distinct phases, but part of a fluid strategy formation process. In a permanently changing and unpredictable reality, strategy-building must be considered as an ongoing process with a continuous reflection through interactive communication "in order to adapt to internal and external emergent changes" (van Ruler, 2018, p. 378). Consequently, modern strategy development theories place greater emphasis on emergence by consistently observing trends and assessing their effectiveness, rather than strictly adhering to rational long-term planning (Heide et al. 2018). In this context, van Ruler (2021) presents the concept of agility as a suitable approach for continuous adaptation in strategic development, whereby not only the output or tactical level is tested and evaluated, rather every choice made in the strategy. The common idea of classical strategy

theory, which positions evaluation as a final step in the strategic process, is extended by goal-based and goal-free evaluation, in which the former represents a targeted in-process review, and the latter underpins any relevant insights for decision-making and the planning process outside of the formulated strategy as an ongoing testing of choices. This ongoing exchange of ideas and feedback not only defines and presents the strategy but also continuously refines and adapts it in response to new insights and changing conditions, making communication central to both the creation and evolution of strategy (van Ruler, 2018). Heath et al. (2018) refer to the strength of strategic communication in this context as “purposeful, normative use of functions and discourse processes by organizations to accomplish their missions, visions, and core values” (p. 1), which captures the essence about aligning organisational actions in a communication process that is impacted by dynamic and unpredictable shifts. While the deliberate approach highlights the structured, top-down control of resources and goals, emphasising careful, predictive planning, the emergent perspective challenges this by recognising that strategies evolve through interaction with internal and external factors. The concept of agility, as presented by van Ruler (2021), bridges these perspectives, advocating for a continuous, reflective approach to strategy-making that allows for ongoing adaptation, even during implementation. Ultimately, these recent strategic communication approaches combine deliberate planning with flexible responses to emerging challenges in real time, ensuring that strategies remain agile and relevant. The emphasis on feedback loops and evolving insights is critical to managing the complex and dynamic environments that organisations face.

2.4.2 The levels/stages in the strategic process

A comparable interpretation can be recognised in the literature by Zerfass et al. (2018), which already relies on fluid external influences from the objective dimension in problem identification and equivalently defining the strategic objectives. The latter consider three distinct phases of the strategic process, which can be implemented at any level of complexity, whether in an international conglomerate, military, politics or any other type of organisation. The initial phase is denoted as *strategy formulation and revision* (I.), which describes multi-layered activities that exceed the mere allocation of resources and include communicative actions giving substance to the strategic initiatives. This phase involves not only the formulation of the strategy but also the negotiation of its components, emphasising the subjective nature of strategic meaning. Secondly, *strategy presentation* (II.) involves informing relevant stakeholders about the strategy, its expectations, and opportunities. The dissemination

of strategic plans using internal and external channels such as annual reports and company websites characterises this phase as crucial for the effective communication of a developed strategy (Köhler & Zerfass, 2018). The third phase, *strategy execution, implementation and operationalisation* (III.), refers to the practical application of strategy through resource allocation and operational action. The implementation of strategy by central actors often involves a pattern of operational activities and routines that are not always recognised as strategic behaviour. During this stage, the entity engages, communicates, and, crucially, sends deliberate and purposeful signals. Communications teams, therefore, devote significant resources to the implementation of strategic campaigns across various media channels, while simultaneously carrying out monitoring activities to make strategic adjustments (van Ruler & Körver, 2019; Volk et al., 2017). This integrated approach, which includes gathering insights via social media and surveys, supports the effective implementation of strategies and contributes significantly to an organisation's success. Van Ruler (2018) highlights these efforts as a comprehensive synthesis of ongoing communication activities that are essential to the design, implementation, and revision of strategic plans. Simerson (2011), on the other hand, sets out five levels comprising nine components in his work "Strategic Planning: A Practical Guide to Strategy Formulation and Execution" (see Figure II.), detailing the specific steps as a framework for the strategic process. This structured process begins with an initial analysis, continues with strategy formulation, action planning and implementation and concludes with continuous improvement.

Focus	Associated Elements
Analysis	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gather, analyze, and summarize information. 2. Analyze information relating to the organization's value proposition and internal factors and external forces likely to impact its short- and long-term success.
Formulation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Create (or verify) your organization's mission, vision, and sweet spot. 4. Create strategic goal statements. 5. Identify and prioritize the means by which you will achieve the strategic goals.
Action Planning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Identify tactics, assign roles and responsibilities, establish timelines, and define metrics 7. Plan for the unexpected and unanticipated.
Execution	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Take steps to ensure constant and consistent execution throughout the entire organization.
Continuous Improvement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Take steps to continuously improve.

Figure II.: The Focus and Elements of Strategic Planning, Source: Simerson, B.K. (2011), Strategic Planning: A Practical Guide to Strategy Formulation and Execution. Praeger, p. 42

The *first level* involves gathering, analysing and aggregating internal and external information to identify the organisation's strengths and weaknesses as well as the opportunities and threats in its environment. In this phase, the foundation is laid by obtaining relevant data to understand the internal and external landscape. Further analysis assesses the entity's value proposition in relation to its internal strengths and external forces to identify current and emerging opportunities and threats. Building on the insights gained from the analysis, the *formulation phase* consists in defining the organisation's mission and vision and identifying the intersection where passion, capabilities and purpose merge. Strategic objectives are then formulated to clarify and specify the mission and vision and create the conditions for executable strategies that align with the overarching goals. A successful strategy recognises the essential obstacles that must be tackled and relies on a norm to identify those challenges, whereby vision is to be considered as the normative and strategic starting point (Collins & Porras, 1997). In the *third phase*, the strategic goals are translated into detailed action plans. It includes the identification of specific tactics, allocation of distinct roles and responsibilities, setting achievable timelines, defining measurable metrics to monitor performance, and potentially preparing for unforeseen challenges to ensure adaptability. In the *execution phase*, the focus switches to the practical implementation of the strategic plan across the entire organisation. Central to this process is ensuring full understanding, commitment, and participation across the organisation to facilitate alignment in order to achieve and maintain the strategic objectives. The framework concludes in the *continuous improvement phase* with an ongoing process of refining strategic planning and implementation methods to enhance efficiency and effectiveness over time. Simerson's approach to strategic planning, execution and implementation can thus be considered a symbiotic process involving linear and rational-analytical elements in planning, while also allowing flexibility for constant modifications for change and feedback loops.

To conclude the theoretical classification of strategic communication, the first part of the chapter delved into the multi-faceted nature of strategic communication and analysed its definition, its application in various disciplines and the conditions under which communication becomes strategic. Zerfass et al. (2018) and other leading scholars have defined strategic communication as any communication activity by a member of an organisation that is aligned and evaluated with the goals of the organisation and all its stakeholders, highlighting the comprehensive and purpose-driven nature of strategic communication. The exploration of strategic communication has emphasised the importance of strategic planning, the interactive characteristics of communication and the complexity of conveying and constructing meanings within and across different settings. By identifying the relevance of issues, the strategic

significance becomes more apparent in the interplay between strategy and communication, thereby influencing modern strategy development. In its final step of *continuous improvement*, Simerson's Strategy Plan (2011) supports the emergent and agile adaptation of strategic choices at each phase of the strategy (van Ruler, 2021), further reinforcing the crucial role of communication in the strategic process. The second chapter highlighted both theoretical and practical dimensions of strategic communication, setting the foundation for a deeper examination of how political entities communicate strategically to achieve electoral success. These aspects build the theoretical axis for the next chapter, focusing on the conceptual exploration of political communication and its multi-faceted levels of theory and practice.

3. Political Communication

This chapter addresses political communication as a discipline that bridges the gap between practice and theory. It analyses the dynamic interplay between the political sphere, the media and the public and highlights the complexity of modern hybrid communication ecosystems. The chapter introduces key concepts such as political public relations, marketing and advertising and outlines their symbiotic relationship with political communication in shaping political messages and strategies. These discussions provide a theoretical frame of reference for a more in-depth analysis of political campaigns in contemporary political systems.

3.1 Political Communication: A conceptual classification

Although Borgebund's definition, "Political communication is the glue that binds the electorate and politicians together" (2019, p. 166), may seem rather one-dimensional at first glance, the individual elements conceal a great variety of accentuations and characteristics, as the relationship between politics, media and public sphere encompasses a multitude of differing stakeholders while possessing a high degree of complexity. The subsequent subchapters explore the evolution of political communication, navigating through its strategic dimensions and investigating its ambivalent conceptualisation. In the first section, I will transition from the general theoretical clarification of strategic communication to a more nuanced examination of political communication. Section 3.1.2 expands this horizon to include the main concepts that correlate and are integrated with the discipline, including political public relations, political marketing, political advertising, and public affairs. This chapter aims to untangle the

complexities and nuances that make up political communication and forms the starting point for an in-depth elaboration of political campaigning as an essential part of my master's thesis.

3.1.1 Defining Political Communication as a discipline in practice and research

Parting the level of strategic communication as an umbrella term, which describes the strategic process of all (internal and external) communicative relationships of an entity and embarking on a path of seeking a definitional classification of political communication, an ambivalent perception in the conceptualisation similarly to strategic communication can be identified. An inter- or multidisciplinary is apparent, revealed in political communication as a distinct and self-conscious discipline (Lin, 2004). Nimmo (1977) outlines this attribute as follows:

[Political communication] is not a discipline [or a field] distinguished by manner of explanation but a study guided by the phenomena it explains. It is a field exceedingly diverse in theoretic formulations, research questions, and methods of inquiry that transcend the boundaries of the separate disciplines from which it draws (p. 441).

However, a fundamental core, which is recognisable amongst all definitions, can be derived from the multi-disciplinary perspectives. Political communication involves “the role of communication within the political process” (de Vreese, 2006, p. 8). The first part of the definition ‘role of communication’ can be reinterpreted as the interaction among key players, where the reciprocal relationships between the political sphere, the media and society form the centre of the process (Goncalves, 2018; McNair, 2018; Gackowski, 2013; Kolovos & Harris, 2005). Research in political communication, therefore, focuses on identifying the roots, scope, and impact of potential change by examining the ways in which particular actors create, disseminate and frame their messages and determining the conditions under which different types of influence may emerge among them – as Lasswell (1927) aptly stated in his theory of propaganda in the USA: “who says what to whom via which channels with what effects?” (Goncalves, 2018, p. 1). McNair (2018) and Davies (2024) emphasise the intentionality of political communication and refer to all forms of communication from political actors to the recipients of the public sphere and media, with the purpose of achieving specific objectives.

Blumler (2015) acknowledges in the 'political process' a high degree of complexity and identifies five different but interdependent attributes. Firstly, the process occurs on several levels, in addition to the established interactions between politics, media and society, it expresses itself in the individual spheres through different operations and standpoints.

Secondly, this process is dynamic, undergoing continuous evolution that includes shifts within these areas as well as significant technological advancements and societal changes outside traditional media. Thirdly, it extends across society and influences different sectors and activities that are impacted by politics. Fourthly, in terms of communication, the process revolves around a complex yet fluid relationship between politics and media, shaped by interdependence and various interactions between entities driven by different goals and rationales. And finally, the political process is seen as a normative act, which plays a crucial role in enhancing or hindering effective citizenship and the essence of democracy.

Consequently, the discipline of political communication engages in the creation and dissemination of messages that have the potential to influence political processes, either directly or indirectly (Goncalves, 2018). Jamieson and Kensky expand this definition of political communication in the *Oxford Handbook of Political Communication* (2017) to include the "presentation and interpretation of information [...] with potential consequences for the exercise of shared power" (p. 4). Esser & Pfetsch (2020) and Perloff (2022) further specify the term as a "discursive power" which refers to the ability of actors to dominate the political communication process by shaping and advancing their own agenda within the political sphere. From a historical perspective, the emancipation of political communication in theory and practice can be divided into three distinct phases (Norris, 2000; Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999), which has been extended to a fourth era in the current research landscape (Blumler, 2016; Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Tasente, 2020; Davis, 2024). According to Norris (2000), three initial phases emerged in the evolution of political communication: the pre-modern era, which spans from the mid-nineteenth century to the late 1950s; the modern era, which begins in the late 1980s; and the postmodern era, which begins in the early 1990s. The pre-modern or progressive era serves as the origin of political communication innovations, including the press release, paid political adverts and political PR campaigns as the foundation of media interference in the political process (Martinelli, 2020). Three scholars dominated the discourse during the first phase: Walter Lippmann's work 'Public Opinion' (1922) laid the foundations for the research field of media effects, which is closely linked to communication studies, and localised the media as an intermediary between politics and society (de Vreese, 2006). Lasswell's (1927) quantitative analyses of propaganda research highlighted the potential of political mass communication in shaping public opinion (Lin, 2004). And thirdly, Lazarsfeld's study on mass media effects (1940) in the USA initiated concepts such as opinion leadership and the two-step flow of communication from the mass communication model. In the modern era, television was the predominant medium for communicating political interests, while the postmodern era

is characterised by the rise of the internet, which marks a significant shift towards 'hyper-media campaigning' and has changed the traditional approach to mass media campaigning. A further differentiation into three phases within the development of political communication was identified in the research by Blumler & Kavanagh (1999) and Lilleker (2006). Starting with 'the age of the newspapers' in the first two decades after the Second World War, the first era was marked by strong party-voter identification and high trust in political institutions. This period featured substantive political messaging focused on policy differences, easy media access for these messages aligning with partisan perspectives, and voters responding based on party loyalty. Despite active policy debates, voter choices were often influenced by group loyalties rather than the merits of the arguments, revealing a paradox between the substantive nature of political communication and the actual drivers of electoral behaviour. In the second era of political communication, which began in the 1960s, television became the dominant medium, while loyalty to the parties declined. This period led to reduced selective exposure to partisan content due to television's even-handed presentation and the decline of party-affiliated newspapers and organisations. Television introduced nonpartisan norms, broadened the political audience, and emphasised short-term influences over long-standing political identifications. Adapting to the television format required an initial shift towards the professionalisation of political campaigning, prioritising customised strategies and media influence over direct discourse, leading to the paradox of a more receptive electorate facing less enriching communication content, as Perloff (2022) recapitulates. The third phase, which marks the transition to the postmodern or digital era at the turn of the 21st century, led to significant changes in technology, voting audiences as political consumers and a professionalised strategy (Lilleker, 2006). Characterised by an explosion of communication channels, media saturation, and rapid dissemination, this period extends beyond the multiplication of TV and radio channels, accelerated by digital technology. The new dynamics in political communication influence the way in which politics is consumed and present political actors with the challenge of operating and reacting to an increasingly demanding and fragmented media landscape and public audiences. As formulated by Blumler (2016), the ongoing complexity of media systems, the systematic construction of parallel political online realities through digital social platforms and information overload with far-reaching consequences for the dissemination of political messages point to a fourth and contemporary dimension of political communication. The new age of political communication is expressed through a new communication architecture, which marks the end of the top-down dissemination pyramid, wherein the political message has been transmitted via the media

towards the public sphere (Davies, 2024). The fragmentation of the public sphere into networked spheres of consciousness, media platforms, audiences and agendas has changed political communication (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). Through the intercommunicative power of the internet, individuals have become proactive actors in this process, challenging the former gatekeepers of political communication to monitor these opinion trends attentively (Blumler, 2016). The public is no longer just a passive recipient of information but actively participates in the design and dissemination of political messages. They go beyond the unidirectional communication model of Shannon and Weaver (1949) and often distribute messages in their social networks more effectively than the political actors themselves (Tasente, 2020). This ongoing and still-unfolding era, coloured by its complexity and its multi-faceted, partly contradictory trends, constitutes a substantial change in the theoretical and practical landscape of political communication, introducing a variety of further conceptual vocabularies, which are explored in the following section.

3.1.2 The main concepts of Political Communication

The challenges of the fourth phase of political communication, such as the increased complexity of the media environment, the rapid technological development of digital networks as a social sphere and the inherent volatility of the electorate, have significantly increased the demands on the political communication process (Strömbäck & Kiouisis, 2020; Blumler, 2017). Although political communication, in its theoretical and methodological foundations, can be understood as an independent discipline, its current stage of development displays a multitude of similarities to other disciplines in the omnidirectional distribution of agendas and interactions within the political process (Tasente, 2020). Jamieson (2017) describes political communication as a cross-disciplinary hybrid, intricately linked to disciplines in the fields of social psychology, political science, economics, rhetoric, and cultural studies. By investigating areas such as political marketing, public affairs, political public relations, political advertising and political campaigning, both distinctions and synergies become apparent, offering a deeper understanding of the interdependencies within these domains (Berg & Feldner, 2020). In addition to the concept of political campaigning, to which a separate chapter is dedicated as an elementary component of my master's thesis, the other four terminological and conceptual alternatives will be examined in more detail below:

- **Political Public Relations:**

While the term public relations, as discussed in 2.2, is closely intertwined with the purposeful use of strategic communication and its management function to encompass broader organisational and stakeholder communication, the term political public relations is adapted to the context of political communication and predominantly refers to the deliberate efforts of political actors to shape media narratives, influence media agendas, and control the framing of events, issues, and processes (Martinelli, 2020; McNair, 2018). However, Strömbäck and Kiousis (2020) consider this definition to be limited to the media landscape, neglecting the interaction with other actors. According to them, political public relations is “the management process by which an organisation or individual actor for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, seeks to influence and to establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals” (p. 12). Political communication and public relations both focus on strategic, stakeholder- and relationship-driven communication, but for Strömbäck and Kiousis (2020) with distinct emphases. Referring to Blumler and Gurevitch’s publication “comparative framework for political communication research” (1975), the scholars emphasise that political communication is not inherently purposeful or managerial, rather underlines the intrinsic integration of communication within politics, suggesting that ‘politics’ and ‘communication’ are inseparable. According to them, the idea of purposeful communication in politics is not universally present in political communication, rather it relates to specific sub-disciplines such as strategic political communication, political campaigning, political marketing and various others. In contrast to the differentiation of Strömbäck and Kiousis (2020) and a simultaneous demonstration of the ambiguity in the demarcation of political communication, a significant group of researchers consider the intentionality and purposeful-driven processes in the interaction between the political sphere, media, and the public as a central characteristic of political communication (McNair, 2018; Davies, 2024; Gackowski, 2013). For Goncalves (2018), political public relations and political communication both aim to communicate objectively, but simultaneously, political communication is more critically concerned with power dynamics and potential abuses of power within the political process.

- **Political Marketing:**

Political marketing refers to a concept that integrates classic product or for-profit marketing strategies into the political spectrum. Two theoretical perspectives on political marketing are particularly worth noting: according to Newman’s definition (1999), political marketing

applies marketing principles to political campaigns, aiming to influence public opinion, win elections, and enact policies through strategic analysis, development, and management by varied political actors. His concept adopts commercial marketing strategies and focuses on creating value for the electorate, similar to customer satisfaction in business (Strömbäck & Kiouisis, 2020). Central to political marketing is the adaptation of the 4Ps - product, promotion, price, place - to the political context, where 'product' comprises the policies and image of the party, 'promotion' the communication strategies, 'place' the dissemination of the campaign and 'price' the voter's transaction (vote as an exchange for promised actions) (Cwalina et al., 2009). The methods are adjusted accordingly to the political arena by accentuating the strategic positioning of political actors and their offerings with a highlight on a competitive market (at least two parties) in order to effectively target, convince and satisfy the electorate (Lilleker, 2006). One of the key strengths of political marketing lies in its emphasis on cultivating candidate reputations and managing their communications within the political process, along with its continual focus on gathering market intelligence (Lees-Marshment, 2012). Based on a more holistic conceptualisation, Maarek (1995) defines political marketing as "a complex process, the outcome of a more global effort implicating all the factors of the politician's political communication" (p. 2). In this context, marketing serves as a central and integrative component in the strategic formulation, mediation, and execution of political communication (Kolovos and Harris, 2005). Whilst the origins of the discipline of political marketing are rather related to marketing and political science than to communication theory, there are similarities in its core principles. Both political marketing and political communication focus on the "management of purposeful communications" to ensure and cultivate relationships with the public, the media, and other stakeholders (Strömbäck & Kiouisis, 2020, p. 16). Advances in political marketing theory relate to a classification of the marketplace as governmental, parliamentary and electoral, which affects the relationships between political decision-makers, the government and stakeholders depending on the timing and context of communication (Ormrod 2017, 2020). Despite the stakeholder concept being expanded in political marketing, Strömbäck and Kiouisis (2015; 2020) see the prioritisation of stakeholders in the specific context of elections as a way to differentiate it from political communication and other disciplines.

- **Political Advertising**

Through the commercialisation and professionalisation of economic strategies applied to the political sphere, as already noted, politics has become a process in which consumers

are presented with a range of political offerings through various media channels, whereby political candidates promote themselves as different brands offering slightly different products (Cwalina et al., 2009). In order to providing information dissemination and persuading consumers (electorates) to choose a particular product, advertising efforts are required, putting political advertising into play (McNair, 2018). According to Kaid (2004), political advertising can be identified as a communication process for political entities in which audiences are confronted and informed with political content via mass media channels in order to influence their political attitudes, beliefs and/or behaviour. There are three primary political advertising strategies in election campaigns: Advocacy advertising, which praises the candidate's qualities; comparative advertising, which portrays the candidate favourably against the opponent on certain issues; and negative advertising, which highlights the opponent's weaknesses, sometimes resulting in misleading and aggressive 'attack ads'. This trend toward negativity, including misleading tactics, is most prevalent in the U.S., although it is extending globally (Lilleker, 2006; Kaid et al., 2011). A key incentive for using negative ads is their high news value, as negativity and conflict attract media coverage and public attention. TV stations often replay these ads, and newspapers discuss their form and content, providing the sponsor with free publicity (Holtz-Bacha, 2022a). Compared to other forms of political communication, the weakness of political advertising can be found in its biased or propagandistic nature. This inherently limits its persuasive power, as recipients tend to maintain a critical view of such engaging messages. In addition to traditional advertising platforms such as print, billboard, television and radio channels, there has been a shift to online political advertising since the Obama election campaign in 2008 at the latest. Defined as "interactive content placed for a fee" (Fowler et al., 2020, p. 112), digital formats are expanding the reach and possibilities of political advertising. This not only offers more channels and playout options for content formats but also the user experience of political adverts, where social media, in particular, facilitates interaction and content creation. User behaviour is being influenced by data-driven algorithms, marking a transition from passive consumption of traditional TV advertising to a more interactive and targeted approach (Echeverría, 2023). The increasing shift of political advertising to the digital realm, targeting a variety of different platforms and audiences, significantly increases the role of monetary resources in funding a communication campaign. As Fallis (2017) argues, political advertising is an effective tool for influencing citizens in political communication, whereas "differences in the amount of money alternative campaigns have available [...] can affect outcome" (p. 157).

- **Public Affairs**

Lerbinger (2005) outlines public affairs as a strategy for organisations to gain power and influence favourable political outcomes, emphasising analysis and engagement in political processes to shape public policy. Distinctly, it focuses on the non-governmental or private sector's role in political processes, ensuring it can secure outcomes that align with its preferences and develop a sociopolitical climate that supports its interests. According to Harris and Fleischer (2017), public affairs contains three main components: the process of shaping policy and stakeholder programmes, the assessment of the environmental, political and social impact on a corporation, combined with the targeted involvement of opinion-leaders, and the comprehensive management of government relations. The essence of public affairs is a strategic approach in which organisations and companies engage in communications and activities with a political purpose in order to create and maintain favourable relationships with key stakeholders (state, federal and local level) in governmental institutions. Zetter (2008) considers public affairs to be a continuous crisis management activity that reveals both great potential for conflict with an impact on the entire strategy and communication process, but simultaneously can also generate considerable benefits for the organisation within the political environment. The framework highlights not only governmental relations but also interactions with the media and political organisations, such as interest groups, as important elements of the political landscape, with public opinion being a crucial factor (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2020). It includes various mechanisms through which public policy is formulated in society to respond to societal problems. Furthermore, Arceneaux et al. (2020) and Berg & Feldner (2020) perceive public affairs as a relationship-centred communication function of political public relations, similar to other tools such as issues and reputation management. For them, it is therefore difficult to draw a clear line between public affairs and political public relations in practice.

Given the current challenges and opportunities arising from digital, social, and political shifts in the multi-directional interaction between politics, media, and the public environment, there is a growing need for theoretical integration (Goncalves, 2018). These changes, driven by the fourth phase of political communication (Blumler, 2016), call for a more comprehensive approach that bridges cross-disciplinary perspectives to develop a hybrid understanding of the field and adequately meet emerging challenges (Jamieson, 2017). As Strömbäck and Kioussis (2020) conclude, the origin of theories and research—whether of political communication, public relations, public affairs, political marketing, or any other field—is not of primary

importance. Instead, the focus should be on understanding the processes through which communicative interactions achieve purpose-driven outcomes. In practice, the increasing professionalisation has multiplied the range of tasks and requirements due to the diverse functions of the communication-related disciplines. The political communication process in its hybrid form adopts the functions of the sub-disciplines presented with the overarching goal of achieving political objectives through communication and action (Negrine et al., 2007). With regard to my research question, it can be assumed that political campaigning as a further sub-discipline (Chapter 4), in many respects forms synergies with the presented theories and implements functions in the strategic process of planning, implementation and execution (Falasca & Grandien, 2016; Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2020). These include concepts such as stakeholder engagement and market orientation from political marketing, relationship development and persuasion with key publics from political public relations, as well as more specific elements such as personalised advertising and the involvement of external communication experts.

3.2 The changing role of Political Communication: The Public, Politics & Media

As defined by Esser and Pfetsch (2020), the process of political communication “involves creating, shaping, disseminating, and processing information among actors from the political system, the media, and the public, as well as the effects of such communication” (p. 3). According to Dahl (1998) as one of the leading thinkers of pluralist theory, it underscores its vital importance in democratic societies, highlighting that the accessibility to diverse viewpoints and participatory discourse as part of the communication process is central to the democratic process. He asserts, "within reasonable limits as to time, each member [of the electorate] must have equal and effective opportunities for learning about relevant alternative policies and their likely consequences" (Dahl, 1998, p. 37). Classical perceptions of political communication, exemplified by Lasswell (1927), centre on the sender's intent to persuade the receiver, positing that messages are crafted with specific effects in mind and serve political objectives, flowing unilaterally and as a linear process from the core of politics towards the public, as referred to by Blumler (2016) in the historical classification of the four phases as the ‘pyramidal model’. The central theories and concepts are based on the assumption of a largely inclusive and relatively well-functioning interplay between the individual spheres, in which communication by legitimate institutions is directed through media channels to influence the opinions and behaviour of citizens (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). However, the transition into the

fourth age of political communication, accompanied and accelerated by transformations of digitisation, globalisation and pluralistic democratisation tendencies in political systems, has led to significant shifts in social, political, and media landscapes (Davies, 2024; Borgebund, 2019; Goncalves, 2019). The ongoing innovative evolution of the internet has sparked an explosion of diverse and interconnected digital media platforms, resulting in an overwhelming flow of information and network-based communication (McNair, 2018). This transformation has significantly reshaped democratic public spheres, the behaviour of political actors, and the media consumption habits of audiences, as well as the interplay between each sphere. Esser and Pfetsch (2020) conceptualise these characteristics in the political communication ecosystem, which is constituted by the omnidirectional and synergistic relationship "between political actors, own means of communication, news media organisations, social media platforms, and members of the public" (pp. 8-9). A central advantage of this approach to political communication is the acknowledgement of the 'coopetitive' character of interactions, which consists of both cooperation and competition in the communication process. Political, media, and civic actors compete for attention and influence over communication through discursive power; while simultaneously cooperation becomes apparent through a high degree of connectivity, mutual observation, adaptation, and imitation, which explains patterns such as civic attention cycles, news waves and scandals (Jungherr et al., 2019). In the political communication process, the relationships between the particular spheres were determined by the trends of mediatisation, media effects, and media-centred democracy, with 'mediatisation' reflecting the adaptation and professionalisation of political actors to media logic, 'media-effects' emphasising how media and its institutions shape public opinion and political agendas, and 'media-centred democracy' highlighting the central role of media in facilitating democratic discourse, often amplifying or filtering political messages (Lilleker, 2006; McNair, 2003; Negrine et al., 2007). The advent of the internet has disrupted the top-down function of mass communication and minimised the passivity of the public sphere, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers. Interactive and participatory features on new social and digital platforms have empowered audiences to not only consume but also produce and disseminate politically and socially relevant content, including its communication to the other spheres, as McNair (2018) resumes. Esser and Pfetsch (2020) identify the increased complexity of the dynamically changing media systems as the duality of mass media (both as an intermediary and as an independent actor) and the "decentralised, participative interactive logic of internet communication" (p. 6). Chadwick (2017) describes this as the emergence of a hybrid media system in the process of political communication, which leads to further fragmentations and

disruptions within the environment of politics and society. The increased complexity in the exchange relations between media, politics and citizens is also intensified by the less clear separation of the individual spheres: digital convergence has given rise to hybrid political actors consisting of political parties, interest groups, media outlets and tech conglomerates, engaging in interdependent and interrelated political activities (Davies, 2024). Moreover, these linked transformations constructed a public sphere, which consists of a “uniquely interactive, participatory, non-linear structure, crossing boundaries of time and space, connecting publics all over the world in the accessing of information about issues which with increasing frequency have global ramifications and solutions” (McNair, 2018, p. 23). The systematic construction of parallel political online realities has altered access to discourse and information abundance, creating a space for more voices to be heard and disseminated, resulting in greater pluralism (Davies, 2024; Martinelli, 2020). However, it is debatable to what extent digital filter bubbles are influenced, navigated, or even manipulated by social media networks and their algorithms. A fragmentation, separation and polarisation of news audiences and society resulted, in which trusted sources and neutrality can no longer be verified, with a myriad of hybrid actors rivalling for the attention of digital consumer-citizens (Davies, 2024; Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; McNair, 2018). In a more generalised model depicted in Figure III., the presented channels of communication between politics, the media and the public are more than ever fluid, transitory and interconnected. Within an omnidirectional communication process, all spheres engage directly or indirectly with each other with the goal of maximising attention and influence on the political system (McNair, 2018; Goncalves, 2019; Lilleker, 2006).

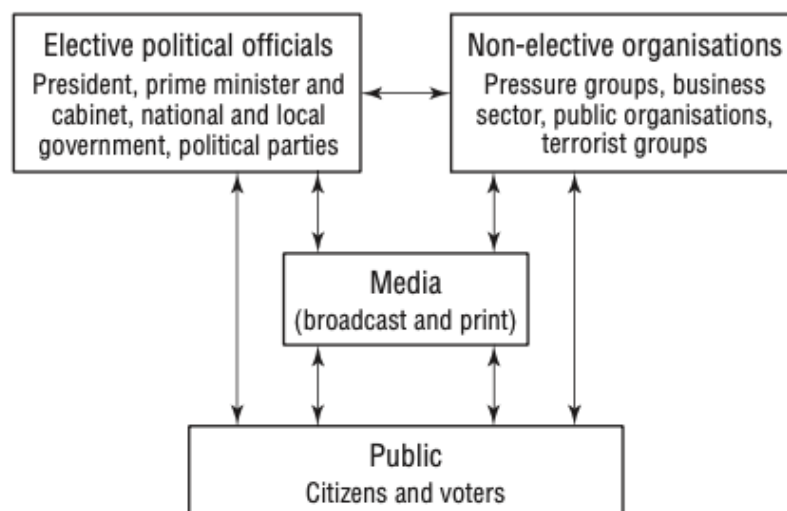


Figure III.: The Levels of Political Communication, Source: Lilleker, D. G. (2006). Key concepts in political communication. Sage Publications, p. 6

In order to comprehend the impact and interrelation between political actors, media and the civic society, the following three subsections will take a closer look at each sphere within the process of political communication.

3.2.1 The Political Sphere

In the synergetic process of political communication, initially, the political sphere can be identified, which consists of political and non-state actors pursuing political goals. The former include individuals and groups that seek to influence decision-making through organisational and institutional channels (Lilleker, 2006). Political actors seek political power in order to impose their favoured policies or, if in opposition, to challenge and replace those currently in power. A central role among these actors is played by political parties, collectives united by shared ideologies and organisational frameworks, with the aim of convincing voters of the benefits of their policies and elevating their agenda in the electoral process (McNair, 2018). Due to extended voting rights and a pluralised constituency, a variety of strategies are therefore required to engage with voters and the mass media. In a pluralistic society, the multiplicity of voices and intense competition make it necessary for groups to become skilled communicators in order to be heard, which has led to a professionalisation of political communication (Alaimo, 2020; Strömbäck & Kiouisis, 2020). This process has evolved to involve advanced technical and technological methods with strategies and external actors from political advertising, political public relations and political marketing, discussed in 3.1.2, in order to compete in an information-saturated environment. Commercial marketing strategies and the expertise of modern political advisors and media specialists are brought into play to differentiate political 'products', shape public perception and maximise positive attention while minimising negative attention (Strömbäck & Kiouisis, 2020; Goncalves, 2018). This constitutional core is surrounded by non-state actors within the political sphere (Figure III.), such as public organisations with political motives, corporate bodies and pressure groups as social movements that are usually concerned with a single issue and, in extreme cases, terrorist groups that use non-legal acts of violence as a form of political communication to achieve their political goals (McNair, 2018). In the evolving ecosystem of political communication (Esser & Pfetsch, 2020), the rise of hybrid political actors has blurred the lines between traditional political roles. Digital media has enabled the convergence of the functions of political parties, interest groups, think tanks, and media content, as Davies (2024) summarises. Political parties now resemble social movement networks, promoting dual affiliation with both party identities and individual

issues. Prominent politicians such as Donald Trump are increasingly turning away from traditional media outlets and opting for direct communication via social media and messaging platforms. Less visible politicians can now bypass hierarchical party structures and increase their visibility through strategic social media engagement (Kreiss & McGregor, 2019). Furthermore, certain media outlets, think tanks and large tech companies have themselves transitioned into active political actors, becoming involved in political campaigns and providing biased news coverage and other services to political organisations (Davies, 2024).

3.2.2 The Public Environment

One of the primary objectives for the political sphere in the process of political communication is persuasion, with the recipient (the audience) being the central element in this process. Without an audience, political messages lose their meaning. Regardless of the size or formation of the audience, the intention behind political communication is to influence the receivers of the message (Lilleker, 2006). Initially shaped by the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas, the terminology of the public sphere describes a concept, where “citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, within the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions” (Habermas quoted in Pusey, 1978, p. 89). Creating an arena of social pluralism, in which each individual’s process of socialisation, such as experiential and familiar knowledge (private arena), contributes to a common sense in public opinion as collective ground for political action (public sphere), as McNair (2018) depicts. Furthermore, Ernst (1988) remarks, this abstract conception involves a “distinctive discursive space [in which] individuals are combined so as to be able to assume the role of a politically powerful force” (p. 47). In this context, communication is the fundamental mechanism for the transmission of societal will into the political system. The media play a decisive role in achieving this, they provide and transmit information, acting as a voice for the public sphere whilst advancing pluralism. In contemporary discourse on the public sphere, the presence of the digital era in the form of social platforms and online channels is transforming the power dynamics and public participation in the transmission of interests. The rise of the internet has further expanded these communication channels and enables issues formulated and disseminated within the digital civic environment to independently attract and influence media attention, thereby promoting pluralism (McNair, 2018). The public audience is transforming due to the interactive and participatory features of digital enhancements from mere receivers into a communicating force, proactively producing, selecting and disseminating

content with relevance for all actors within the political communication process (Davies, 2024; McNair, 2018). This arena is characterised by its ability to overcome (geo-)political and temporal boundaries and thus evade the regulatory framework and controls on content dissemination (Davies, 2024; Lilleker, 2006). While new platforms have enhanced democratic diversity and pluralism, they have also contributed to the breakdown of the national public sphere. Media fragmentation has led to the emergence of interconnected yet isolated micro-publics, amplifying the polarisation and radicalisation of political discourse (Esser & Pfetsch, 2020). In addition, the objectivity of information dissemination is increasingly difficult to ensure or verify. While bias and framing have persistently been issues in traditional media, digital filter bubbles are increasingly shaped and often manipulated by social media platforms and their algorithms. The reliability of trusted sources and neutral reporting is becoming harder to confirm, as a variety of hybrid actors compete in the digital space for the attention of digital consumer-citizens (Davies, 2024; Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; McNair, 2018).

3.2.3 The Impact and Interrelation of Media

Finally, the role of the media as the third decisive component in the process of political communication has to be analysed in more depth. In democratic systems and in the wake of the political communication ecosystem, the media fulfil a dualistic role: firstly, in its function as mass media, it acts both as a transmitter of political messages in a linear top-down model and as an independent and autonomous entity that formulates, accentuates, and disseminates political content as a protagonist (Esser & Pfetsch, 2020). Secondly, and in line with the fourth phase of political communication, the media operate with a decentralised, participatory, and interactive logic of a pluralistic and highly digitised communication world, in which political discourse takes place on online platforms facilitated by social media. Chadwick (2017) terms this convergence a hybrid media system. In both determinations, the role of the media in the interplay of politics and society is of central importance. Referring to the first function, mass media are indispensable for political actors to effectively communicate their messages to their targeted audience. The existence and communicative impact of political programmes, policy statements, election proposals, interest group initiatives and even terrorist attacks depend on their coverage and reception by the media. Therefore, the accessibility of a network of public service broadcasting, ensured with principles of legal requirements and acts of neutrality are essential in maintaining the relationship between the political level and media (McNair, 2018). From the standpoint of the public sphere, the media play a pivotal role in the political

communication process through their direct engagement and influence. Traditional media (online and offline) express political opinions in form of editorials and opinion polls, which are often seen as representing readers' opinions to policymakers or as authoritative editorial analysis and serve as an important sentiment and tangible benchmark for government and parties in relation to the political status quo (Perloff, 2022). In addition, broadcasting in television and digital media has led to numerous political debates and public-access programmes that provide the public with the opportunity to discuss relevant topics and express their opinions directly (Lilleker, 2006). Nevertheless, three main mechanisms emphasise the power of the media as an independent actor in the political communication process: agenda setting, framing, and priming (Borgebund, 2019). Agenda-setting, based on the theory of McCombs & Shaw (1972), suggests that while the media does not dictate opinions, it influences which topics people view as important. Framing shapes how issues are perceived, often driven by commercial motives. Priming, particularly during elections, highlights certain issues and guides how voters associate candidates with specific viewpoints (McNair, 2018). News discovery and consumption have shifted significantly toward digital-native news platforms, online feeds, search engines, and social media, highlighting that traditional media no longer hold the dominant role in shaping news agendas, cycles, and story framing (Davis, 2024). Hybrid media actors, intertwined with power convergence across all spheres, shape the agenda and information flow within the constructed social reality of digital platforms. They either foster pluralism and the omnidirectional liberation of message dissemination or become power centres that dictate and control social and political discourse, often driven by vested interests (Davies, 2024; Esser & Pfetsch, 2020; Bennett & Esser, 2018).

4. Political Campaigning

This chapter defines political campaigning as a core element of the theoretical premises of my research. It provides a systematic theoretical overview of campaign models, strategies and their development in the pre-modern, modern and post-modern periods. The chapter investigates the key actors, the processes of campaign planning and the impact of trends and dynamics in contemporary political campaigning such as hypermedia campaigning and professionalisation. Furthermore, it emphasises the strategic importance of communication in election campaigns and forms the foundation for analysing the FDP's 2021 federal election campaign in Germany.

4.1 Political Campaigning: A theoretical overview

As noted by Strömbäck and Kiouisis (2014), political campaigning is fundamentally rooted in the realm of political communication and its related definitional theories explored in 3.1.2. This central role of communication stems from the fact that campaigns entail the orchestration of multi-faceted efforts, including the coordination of campaign elements, the formation of strategic alliances, the mobilisation of supporters, the influence on media narratives, the outreach to voters, and the strategic shaping of the political information landscape. Thus, Kaid et al. (2009) consider political advertising to be a major form of communication between the political sphere and the electorate in modern campaigns, in which the power of political advertising messages impacts the perception of candidates, party programmes, and voting decisions. Most notably, this applies to undecided voters and those who have no or little involvement and interest in the political arena. The transformation of the 4P marketing concept into the political communication process, which is to be regarded as the core of the strategic conception (analysis, development, execution, and management) of a political campaign, demonstrates the relevance of political marketing (Newman, 1999; Cwalina et al., 2009). Furthermore, Strömbäck and Kiouisis (2011, 2020) highlight the critical role of strategic communication and its management in political public relations, emphasising its significance in political campaigning. Political public relations focuses on winning votes by influencing public opinion and influencing voting behaviour by promoting the message of the candidate and discrediting the political opponents. In essence, the efficacy of these campaign activities hinges on effective communication, making it the linchpin that binds together and propels the various facets of political campaigning. On the basis of this introduction and the connection to communication and its related concepts, the history and terminology of political campaigning will be outlined in more depth in the following section.

4.1.1 A historical classification and definition of Political Campaigning

Farrell and Schmitt-Beck (2002) highlight the significance of campaigning as a fundamental aspect of the political process in modern democracies, underscoring its importance across various domains, including electoral politics, referendums, issues, and image-based endeavours. This diversity of campaign practices suggests the need to establish a broad definition before specifying political campaigning in relation to my research question on political elections. In this regard, a political campaign can be broadly defined as a strategic endeavour aimed at influencing the outcomes and processes of governance. This involves a coordinated communication strategy where entities or individuals, whether they be parties,

candidates, institutions, or interest groups, engage in deliberate efforts to influence political decision-making through specific strategic and communicative actions. More specifically, within the electoral process, Baines (2011) considers political campaigning as an exchange of promises about the government's policies and future performance for votes, and this underlying process proceeds through the selective communication of programmes, ideas, and policies. For Lilleker (2017), this definition is further sharpened by the component of “persuasive communication” to influence the electorate in favour of the candidate (p. 1). According to Brady et al. (2006), a campaign can be said to exist if, I. there is a concrete date of the election, II. the participating parties have to announce their candidates publicly, III. the parties and candidates must be able to dedicate their undivided time to the election campaign and IV. certain actions that are normally unregulated are now regulated/forbidden for example, fundraising and spending. Röttger (2009) provides a foundational definition of campaigns within the context of German political academic discourse, conceptualising campaigns as dramaturgically structured, thematically focused, and time-bound communicative strategies aimed at capturing public attention. Furthermore, the definition was expanded by Jarren and Röttger (2015), with the common feature of all political campaigns "gaining public attention through strategically well-considered staging"(p. 40). Holtz-Bacha (2022b) draws a similar conclusion with regard to German political campaign research, describing election campaigns as public relations measures that are limited in terms of time and agenda and which, as an instrument of political communication, attempt to influence subsequent behaviour through carefully crafted attention. In Röttger's more current research, the scholar acknowledges the integrative and multi-disciplinary principles of strategic communication in the realisation of campaigns by using a wide range of communicative instruments, including traditional public relations, advertising and marketing methods (2022). Campaigns strive to achieve several key objectives: gaining attention, fostering trust in their credibility, and securing support for their agendas and following actions (Cwalina et al., 2009). Political campaigns take place within the specific environment of the three spheres and are, therefore, related to the distribution of forces in their particular setting. Three fundamental component groups constitute the foundation hereby. The first is the selection of channel(s) (direct advertisement, television, digital platforms, and other tools of electoral communication such as commercials) as the basis of the implementation of the campaign. Secondly, basic structural and legal requirements must be taken into account, such as the individual country's electoral law, the electoral system and the financial regulations for the campaign, and thirdly, the stakeholders, such as the candidates, consultants, parties, media, interest groups and voters (see section 4.2 for further details), who

actively and passively impact the outcome of an election campaign (Cwalina et al., 2009). These components have undergone significant transformations over the last several decades. Simultaneously to the development of political communication, there have been distinct phases in political campaigning, shaped by structural, theoretical and technological accomplishments in democratic political systems. Lilleker (2017) outlines three major historical changes in the evolution of campaigns: until the 1960s, the mobilisation of the electorate was shaped by interests in the individual social classes, which led to relatively consistent electoral groupings. With the emergence of issue politics, triggered by protest movements and pressure groups against war and racial discrimination and a simultaneous weakening of class identities, the parties had to further refine and professionalise their tactics in persuading voters. The second phase, which is marked by a fragmentation of the media, required political actors to adopt effective communication strategies in an increasingly commercial and diverse media landscape, has been further complicated by the emergence of digital platforms. The latest phase shows a decline in public trust and deference towards political actors, due to aggressive media practices and the proliferation of media-driven 'attack journalism', which has increased scepticism among citizens. These changes are forcing political organisations to navigate a complex communications and societal landscape and to adopt new strategies to maintain a positive public perception. Drawing on the research by Farrell (1996), Farrell and Webb (2002), Farrell and Schmitt-Beck (2002) and Norris (2000), Semetko and Tworzecki (2018) categorise political campaigning into four eras: print and radio dominance, including door-to-door canvassing as the most common vote-seeking channel until 1950, transitioning into the second era, from the 1950s to the mid-1980s, where campaigns became more centralised and professional, leveraging network television for political messaging, leading to extended campaign durations and increased costs. The third era, which spanned from the late 1980s to the late 1990s, also referred to as the 'permanent campaign', was typified by targeted messaging via direct mail and television advertising and in which professional advisors began to play an increasingly important role, while the media landscape diversified due to technological advances such as cable and satellite and early internet. The fourth era, which builds on the previous periods, follows the trend of professionalisation and permanent campaigning yet is primarily determined by the emergence of big data and social media. These technologies have enabled unprecedented precision in targeting potential supporters while also contributing to the rise of 'post-truth politics', where facts and opinions are often mixed together. As Ward et al. (2018) remark, the current era is characterised by a shift away from the traditional pyramid model of political communication, where the audience was primarily

the recipient of messages from institutions. Blumler (2016) further points out that the internet has turned interpersonal communication into a public exchange, facilitating peer-to-peer interactions more efficiently than ever, thus accelerating the potential for a dynamic public sphere. In addition to new media technologies, the fourth era of campaigning is being shaped by digital targeting of individualised voter groups, interactive communication and organisational decentralisation in terms of communication channels (Ward et al., 2018). The current (fourth) era can also be rediscovered in the research of Kaun and Guyard (2011) as with the modified terminology of political campaigning 2.0 or with a more digital emphasis with Web2.0 as Lilleker (2015) and Römmele and Gibson (2020) combine digital innovations with the underlying campaign practices.

4.1.2 Challenges in research

The complexity of political or election campaign research can be illustrated by the delineation of the phases of political campaigning described in the previous subchapter. As identified by Blumler (2016), the drivers of the individual phases, such as professionalisation in communication or innovations in media and technology, are fluid, making it difficult to clearly distinguish between the eras. As a result of the fragmentation of an interdisciplinary research area between political, communication and media studies, as well as the influence of marketing research, different research objects are prioritised and, therefore, constitute distinct perspectives on the concepts of political campaigning both in theory and practice (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2014). Beginning with the general challenges in the research of political campaigns, five issues of salience emerge, as indicated by Dommett and Power (2019). Firstly, there are significant obstacles in accessing data for political campaign research using both qualitative and quantitative methods due to the lack of transparency, availability, and restrictions such as confidentiality agreements. Secondly, understanding the evolving nature of digital campaigning challenges researchers, blurring online-offline distinctions and rapid technological changes creating issues in comparative analysis and theory development. Thirdly, ethical dilemmas arise, particularly in online data collection, which demands precise guidelines. Fourthly, there are methodological challenges in effectively combining different techniques that require constant adaptation and optimisation. Finally, the competence and capacity of researchers may cause concern. There is a lack of expertise in both digital methods and sociological theories, which emphasises the need for interdisciplinary research collaboration or improved methodological training. As outlined by Holtz-Bacha (2004),

research on election campaign communication is primarily concerned with uncovering the organisational aspects of election campaigns in terms of communication and exploring the interaction and impact of media within the individual phases of the campaign process. The research areas in which the political election campaigns can be categorised by characteristics (Leidecker-Sandmann, 2023, p.112):

- I. Single vs. multiple elections on one versus multiple levels of the political system
- II. Single vs. multiple country/ies studies
- III. Single case vs. longitudinal studies
- IV. One type of media vs. comparisons of multiple types of media

Two specific research approaches stand out: the non-comparative, single-country research, and the comparative research. While the former, with its concentration on one country, enables an in-depth investigation of election campaign communication in terms of historical, systematic, and cultural variables, comparative research can be divided into temporal (examination of longitudinal developments of campaigning) and spatial analyses (impact of country-specific effects vs. common practices). These theoretical concepts clarify those contextual settings as different sets of limitations and opportunities explaining the variations of campaigns in different countries or divergences from a standard theoretical campaigning model (Esser, 2019). However, as highlighted by Strömbäck and Kiousis (2014), the research field of political campaigning faces a number of challenges. In line with the introductory example in this section, the research field of political campaigning is based on several different disciplines with independent theoretical research methods and approaches. Thus, political campaigning can be considered an interdisciplinary and rather fragmented field of research, which is analysed from a communicative, political or economic perspective, depending on the objectives. This leads to the implication that there is a lack of unified and overarching theories that incorporate all theoretical influences. In addition, research tends to concentrate on political communication within individual election campaigns in particular countries. This focus often leads to detailed analyses of country-specific contexts and lacks theory-based research that can be applied to broader political campaign research. After each election, new studies are usually published that aim to characterise and understand the unique campaign strategies and communication efforts in a country and their influence on the election outcome (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2014). Another current challenge is based on a US-centric approach, where the predominant scientific focus is on the campaign elements in elections in the United States. Although European research efforts

have intensified in recent years, only a few campaigns in Europe are compared with each other in terms of their specific characteristics (Holtz-Bacha, 2004). A further shortcoming refers to the comparative cross-national perspectives on the research field of political campaigning, which is slowly developing, but as noted by de Vreese (2003), the "evidence from cross-national comparisons of national elections is virtually non-existent" (p. 184). This cautious approach might be a result of the development of campaign strategies and related research. A major constraint in the comparative research field is the complex set of contextual variables that need to be carefully considered. While there are numerous national campaign studies, comparative international research is still limited. This lack is rooted in the complicated set of political and cultural factors that affect the subject of research and is further intensified by the different academic traditions in each country (Esser, 2019). Another reason for the slow progress is the limited number of dedicated researchers, as success depends on building international partnerships, securing resources for cross-country research, and having a committed institutional scientific panel. Furthermore, the focus of campaign research can be criticised for being mostly concerned with the layer of communication (direct or via the media sphere) between politicians and voters, neglecting other forms of communication such as internal campaign planning and associated internal communication (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2014).

4.1.3 Trends and dynamics in Political Campaigning

The final section of the introduction to political campaigning aims to outline trends and dynamics in the field, serving as a theoretical foundation for a qualitative case study on the FDP's strategic campaign planning and execution in the 2021 federal elections. Based on an examination of the leading academic publications in political campaign research, such as Lilleker (2006; 2015; 2017), Holtz-Bacha (2004; 2007; 2022a), Strömbäck & Kioussis (2011, 2014), Borgebund (2019) and Semetko & Tworzecki (2018), the following influences emerge consistently and in direct relation to political campaigning:

- **Americanisation:**

Converging with the US-centric research focus of political campaigning, US-American campaigning methods and characteristics exert a significant influence on the strategies of political election campaigns across the Western world (Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990; Plasser & Plasser, 2002). The Americanisation thesis can primarily be associated with the phases

presented in 4.1.1. The changes Norris (2000) identified through postmodern campaigning or the transformations in the individual eras (Semetko & Tworzecki, 2018) first became apparent in the context of the preceding presidential elections in the USA. Schulz (1997, 1998) highlights the personalisation of campaigns, the limitation of election campaigns to competition amongst candidates, the strategy of negative campaigning, increasing professionalisation and a marketing-based approach as characteristic features of Americanisation. Three ways of dissemination are elaborated by Strömbäck and Kiouisis (2014; 2020); US campaign strategies are globalised through foreign experts studying US elections, American consultants working abroad, and international media coverage of US elections. This leads to a worldwide convergence of campaign practices with the American model. However, there are also critical voices regarding the Americanisation of political campaigning, which consider this transformation as excessively one-sided and simplified and thus emphasise the unique multi-dimensionality in the political, social and media systems across countries. The modernisation theory serves as an alternative terminology to describe the increasingly similar strategies in electoral campaigns, primarily identifying endogenous factors as initiators of transformations in political processes. Growing pluralisation and individualisation within society are considered to be the main factors that alter both political and media practices. Consequently, the desire for news management or the personalisation and professionalisation of election campaigns arises due to the increased volatility of the electorate (Strömbäck & Kiouisis, 2020). According to this approach, the USA cannot be regarded as the source of change; rather, it is already in a more advanced stage of the democratic process of social individualisation (Donges, 2009). Established American strategies and tactics, therefore, fulfil a role model function and are individually adapted to the country's own structures and needs.

- **Professionalisation:**

With profound intersections to Americanisation and modernisation theory and, moreover, a degree of definitional vagueness in research (Strömbäck, 2009), the concept of professionalisation can be composed of the definitions of Tenscher et al. (2012), Gibson and Römmele (2009), Negrine & Lilleker (2002) and Schlipphak (2018). The professionalisation of political campaigning, therefore, encompasses a multi-faceted approach characterised by ongoing strategic, rational, and sustainable management practices, incorporating specialised tools and strategies, a centralised approach, and the involvement of experts. This evolution reflects the postmodern shift towards more complex and expert-driven campaign methodologies. According to Lilleker (2006), the thrust

towards professionalisation in politics is driven by social and political changes such as dealignment and increasing consumerism, as well as the media's shift towards entertainment. These changes force parties to revise their strategies, often after electoral setbacks, and thus accelerate the professionalisation of political campaigns. An adaptation of a 'Professionalised Campaign Index' originally formulated by Gibson and Römmele (2001) is offered by the synthesis of research by Tenscher et al. (2012), Strömbäck and Kiouisis (2014; 2020) and Lilleker (2006). A set of features can be determined in the conceptualisation of professionalised campaigns, whereby the more these elements are applied, the more professionalised the political campaign appears to be. A recurring feature in the literature centres on the long-term planning and implementation of a political campaign, which is no longer limited to the immediate period before an election, instead encompassing structural, financial and personnel strategies that are constantly revised and adapted (Tenscher et al., 2012). Secondly, the progress in professionalisation is reflected through the involvement of internal and external campaigning experts who specialise in the individual campaign phases and tasks such as internal and external communication, engaging with the media and targeting electoral groups (Maisel et al., 2007). While internal professionals identify with the ideology of the party, the latter consist of consultants and advisors who are responsible for the optimisation of political campaigns, applying market intelligence and data management. In this sense, professionalisation represents a complex structure of different campaign strategies that are based on externalisation, commercialisation, and personalisation by using digital platforms and media campaigns to address voters in target groups with the aim of establishing the largest possible electorate within the individualised society.

- **Marketisation:**

As previously outlined in section 3.1.2, marketing and advertising approaches in political communication perceive the voter as a consumer exchanging their vote as a transaction for the realisation of their political interests. The advancing professionalisation and commercialisation of political campaign strategies are further accelerated by the digital communication measures of tailored and interactive content for a fee on social platforms (Fowler et al., 2021). This trend can also be observed in political campaigning. As noted by Lilleker (2017), the fragmentation of the media landscape and the de-ideologisation of the electorate has led to the emergence of a self-interested approach to voting. The disappearance of the traditionally responsible and committed citizen from the political arena is the subject of considerable debate. Marketisation through the use of campaign

professionalism and economic strategy strategies has led to political actors offering their potential supporters value-based incentives to participate in their campaigns. Lilleker argues that "political actions, a vote, a click on social media, a donation etc. are all given a value when they are promoted. Marketisation, therefore, may reinforce or even create a search for value in political engagement as campaigns sell actions to potential supporters" (2017, p. 6).

- **Globalisation:**

In the current era of political campaigning, the globalisation approach assumes that similar to the modernisation approach, there is a symmetrical and reciprocal exchange of values, norms and practices between different cultures (Donges, 2009). The influence of globalisation as one of the drivers of election campaigns can be observed not only in the alignment of democratic electoral systems but also in competitive and authoritarian regimes. Partly to maintain the legitimacy of their 'sham democracies', to demonstrate power and strength towards the opposition and the West, and as a tool of propaganda, similar campaign methods are used in political elections as in democratic nations. Moreover, the spread of political campaign methods is by no means one-sided. Stylistic devices such as 'negative campaigning', in which any criticism of political opponents or their standpoints are being employed, or the even more radical step of spreading misinformation in the media (fake news) have also become commonplace in democratic election campaigns (Ude & Wendorf, 2018; Semetko & Tworzecki, 2018). The globalisation approach of political campaigning can also be explained by the interconnectivity of a global media landscape and technological progress, which makes it easier to access and follow successful campaign strategies from other countries and encourages imitation, as Borgebund (2019) declares.

- **Mediatisation:**

As already stated in the process of political communication, the concept of mediatisation refers to a "media-constructed public sphere", which places the media at the centre of all communication efforts, both as a transmitter and as an autonomous actor on which the political sphere seeks to exert influence (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 211). In the field of political campaigning, the importance of engaging with the media has been recognised and is considered the most important factor in winning over potential supporters. In the planning, implementation and execution of political campaigns, strategies and timetables are built around media coverage. Teams of communications experts and public relations specialists advise political candidates in election campaigns on presenting themselves in

the media, using tailored linguistic, symbolic and rhetoric techniques to appeal to potential voters, depending on the specific channel (Lilleker, 2017). Press events and campaign rallies are customised to the interests of the media in order to ensure visually convincing content for news coverage. The process of mediatisation is linked to a shift towards the personalisation of politics, in which candidates use their private personality as a strategic tool besides their public appearance to build proximity to potential voters (Sweetser, 2011).

- **Hypermedia Campaigning/Digital Campaigning:**

As acknowledged by Sweetser (2011), the personal, immediate, and interactive nature of digital communication makes it a resource that contemporary communication cannot operate without. Furthermore, she views a digital political presence offering a variety of online tools that are personal, immediate, and inclusive with the goal of engaging the voter emotionally and physically in the campaign. Lilleker (2015) defines it as an "architecture of participation" that enables the co-production of information procurement and dissemination, social networking and interaction between individuals and organisations belonging to the same digital and social community (p. 2). As part of the acceleration of Web 2.0, the internet and its social platforms have become mutually dominant with the mass media, which has led to an adaptation of communication strategies in political campaigning (Ireland, 2009). This new approach to the digitised media landscape is referred to by Howard (2005) as hypermedia campaigning, defined by "its capacity for innovatively adopting digital technologies for express political purposes and its capacity for innovatively adapting its organisational structure to conform to new communicative practices" (p. 2). According to Lilleker (2015), four strategic functions can be identified: firstly, the immediacy in the transmission of information, which encourages the simultaneous dissemination of political communication via various media and digital channels. Secondly, the hypermedia campaign consists of specific and targeted media strategies that transmit customised political content for private consumption via network technologies (Howard, 2005). In addition to the transmission of content via the mass media, multiple forms of consumption and distribution must, therefore, be created for the various recipients in political campaigning. Thirdly, hypermedia campaigning extends beyond the mere transmission of information; it aims to create interactive experiences that are easy for the recipient to distribute and comment on. Fourthly, social platforms offer a range of analysis and tracking tools and data to create specific target groups of potential voters in order to address their needs and wishes even more precisely and incorporate feedback into the election programme (Olson & Nelson, 2010; Lilleker, 2015). Integrating these functions

results in organisational changes that affect goals and relationships between staff, leaders, volunteers, donors, citizens and other campaigns. In a modern approach resembling relational or inductive marketing, political parties and leaders engage voters as co-creators of campaign content for mobilisation. The objective is to expand the pool of individuals capable of independently mobilising support through innovative tools, extending networks beyond traditional party structures. Social networks are crucial to this strategy as they improve individual mobilisation and message targeting. Contemporary election campaigns focus on building lasting volunteer networks, tailoring engagement to individual needs and viewing volunteers as key campaign partners (Sampugnaro & Montemagno, 2021). Other advantages of political campaigning, which are enhanced by digital communication, include clearer differentiation and positioning of the candidate through personalisation by means of posting character traits, improved name recognition and symbolic elements (Stier et al., 2018). However, it is unclear whether politicians compose online messages for a broad mass or a specific social media audience. In contrast to previous findings on traditional website strategies, Stier et al. (2018) assume that social media encourages political campaign leaders to tailor their messages to the preferences of their network, either for strategic reasons or for personal motives. However, this accelerated dissemination of tailored and more interactive election advertising also facilitates the abuse of political campaigning towards fake news, where social media is flooded with negativity targeting a candidate by automated and human 'trolls' (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Semetko & Tworzecki, 2018). Finally, to succeed in today's communications landscape, hypermedia campaigns must integrate and actively participate in the broader communications ecosystem by engaging online and offline information networks. This strategy includes the use of political outreach on social platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and co. to stimulate discussion between digital and traditional media, boost engagement with online content and generate greater visibility and resources such as donations and volunteers. In this way, hypermedia campaigning is becoming a crucial approach to achieving the communication goals of twenty-first-century campaigns (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Lilleker, 2015).

4.2 Stakeholders

Political election campaigning has become increasingly professionalised in conjunction with technological progress in the media landscape, requiring various strategies and communication tactics to interact with the growing number of stakeholders from politics, economy, society,

and media. The specific stakeholders can be traced back to the political communication process within the three spheres elaborated by Cwalina et al. (2009) and Lilleker (2006), whereby the prioritisation in the relationship with the individual stakeholders depends on a variety of factors. As this section is an abstract and theoretical stakeholder assessment, certain aspects of concretisation, such as country-specific differences in the form of legal, historical, and socio-cultural electoral norms, are neglected. For example, the presidential election system of the United States of America relies profoundly on the process of party donations, fundraising, and other campaign contributions to political candidates from entities such as political action committees (PACs) and individual supporters (Burton & Shea, 2010). In many European countries, this type of campaign financing is much more restricted or equalised through public funds, which means that a substantial weighting of these stakeholders is less necessary (Grotz & Schroeder, 2023). Kotler and Kotler (1981) initially emphasised the importance of communicating with six stakeholder groups: the party, candidates, interest groups, donors and the media. The role of mass media as a voice, intermediary and independent organ is crucial in reaching these groups. Despite the importance of media relations, hypermediatisation has also enabled parties to engage directly with electorates through various paid media channels and platforms (Baines, 2011). On the other hand, Burton and Shea (2010), took a closer look at the stakeholders and their authority and communication hierarchies within a campaign organisation, which can be divided into three pillars, starting with a candidate and their assistants. The first pillar consists of internal staff such as a campaign manager, finance director and communications manager; the second of advisors from the private sphere of family, friends and mentors, for example; and the third pillar, in the course of professionalisation, of external stakeholders who nevertheless operate within the campaign organisation but are employed as experts from business and media (Figure IV.). Furthermore, Burton and Shea (2010) segment the electorate into soft-partisan, partisan, and swing voters as the most important stakeholders for persuasion before the elections. These voter groups can be reached to varying degrees through individualised targeting with specifically tailored campaign content. Sweeney (1995) assumes that political candidates address two types of stakeholders: the primary audience, which consists of voters, and the secondary audience, which includes campaign staff, volunteers, organisations, opinion leaders, the political party, donors, allies, friends and the media. Another attempt to determine the classification of stakeholders can be derived from the categorisation of strategic political communication in election campaigning by Strömbäck and Kioussis (2014). In order to optimally align the strategic objectives of parties and their campaigns to their stakeholders, the specific objectives of parties have to be determined

beforehand. Party objectives are divided into vote-seeking (maximising electoral votes), office-seeking (power and control over political processes) and policy-seeking, which involves exerting influence on legislation.

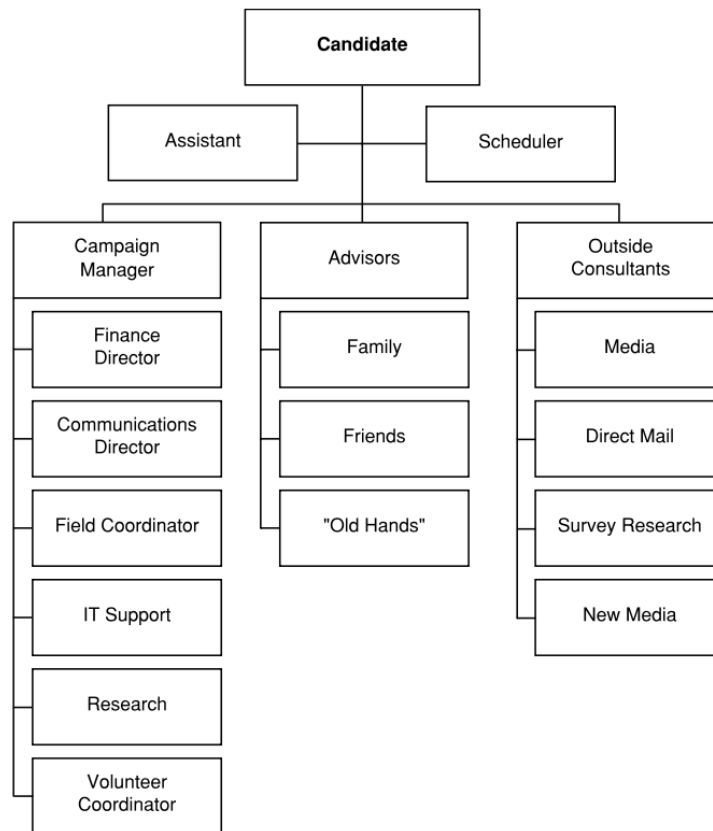


Figure IV.: Notional Campaign Organization, Source: Burton, M. J., & Shea, D. M. (2010). Campaign craft: The Strategies, tactics, and art of political campaign management. Praeger, p. 26

The second distinguishing feature that originated in political marketing is the differentiation between product-, sales- and marketing-oriented parties. While the former can be seen as purely policy-seeking on the processes in the political system, sales-oriented parties apply the accumulated knowledge about the electorate's interests and competition to foster internal cohesion. Parties operating on the political market develop and strive to fulfil the population's wishes and demands by campaigning and persuasion to be elected (Lees-Marshment, 2001). Based on this categorisation, four arenas can be determined to differentiate the stakeholders in order to communicate and interact effectively. In the parliamentary arena, the most important stakeholders are members of their own party as well as other parties. The internal arena includes the party's elected representatives, employees, advisors, activists and members. In the electoral arena, the vote-seeking and market-oriented party interacts with the individual target groups of the electorate. The fourth arena for the media, with its journalists, mass media and digital platforms, exists both as an interactive communication medium with the other arenas and as an

independent stakeholder with whom parties attempt to communicate and maximise positive visibility (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2014). Different stakeholders and arenas can, therefore, be applied depending on the objectives of the parties and campaign strategy, allowing the most suitable communication channel to be selected for each group of stakeholders. At the same time, however, it must be mentioned that this simplified strict separation of the ideal typologisation of parties cannot be realised in practice; rather, the individual party determinations correlate with and merge into one another. In addition, a further categorisation in the selection and positioning of stakeholders can be taken from political marketing or the concept of political market orientation by Ormrod (2005, 2017, 2020), in which a triadic exchange structure results from the political context (Figure V.).

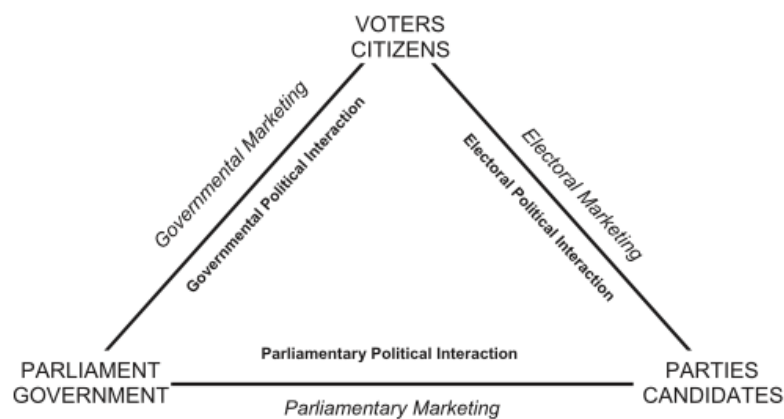


Figure V.: The triadic interaction model of political marketing exchange, Source: Ormrod, R. P. (2020). Political exchanges of value and the stakeholder concept: Implications for public affairs. *J Public Affairs*, p. 2

Ormrod (2017) defines stakeholders in a three-linked interaction in the electoral, parliamentary, and governmental marketplace as “context-specific agents that directly or indirectly influence or are influenced by the political actor” (p. 12). The difference to Strömbäck and Kioussis’ (2014) categorisation is that Ormrod classifies the stakeholders in a dynamic process as direct or indirect actors depending on the marketplace. Ormrod (2020) asserts that direct stakeholders participate in the three marketplaces central to political value exchange, while indirect stakeholders are part of the socio-political environment but do not participate in a specific market interaction. For example, the role of the electorate shifts throughout the election cycle from a direct stakeholder prior to an election to an indirect stakeholder who can only exert influence via opinion polls from another indirect stakeholder, such as the media (Ormrod, 2017). Hughes and Dann (2006, 2009) use the terms 'active' and 'passive' in a further stakeholder model similar to Ormrod's 'in-/direct' classifications, whereby these labelled stakeholders cannot change in their dynamics, instead dynamic stakeholders are marked with

the label 'switch'. Thus, labelling a stakeholder simply defines their role in a given context and serves as an initial step in recognising and classifying stakeholders relevant to the political entity and its strategic campaigning goals.

4.3 Political Campaign Models: Changing practices and communication strategies

As introduced out of a historical perspective, four models stand out in the political campaigning research: Strömbäck & Kiouisis' typology of changing campaign practices (2014), Burton & Shea's Party-/Candidate-/Consultant-Centered Campaigns (2010), Farrell and Schmitt-Beck's Model of Campaigning (2002) and Baines (2011) Model of Political Campaign Management from a political public relations perspective. In the following, the strategic approach of the four models will be explained in more detail as a measurement to gain a comparable framework for the campaigning strategy of the FDP in the federal elections in 2021.

4.3.1 Premodern, Modern and Postmodern Campaigns

As already postulated in the historical classification in section 4.1.1, different phases of political campaigning can be identified, each of which (see 4.1.3) resulted from technological innovations and social dynamics in an increased extent of professionalisation and modernisation in the course of campaign planning and execution. Based on these assumptions, an attempt has been made in strategic political communication research to extract three simplified campaign models drawn from a historical perspective. Norris (2000), Plasser and Plasser (2002) as well as Strömbäck and Kiouisis (2014) term the process premodern, modern and postmodern campaigning. Farrell and Webb (2002) refer to the process as the 'three' stages, although each display almost identical characteristics to the previous categorisations. Adapted from the preceding literature, Strömbäck and Kiouisis (2014) composed a table with the respective phases as three columns, which are classified by eight characteristics (Figure VI.). These are differentiated by the system, style of communication, media channels, advertising platforms applied, campaign coordination, campaign rationale, duration of the campaign and campaign expenditure. Strömbäck and Kiouisis (2014) portray the premodern phase of political campaigning through minimal preparation and the use of traditional media such as party press, billboards, campaign rallies and canvassing. Resources were drawn primarily from the traditional party bureaucracy and the use of volunteers to stage propaganda-led events for election candidates at a local level and without central organisation.

This early style of campaigning emphasises the mobilisation of passive social groups in its communication over the persuasion of a broader potential electorate. Furthermore, the strategy followed the intuition of the party leadership rather than an objective analysis of feedback and social demands. The second model of political campaigning, known as the modern stage, is characterised predominantly by the integration of television, which fundamentally reshaped campaign strategies. This era was typified by detailed campaign planning with specialised networks of campaigning teams set up well before elections, emphasising the importance of television and media training (Gibson & Römmele, 2001). Campaign structures became more professional, media and marketing experts were brought in, and the focus was on centralised, nationwide outreach. Leadership has been emphasised with campaigns disseminating a coherent statewide narrative. Unlike previous strategies that targeted specific groups, the modern approach aimed to address all segments of society. Communication tactics focused on 'selling' a consistent political message, with the belief that public opinion was adaptable. The third 'postmodern' campaigning model is characterised by the integration of technological innovations. In this phase, the 'permanent campaign' is introduced, in which the campaign cycle extends beyond the elections and is continuously active. It favours direct communication via digital platforms like the internet and cable television. In addition, professionalisation through internal and external consulting teams is at the forefront and entails the dissolution of traditional party structures (Farrell & Webb, 2002). The centre of campaigning is shifting to highly targeted messages or 'narrowcasting', using detailed feedback loops to customise communication to specific voter segments. Campaign strategies are becoming more consumer-orientated and consider the political message adaptable to voter preferences. This approach suggests a preference-adaptive model of politics, where parties adjust their policies within the boundaries of their established reputations in order to maintain their credibility. However, excessive adaptability can lead to a perception of opportunism, which could fuel voter scepticism and contribute to the party's decline. This phase represents a significant shift towards a more strategic and responsive form of political campaign communication (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2014). Nevertheless, the three-stage campaigning model has notable limitations. It oversimplifies the evolution of campaign practices and assumes a linear progression. However, the individual stages are not static; rather, they can be considered as a continuum on which campaign teams operate and where changes fluidly evolve into new trends (Farrell & Webb, 2002). From a contemporary-influenced perspective, it is often neglected that campaigns might have certain characteristics from several stages simultaneously. Furthermore, the model does not consider any specific political, social and legal environment in which the

campaign takes place. However, political electoral regulations and historical and cultural circumstances often shape individually oriented campaign strategies at the federal level - any standard, such as the Americanisation debate in political campaigning research, is often unsuitable. Strömbäck and Kiouisis' (2014) adaptation of a model developed from research in the field of strategic political communication as an explanatory approach for political campaigning can, therefore, be regarded as a starting point for more specific campaign models, in which the characteristic criteria for each line (Figure VI.) provide an important foundation of differentiation in order to understand the interplay and role of campaign strategy, media and voters more transparently.

	Stage 1 ("Premodern")	Stage 2 ("Modern")	Stage 3 ("Postmodern")
Mode of political communication system	Party-dominated	Television-centered	Multiple channels and multi-media
Dominant style of political communication	Messages along party lines	Sound bites, image and impression management	Narrow-casted, targeted micro-messages
Dominant media	Partisan press, posters, newspaper adverts, radio broadcasts	Television broadcasts through main evening news	Television narrow-casting, targeted direct mail and email-campaigns
Dominant advertising media	Print advertisements, posters, leaflets, radio speeches and mass rallies	Nationwide television advertisements, colorful posters and magazine adverts, mass direct mailings	Targeted television advertisements, e-mail campaigns and tele-marketing, web-based advertisements
Campaign coordination	Party leaders and leading party staff	Party campaign managers and external media, advertising and survey experts	Special party campaign units and more specialized political consultants
Dominant campaign paradigm	Party-logic	Media logic	Marketing logic
Campaign preparation	Short-term, ad-hoc	Longer-term campaign	Permanent campaign
Campaign expenditures	Low	Increasing	Spiraling up

Figure VI.: Typology of changing campaign practices, Source: Strömbäck, J., & Kiouisis, S. (2014). Strategic political communication in election campaigns. De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110238174.109>, p. 117.

4.3.2 Party-/Candidate-/Consultant-Centered Campaigns

Another approach to finding a suitable model for the process of political campaigning is the categorisation into party-, candidate- and consultant-centred campaigns developed by Burton

and Shea (2010). In contrast to the historical and developmental labels of Norris (2000), Farrell and Webb (2002), as well as the adaptive version of Strömbäck and Kioussis (2014), which primarily examine the systemic adoption of campaign models, the model of Burton and Shea (2010) attempts to reflect how parties as the heart of political campaigning professionalised on the basis of internal and external factors. Based on Gibson and Römmele's 'Party-Centered Theory of Professionalized Campaigning' (2001), the internal factors of the parties that impacted the transition from party-centred to consultant-centred campaigning can be determined. Therefore, they determine party-specific variables responsible for the significant changes within parties, such as increasing professionalisation. Significant change, which is regarded as a party's change in the structures, policy course, strategies, and tactics, "is most likely to occur in parties when they perceive that their primary goal is no longer being achieved" (Gibson & Römmele, 2001, p. 36). This condition is most commonly caused by an exogenous event, such as the failure of a vote-seeking party in an election in which the maximisation of votes was not obtained. Formerly rigid party structures and strategies are now being shattered, and the pace and imperative for transformation have created an entry for external forces, shifting power away from the political base towards a clear hierarchy of authority between the party leadership and the experts as well as advisors (Mykkänen et al., 2022). External factors that have further accelerated this process of professionalised campaigning can be explained by the transformations through technological innovations discussed in the previous chapters and the process of increased political individualisation of the public sphere, expressed through declining party affiliation (Sampugnaro and Montemagno, 2021).

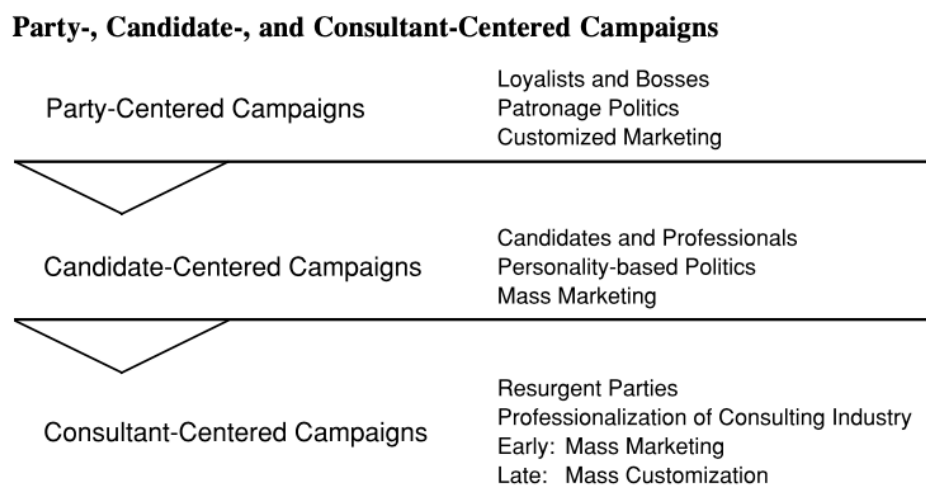


Figure VII.: Party-, Candidate- and Consultant-Centered Campaigns, Source: Burton, M. J., & Shea, D. M. (2010). Campaign craft: The Strategies, tactics, and art of political campaign management. Praeger, p. 18.

Having explored the possible drivers of change in political campaigns at party level in more detail, the individual campaign categorisations of Burton and Shea (2010) can be further clarified. Firstly, a distinction is made between 'old-style' and 'new-style' campaign strategies. The former can be described as the category of party-centred campaigns, in which the political parties predominate the campaigning and are in a direct relationship with the voters to implement the demands and concerns of the electorate in the party programme. Candidates were running for election but were not actively involved in campaign management, which was carried out by the party. Distinct voter segments were targeted with the party programme; outside contributors acted as campaign volunteers for the party out of personal loyalty or ideological beliefs, often with the prospect of a job in the event of a successful election (Figure VII.). The increased pluralisation and individualisation of the public sphere, paired with new media and digital advertising measures (mass media, digital interview formats, broadcast election campaign debates), establish the second political campaign style, in which both the political and private personality and charisma gain more relevance and affect the electorate nationwide in a "one-to-many" format in their voting decision (Burton & Shea, 2010, p. 18). Political campaigns are centred around a political candidate to achieve credibility. If the potential electorate considers the source of communication credible, they are more likely to be convinced by the campaign message (Arbour, 2014). This process, outlined as the 'new style' is becoming increasingly multi-layered and complex in the context of digital and media channels and platforms, causing demand for communications and press consultants, which is resulting in advancing professionalisation. The increasing professionalism of the process around political campaigning has led to the emergence of consultant-centred campaigns, which are characterised by significant changes in the structure and process of campaigns. Professional consultants with specialised skills in areas such as direct mail, strategic planning, media relations and fundraising coordinate modern campaigns with a new range of resources. Mass customisation and modularisation shape the planning and execution of campaigns, in which specific and personalised communication strategies, such as speech modules for candidates, are implemented on a variety of platforms depending on the target group to be reached (Burton & Shea, 2010). Nevertheless, Burton and Shea's campaigning model also reveals that individual classifications cannot be separated from each other by linear stages of development; internal and external factors create a fluid transition that is not universally applicable to the political environment.

4.3.3 Farrell and Schmitt-Beck's Model of Campaigning

Expanding the explanatory models of Strömbäck and Kiousis (2014) as well as Burton and Shea (2010), which attempt to classify political campaigning from a macro-level perspective, the model of campaigning by Farrell and Schmitt-Beck (2002) provides a concrete strategic approach to modern political campaigns as market-driven events shaped by a complex interplay between political actors, media dynamics, and voter feedback. The model depicts the different components and influences involved in political campaigning, focusing on the flow of communication from political actors to voters and the factors that shape this purposive process. As can be seen in Figure VIII., at the heart of the model (left box) is the strategic development by the political actors, with the party leadership or candidate formulating communication strategies together with their internal advisors. They decide on the key messages and the most effective dissemination channels. This central process is linked by a combination of organisational resources - candidates, staff, mass membership, activists, consultants and media - with campaigns using these resources to optimise voter outreach. These strategies are further deployed in mass media, which include news content, talk shows and advertising, each offering varying degrees of control over the message, as shown by the plus signs next to the arrows in the figure.

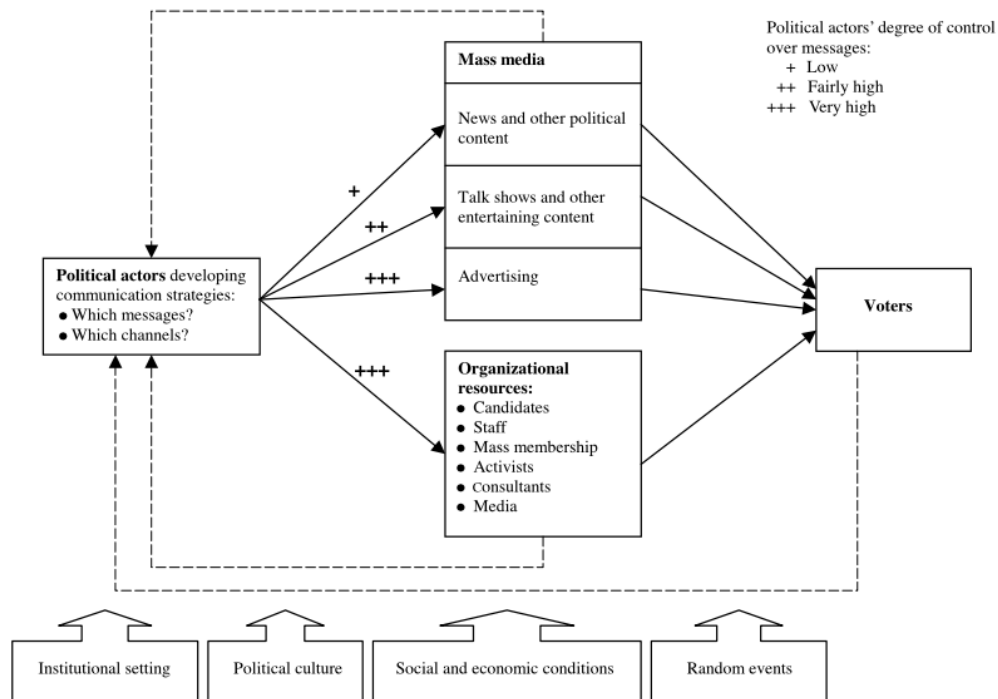


Figure VIII.: A model of political campaigning, Source: Farrell, D. M., & Schmitt-Beck, R. (2002). Do political campaigns matter? campaign effects in elections and referendums. Routledge, p. 6.

While advertising enables a high degree of control over the message, news content offers moderate control and talk shows even less, as they merge information with entertainment. As already elaborated in 3.2.3, the media sphere not only operates as a mouthpiece and transmitter of information but also influences the political message of a campaign through agenda-setting, framing and priming (Borgebund, 2019). This emphasises the importance of considering the media's reaction when designing the campaign. However, as Lilleker (2006) points out, these strategies are not developed in isolation. Instead, they are constantly refined in response to media reactions, organisational feedback, and voter opinion, thus embodying a highly market-driven campaign environment. Farrell and Schmitt-Beck (2002) also note that external factors (bottom units), such as institutional and political settings, social and economic conditions, as well as unexpected events, can affect the dynamic relationships with media and voters, requiring prompt strategic adjustments and a high degree of flexibility. Therefore, the model conceptualises political campaigning as an adaptive, responsive, and ongoing process within a complex web of controlled and uncontrolled elements. It illustrates how the campaign management team and the political candidate must align and dynamically manage their resources and message to the broad public opinion and media coverage environment.

4.3.4 Baines model of Political Campaign Management Process

One further model originates from the research field of political public relations and was originally created by Baines (2011) to compare political campaigning in the UK and the US. However, this model can be adopted as a basic framework for understanding internal campaign management processes and emphasises the interconnected stages that form the inner core of campaign strategy development and planning. Constructed with a top-down approach, the 'Party and Constituency Campaign Organisation' is the central body in the model that directs and coordinates all components of campaign planning, as shown in Figure IX. It ensures that policy development aligns with the party's ideological and strategic positioning and integrates competitive analyses into strategic planning. The message development is mainly an internal procedure that reflects the party's and candidate's ideological beliefs. Campaign finance management, which includes offline and online activities, provides essential funding and has to be managed diligently, considering the legal restrictions on campaign spending, such as donor disclosure. Research is vital for political campaigns, guiding parties in understanding vote-share and shaping messages and policies. Next, communication strategies are developed in coordination with research, finance, and political guidelines as part of integrated marketing

communication, utilising both traditional and digital platforms to target and engage with the electorate. This strategy is closely linked to the overarching campaign strategy, which includes targeting, segmentation and positioning of the party and its candidate in the political arena. Two external factors influence the internal processes of Baines' model: on the one hand, campaign planning is limited by moral, ethical and regulatory considerations; on the other hand, the political market impacts the campaign strategy with new trends and innovations from competing candidates, with external actors from PR and marketing and business being brought in to respond to these dynamic processes. All these components work in a multilayered system of feedback loops in which each phase of the campaign development is impacted by the subsequent developments, resulting in a dynamic and responsive campaign environment. While the campaign strategy evolves as an outcome of these processes, it is constantly adapted due to the continuous flow of new information and changing circumstances. Baines (2011) conceptualises political campaign management as a comprehensive and adaptable process that is managed in its complexity through a network of individual stages leading to the implementation of a dynamic campaign with a central message in media and the public sphere.

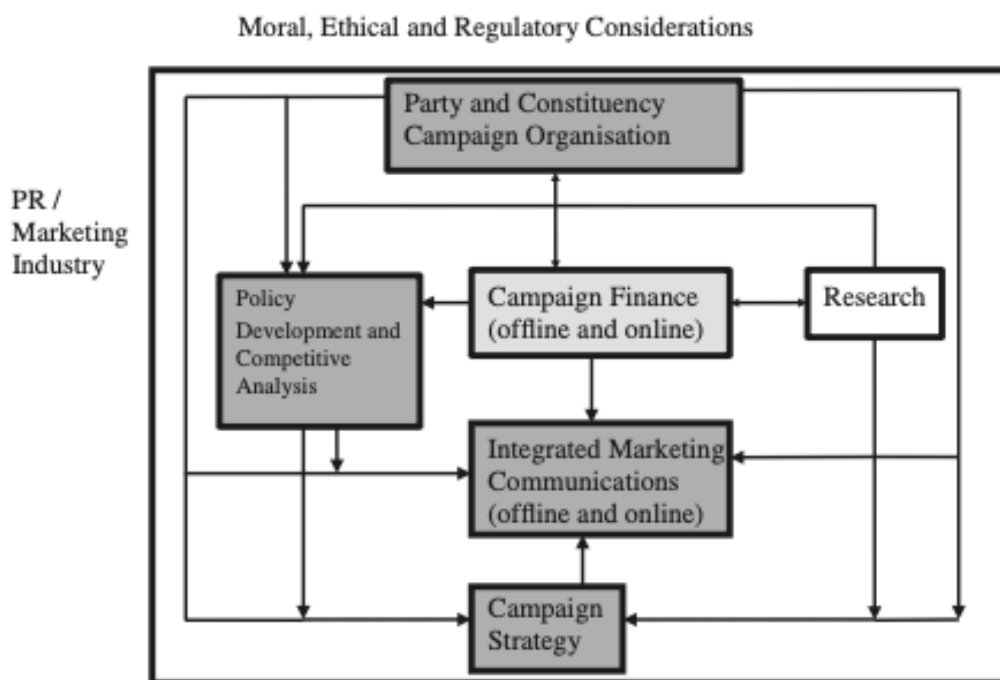


Figure IX.: Modell of Political campaigning management process, Source: Adapted from Baines (2011) in Strömbäck, J. & Kioussis, S. (2011.), Political public relations: Principles and applications. Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group, p. 119.

4.4 The Strategic process of Political Campaigning

After examining political campaign models from various perspectives, this section aims to provide a step-by-step illustration of a concretised strategic campaign planning process. Firstly, it seems worth recalling the strategic planning frameworks developed by Zerfass et al. (2018) and Simerson (2011) in subchapter 2.4.1. The five levels of strategic planning (Analysis, Formulation, Action Planning, Execution and Continuous Improvement) by Simerson (2011) can thus be considered a fundamental basis, which must subsequently be adapted towards a political campaign process. Election campaign strategy, particularly out of a political communication perspective, centres on developing and disseminating political messages to specific electorate groups (Burton & Shea, 2010). The initial stage involves setting objectives and defining an overarching campaign nucleus that goes beyond simply winning office. Parties and candidates must provide compelling narratives for their election, especially in a highly developed technological, societal, and economic environment (Baines, 2011). A successful election campaign itself requires an elaborated strategic approach; it must be tailored precisely to the candidate and the party manifesto. As Beaudry and Schaeffer (1986) recognised, “a campaign plan describes what is to be done, when it should be done, who should be doing it, and how the work will be completed” (p. 44). According to Allen (1996), a promising campaign plan can be compressed on a single piece of paper, “you must be able to succinctly match dollars, strategy, timeline, and cash flow” (p. 51). For Bradshaw (1995), campaign strategy is based on four key principles: (I.) dividing the electorate into three groups: (a) partisan voters, (b) opponents' voters and (c) 'swing voters'; (II.) using polling to find out what voters think and where they are located; (III.) engaging votes from the electorate as a whole; and (IV.) once voters have been targeted, the organisation's resources should be directed towards these particular sectors.

4.4.1 Campaign Planning

Based on Bradshaw's categorisation (1995), a modified and current political campaign planning can be created, which is further refined with the campaign models of Burton & Shea (2010) and Baines (2011).

I. Setting the objectives and candidate's profile:

The first stage of developing a political campaign strategy is about setting clear objectives and identifying a candidate's public image, which must be assessed according to the criteria of credibility, trustworthiness, and relevance. A clear and well-defined

campaign mission is at the heart of the objective, whether tailored to the political candidate or an ideological issue. Parties and candidates must build a compelling case for their choice together with their campaign teams; a strong candidate's profile - including policy positions, previous experience, legislative involvement, and political roles - is crucial (Perloff, 2022). Creating a clear message allows for a robust campaign even in times of backlash and dynamic external events (Burton & Shea, 2010)

II. Opposition Research:

In the second step of campaign planning, Burton and Shea (2010) emphasise the importance of opposition research as a tool for exploring comparative advantage by thoroughly understanding both the candidate's and opponent's background. This process includes examining each candidate's policy positions, political experience, committee positions, legislative contributions, and political appointments, all critical to shaping campaign strategies. The concept of opposition research is also critical, as it allows a candidate to anticipate and counter potential criticism or attacks by knowing their history and record intimately. As campaigns intensify, this research becomes increasingly important and typically covers political, financial, career, and personal information.

III. Segment Analysis:

The third step of a political campaign plan involves voter segmentation, where potential voters are categorised based on various factors in order to adjust campaign targeting. Using methods such as constituency analysis, voters are categorised into groups such as base, swing and partisan. The segmentation is based on the recognition of a heterogeneous and pluralistic population and the fact that demographic variables can predict certain political preferences (Plutzer, 2018). Correlations between voter segments and factors such as wealth, gender and race can drive targeted campaign efforts. Segment analysis is about identifying the likely common interests within a group to develop a customised and modularised persuasion and interaction strategy.

IV. Fundraising:

Given the high cost of modern election campaigns, fundraising is an important part of campaign planning. Professional advisors are often essential in assisting candidates through the complexities of fundraising regulations and helping them secure the financial support they need to connect with voters and run a successful campaign (Baines, 2011; Perloff, 2022). The US presidential elections heavily depend on fundraising and donations from groups like PACs and individuals, while many

European countries have tighter restrictions on campaign financing, often employing public funding to ensure a more balanced influence of stakeholders (Grotz and Schroeder, 2023)

V. Polling:

Opinion polls play a crucial role in the process of planning political campaigns as they provide important data that determine strategy. According to Kavanagh (1995), polling organisations help in several key areas: Identifying the optimal election timing entry, understanding and improving the party's public image, shaping policy decisions, and tracking the party's strengths and weaknesses. Polling also aids in voter outreach by collecting demographic and attitudinal data critical to segmenting the electorate. In addition, opinion polls help measure the impact of a campaign by assessing the quality and effectiveness of message delivery, channel preferences and voter responses, ultimately measuring changes in voter behaviour or attitudes, as Tench & Yeomans (2006) point out.

VI. Voter Targeting:

As Burton and Shea (2010) recognise, targeting voters in political campaigns is about focusing on specific parts of the electorate that can either be persuaded or need to be encouraged to vote. This process starts with understanding who might vote for the candidate and why. The objectives of targeting can be categorised into three main areas: Reinforcement, Persuasion and Conversion. Reinforcement aims to keep loyal voters loyal to the party, persuasion targets undecided voters and conversion seeks to win over opposition voters. Advances in information technology have significantly improved the ability of campaigns to reach voters directly and analyse data to develop personalised messaging strategies. This is achieved through microtargeting, which combines individual-level information with broader demographic and geographic data. This approach helps predict the behaviour and attitudes of specific groups of voters, making campaign work not only more strategic but also more data-driven and precise.

VII. Communications:

A strategic plan for campaign communication can be divided into different sections relating to the communication channels and platforms. While a broader target group of potential voters is addressed via the mass media, a much more personalised and individualised form of communication is required via digital social media platforms, where the aim is not only to persuade but also to turn the previously passive user into an interactive supporter of the campaign in order to expand the reach and network

(Ward et al., 2018). A distinction can also be made between paid and purchased or 'free' media. Clear and well-organised internal communication within the campaign team and its direct contributors is often underestimated, yet it is a decisive criterion for the success of a political campaign (Burton & Shea, 2010).

VIII. Direct Contact:

Despite the increasing importance of electronic public relations and internet-based strategies, traditional grassroots activities such as door-to-door campaigning and poster placement remain important for campaign organisations. Building and maintaining a volunteer network plays a decisive role in these grassroots activities. The scale and nature of get-out-the-vote efforts underline the importance of mobilising grassroots support, as this can have a significant impact on the success of a party or candidate in an election (Baines, 2011).

4.4.2 Challenges in developing a Campaign Plan

The success of any campaign plan depends on a precise analysis of historical, current and future events, as well as an in-depth comprehension of the candidate, the opponent, the strengths and weaknesses of the campaign organisations and the electorate. Without this accurate foundation, even the most diligent pre-campaign preparations risk disappointing outcomes. Campaign planning presents multi-faceted challenges involving the nuanced integration of tactical elements within budgetary constraints, the optimisation of events given limited resources, and the strategic visualisation of plans through flowcharts or software (Keller & Leder, 2018; Perloff, 2022). Backward planning, starting from election day and moving in reverse, proves to be a crucial consideration to avoid time pressure and ensure effective task completion. Understanding voter attitudes as they develop through the stages of cognition, affects, and evaluation is crucial and impacts strategic decisions in the campaign process (Burton & Shea, 2010). The role of campaign material, such as posters and yard signs, requires careful scheduling considerations, taking into account local regulations and pitfalls such as vandalism in the late stages of the campaign. Appointing candidates and opponents early on are important to shape voter perceptions and gain fundraising advantages. However, inherent uncertainties, unforeseen events, and financial setbacks underscore the complexity of campaign planning (Keller & Leder, 2018). Additionally, opposition strategies introduce an element of unpredictability, emphasising the need for adaptability in a competitive political landscape, especially in winner-take-all elections where only one campaign plan can ultimately succeed.

5. Federal Elections 2021 in Germany: The Liberal Party FDP

This chapter contextualises the 2021 federal election in Germany and explores the electoral system and the strategic parameters that shaped the campaign. An overview of the FDP's political position and its response to emerging issues such as COVID-19 pandemic and digital transformation is provided. By analysing the party's strategic positions in a pluralistic political landscape, the chapter establishes the basis for a detailed empirical study of election campaigns.

5.1 The federal electoral system in Germany (2021)

The last chapter of theory addresses a more concrete level, which is intended to further investigate the political electoral system at federal level in Germany and the political environment of the FDP in the 2021 elections. In the first section, I will discuss the institutional foundations of the elections to the German Bundestag, such as the legal provisions for the participation in elections, and the electoral system, which determines how votes are converted into parliamentary seats. Section 5.1.2 will deal with the three components of voting as part of the federal electoral system in 2021. In addition to the general classification of stakeholders in political campaigning (see 4.2), the contextualisation of the German electoral system and its legal requirements in 5.1.2 provides a clearer understanding for the selection process of suitable interview participants presented in the subsequent methodological chapter (section 6.4). The knowledge acquired in the last chapters, therefore, provides the necessary foundation for placing the research topic of the dissertation in a theoretical context, before moving on to the empirical analysis of internal experiences, observations, and perceptions of the involved actors of the Free Democratic Party in the 2021 Bundestag elections.

5.1.1 Basic legal and regulatory framework

Every four years, eligible voters in the Federal Republic of Germany are called upon to determine representatives for the German Bundestag. As parliamentary elections produce binding government compositions that, as representatives, possess the power to execute decisions for the whole of society, it is of fundamental importance that fair, transparent and free elections result in a consensus in democratic legitimacy (Schmidt, 2022). The electoral system is the “most fundamental element of representative democracy” (Lijphart, 1994, p. 1). Therefore, a regulatory framework is needed, which is based on voting rights for the electorate

and vice versa specific guidelines for candidates to be elected. Four principles embody this right to vote, which is anchored in the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany (Art. 38, Basic Law):

I. Universal suffrage:

All citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany (who have reached the age of 18) can take part in elections, regardless of gender, education, income, place of residence or other characteristics.

II. Equal suffrage:

The principle of electoral equality prohibits any differentiation of the value of votes. Every eligible voter has the same number of votes (first and second votes) and each ballot has the same significance.

III. The principle of secret ballots:

The secret ballot ensures that the voter's choice remains private and untraceable, as the vote is cast anonymously at a public polling station or by post.

IV. The principle of immediate/direct and free election:

According to the principle of direct election, citizens choose their representatives without the involvement of intermediary bodies. In Germany's federal parliamentary system, this applies solely to the election of the Bundestag, in which the Federal Chancellor is not directly elected. Additionally, free elections ensure that voters can cast their ballots and participate voluntarily, without any external force, pressure, or coercion.

Electoral systems are the set of rules that determine the form of voting as well as the conversion of votes into parliamentary seats (Behnke et al., 2017; Reiners & Hitschold, 2023). In addition to the legal framework, the German electoral system for federal elections is a combination of the majority electoral system and the proportional electoral system (Grotz & Schroeder, 2023; Schmidt, 2022; Reiners & Hitschold, 2023). The majoritarian electoral system, which is prevalent in Great Britain, France, and the USA in the presidential elections, emphasises the legislative power of parliament by allocating the distribution of seats to a few large parties. The party leader or front-runner is typically the centre of attention, while the proportionality between votes and parliamentary seats is typically sacrificed, and smaller parties have only limited chances of entering parliament (Schmidt, 2022). The primary aim of the proportional electoral system is to align vote shares with parliamentary seats, supporting consensus

democracy, while also allowing smaller parties to enter parliament. However, it often leads to party system fragmentation. Combining elements of both majority and proportional systems, the electoral system for the German parliament is known as the "personalized proportional representation" or MMPS, the "mixed-member proportional system" (Grotz & Schroeder, 2023, p. 147), with distinct characteristics such as voters casting two votes—one for a candidate in a single-member constituency and one for a party list. Half of the MPs are elected directly through constituencies, while the other half are allocated proportionally via party lists, and the system allows for overhang seats if a party wins more direct seats than its proportional share. Additionally, a 5% vote threshold is required for a party to gain parliamentary representation (Reiners & Hitschold, 2023).

5.1.2 The electoral system for the German Bundestag in the context of Campaigning

The personalised proportional representation system ensures a balance between direct and list seats, contributing to the overall proportional distribution of 598 Bundestag seats, which can be adjusted for nationwide representation. Three steps are of significance in the allocation of seats in the German parliament. Initially, the seats are distributed among the 16 federal states based on population size, using the Sainte-Laguë method, as Reiners and Hitschold (2023) observe. Subsequently, within each state, proportional seat distribution is determined by the parties' second votes, provided they meet the 5% national threshold or secure at least three constituency seats. Overhang seats are addressed through intra-party redistribution within state lists. Finally, the nationwide seat allocation adjusts the total number of seats to align with each party's proportional entitlement, ensuring balanced representation while accounting for overhang seats (Grotz & Schroeder, 2023; Behnke et al., 2017; BWahlG, 2020). Since this process aims to balance the representation of the parties fairly, the result is an increase in the size of parliament. The current 20th Bundestag is the largest with 736 seats, including 138 overhanging and compensatory mandates (Langenberger, 2022). As outlined in the previous section, the electorate does not vote directly for the Federal Chancellor, but instead gives a first vote for a political candidate in their constituency (the Federal Republic is divided into 299 constituencies) and a decisive second vote for the political party they wish to have represented in the parliament. The party elected through the second vote in a constituency determines the candidates who will represent the respective federal state in the Bundestag, based on a predetermined order on the party's state list. The higher a candidate's position on the party list, the better their chances of being elected to the Bundestag (Reiser, 2022). From a political

perspective, the two-vote system significantly impacts the strategic direction of a party's federal election campaign. It must not only align with the candidates standing in individual constituencies but also represent a coherent nationwide campaign (Bukow & Angenendt, 2019; Geschwend & Zittel, 2015). As noted by Bukow and Angenendt (2019), “parties and candidates are deeply entangled, and, at least in mixed-member electoral systems, local constituency campaigns are embedded within national party campaigns” (p. 35). Referring to the campaign model of party-, candidate- and consultant-centred campaigns by Burton and Shea (2010), introduced in section 4.3.2, the German multi-dimensional electoral system combines the specific campaign characteristics of the two scholars. As the first vote is focused on direct candidates in each constituency, individualised campaigns, including local and communicative personalisation seem to be of utter importance in winning the support of the electorate (Bukow & Angenendt, 2024). Zittel and Geschwend (2008) therefore suggest that the characteristics of the candidate-centred campaigning are more likely to be employed when candidates perceive an opportunity to win a direct mandate with self-contained infrastructure and resources. While communicative personalisation is an effective tool for direct candidates, it is rarely implemented without the support or approval of the party. This can be explained both by the subordination to party discipline, where the candidate aligns with the party that has supported and groomed them over the years for the direct candidacy, and by the party's significantly greater resources in terms of media reach, financial support, and the future allocation of key positions in the national parliament (Reiser, 2022; Rehmert, 2020; Bukow & Angenendt, 2019; 2024). Nevertheless, research indicates that the direct candidates' electoral success is guaranteed in only a few constituencies in Germany, smaller parties, such as the FDP, traditionally only win seats via the state party lists (Reiser, 2022; Wüst et al. 2006; Bukow & Angenendt, 2019; 2024). As voters' decisions regarding the second vote are largely based on the overarching election manifestos, strategic positioning and ideologies of the parties standing for election, party-centred campaigning approaches with coherency and “intra-party campaign coordination is demanded” (Bukow & Angenendt, 2019, p. 51). To achieve electoral success, central party offices transform into professional campaign hubs during election periods, demanding a degree of loyalty from local campaigners (Bukow 2015). Yet, as Thorlakson (2013) emphasises, local autonomy is crucial for effective vote-maximising strategies that support the party's broader goals. This strategy aligns with the framework of postmodern campaigns, which are driven by professionalisation, external consultancy, mass customisation, and modular approaches (Burton & Shea 2010, Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2014). While centrally planned, these campaigns are locally executed, allowing regional teams the

flexibility to adopt either the full national campaign or selected components (Bukow & Angenendt, 2019; 2024).

5.2 Federal political topics and voting approaches in Germany

Considering that my master's thesis focuses on the planning and execution of the FDP's political campaign in the 2021 election, the election outcomes and campaign strategies of other relevant parties at the federal level are of secondary importance. Yet it is of significance to acknowledge which social issues and dynamics have shaped voting behaviour and could therefore be relevant for the design and implementation of the FDP's political campaign. In this sense, Section 5.2.1 addresses acute social and political trends and challenges prior to the 2021 election, before Section 5.2.2 discusses the underlying principles of socio-structural, socio-psychological, and economic factors in voting decisions and how these are composed in Germany.

5.2.1 Strategic parameters of the 2021 federal elections

The 2021 German general election campaign period was characterised by a series of politically and socially impactful events. Politically, the end of Merkel's 16-year chancellorship marked the first time in Germany's history that a chancellor did not stand for re-election (Kelm et al., 2023; Lemke & Nyhuis, 2023). Social protection and economic security became key concerns for the public ahead of the 2021 elections due to regional and global crises. The public discourse continued to be shaped by Chancellor Merkel's 2015 decision to open Germany's borders to refugees and migrants, raising ongoing questions about how to distribute incoming refugees across both Europe and Germany. The government's welcoming policy became a source of societal contention, fueling controversial debates and contributing to the rise of right-wing voter groups and anti-immigrant rhetoric (Dostal, 2021; Lemke & Nyhuis, 2023). Widely considered the most significant transformative event before and during the 2021 federal elections, the COVID-19 crisis has challenged the nature of the German state and form of government (Dostal, 2021). As social life came to a standstill, many political debates were paused as the focus shifted to implementing COVID-19 containment measures such as border closures, curfews, testing, and eventually large-scale vaccinations. These measures sparked growing protests, fueled by concerns over the authoritarian nature of the restrictions and austerity measures affecting critical sectors like infrastructure and education. This led to tension between politics, business, and society, with the challenge for political parties to

develop a strategic response in the 2021 elections (Angenendt & Kinski, 2022; Lemke & Nyhuis, 2023). From a structural point of view, the ongoing coronavirus restrictions changed the electoral process, with digital events, mask-free opening clauses at campaign events and an acceleration in the deployment of digital campaign measures all becoming prevalent, as Dostal (2021) observed. Another unforeseeable event was the regional flood disaster in North Rhine-Westphalia and Rhineland-Palatinate in mid-July 2021, which destroyed entire areas without warning from the authorities and is considered with 184 fatalities the worst natural disaster in Germany in the last 60 years. The issue of climate change gained additional importance as a significant election topic in the 2021 federal elections as a result of the natural disaster (Angenendt & Kinski, 2022). To what extent, or whether at all, these challenges and issues were emphasised in the strategic positioning of the FDP's political campaign in the 2021 federal elections will be examined in more detail in the empirical research of the thesis.

5.2.2 The three main voting approaches and their effects

As Geschwend and Zittel (2015) acknowledge in relation to the two different tiers of voting at the national level, electoral behaviour is primarily understood as an interactive process between candidates (as representatives of parties) and voters. As in most established democracies, voting behaviour in the Federal Republic of Germany is determined by certain characteristics and factors. According to Schmidt (2022), socio-structural positioning and socio-cultural orientation, as well as three other determinants, shape central voting behaviour. These are the evaluation of the front-running candidates, the parties' most important policy standpoints/controversial positions, and confidence in the parties' issue-solving abilities. These three additional determinants define the voter's proximity or distance to a party. In addition, as Schmidt (2022) points out, party identification is referred to as psychological party membership, determined by socio-structural positioning, such as religious orientation, the sociocultural axis (progressive-libertarian to value-conservative) and the economic left-right cleavage. Other factors that affect voting behaviour include demographic indicators such as gender, age group, level of education and sexuality, as well as external influences such as exposure to mass media or extraordinary regional or (inter-)national events such as the pandemic or the flood disaster in western Germany, as mentioned in 5.2.1. According to Grotz and Schroeder (2023), electoral behaviour is shaped by the supply of political programmes offered by the parties, the demands arising from the media and the public sphere, and the general institutional and political framework, regulating and determining the environment, in which the election process takes place. The scholars distinguish between three approaches that

address demand arising from society: (I.) *The sociological approach* assumes that voters' preferences are determined by their belonging to a specific social group. Citizens with the same socio-structural characteristics, such as occupation or religion, are assumed to share similar political interests and convictions (Niedermayer, 2013; Grotz & Schroeder, 2023). (II.) *The socio-psychological approach* to understanding voting behaviour does not attribute citizens' voting choices to their societal surroundings but rather to their political perceptions, opinions, and evaluations. The key element of this perspective is party identification, which denotes the emotional bond individuals have with a political party. (III.) *The economic approach* to voting behaviour centres on rational cost-benefit calculations, with voters selecting the party that aligns with their interests. Unlike the socio-psychological approach, it does not delve into the ideological or emotional contexts of these interests but focuses on short-term factors like policy issues and prominent candidates (Behnke et al., 2017; Rudi & Schoen, 2014; Grotz & Schroeder, 2023). Research on German elections reveals that the approaches of Schmidt (2022) and Grotz & Schroeder (2023) are the most prevalent criteria for analysing voting behaviour in German federal elections (Schoen & Wessels, 2024; Leitner et al. 2024). Disregarding the specific party affiliations of the electorate in the 2021 federal elections as they are of secondary relevance for the subject of the thesis, I will highlight several general trends in voting behaviour in the Federal Republic of Germany which could have had an impact on the FDP's campaign strategy. In this sense, trends and tendencies in the voting behaviour of the electorate in 2021 can be observed, as identified by Schmidt (2022), Langenbacher (2022) and Dostal (2021). First of all, it can be seen at the demographic level that the voting behaviour of women and men has converged; there is no longer a specific gender gap. However, age effects in voting behaviour persist: the older the electorate, the more constant is their party identification, shaped by socio-structural and socio-cultural characteristics such as level of education and religious affiliation (Schmidt, 2022). In turn, voting behaviour linked to social milieus has changed considerably. Economically and socially weaker population groups have undergone a transformation from an industrial to a service and knowledge-based society, causing the economic cleavage to decrease. It can also be observed that, as a result of secularisation and changing values, general voting behaviour is less dependent on religiously motivated party identification. As is also the case in other democratic systems, party identification is on the decline in Germany. Short-term determination of voting behaviour is more strongly oriented towards current trends and the climate of opinion, characterised by a higher degree of social diversity of interests and pluralisation, resulting in a fragmentation of the party landscape (Langenbacher, 2022; Dostal, 2021). Well-planned and persuasive election campaigns by the

political parties need to be given priority, requiring a high degree of adaptability and the ability to generate attention through both traditional media and digital campaigns (Schmidt, 2022).

5.3 The FDP in the German political landscape

The following section is intended to give an impression of the role of the FDP as the major liberal party in the German party landscape. It should be emphasised again that my research focuses on the campaign strategies of the FDP and therefore, the classification and election programmes of the opposing parties are of little relevance and will not be further accentuated. In the first subsection, the legal framework for political parties in Germany will be briefly introduced before the Free Democratic Party is profiled in more detail in section 5.3.2.

5.3.1 The German party system: organisational foundations and legal frameworks

Political parties form the organisational core of representative democracy by representing the political interests of its citizens and being the intermediary position between society and the centre of political decision-making. “Political parties shall participate in the formation of the political will of the people” (Art. 21, para. 1 GG), as reflected in German Basic Law. Four core functions of political parties will be elaborated in my master’s thesis, which can be categorised into (I.) the representative function, (II.) the policy-shaping influence of parties, (III.) the contribution to the political socialisation of society and (IV.) the political recruitment on all political levels. To ensure that political parties within the German political system fulfil their crucial role and adhere to democratic principles, additional legal measures govern their actions. These measures pertain to three fundamental aspects: party prohibitions, intra-party democracy, and party funding, which will be enlarged upon to give a more profound insight into the German party system (Grotz & Schroeder, 2023). In established democracies, parties typically have a stable structure, each occupying specific programmatic positions. However, party interactions remain dynamic as they compete for votes, requiring constant profile adjustments. Despite their competition, parties must also collaborate in parliament and government to achieve shared goals and fulfil their policy-shaping role (Caramani, 2020). The federal German party landscape emerged historically in the context of social cleavages and consists in contemporary times of currently six permanent parties. In addition to the FDP, these include the two historically catch-all parties of the CDU/CSU (Christian Democratic Union of Germany and Christian Social Union) and the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany), the

party Alliance 90/The Greens, which has its origins in a strong environmental movement, and the two parties at the opposing ends of the left-right conflict line with the Left Party on the one hand and the AFD (Alternative for Germany) as a populist national-identitarian party on the other (Schmidt, 2022; Grotz & Schroeder, 2023).

5.3.2 The FDP's political position in Germany

The FDP is Germany's economically, constitutionally, and culturally libertarian party, which has been part of the federal government six times since the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany. It is a predominantly classically liberal-inspired party, both in terms of supporting a free-market economy and minimising state intervention in matters concerning personal freedom. As Schmidt (2022) notes, from an organisational point of view, the FDP has overcome the historical division of German liberalism into left-wing and national liberalism. The party has also been termed by various media sources as neoliberal, conservative-liberal, classical-liberal and liberal-conservative. Referring to Dittberner (2010) and Treibel (2014), the FDP's political position has variously been described as centrist, centre-right and right-wing. In the 2013 federal election, the FDP failed to surpass the five-percent threshold for the first time, largely due to its inability to fulfil election promises during the previous legislative period and its involvement in negative headlines related to large campaign donations from tax-privileged companies. This reinforced the party's negative image as a clientele party, perceived as prioritising the interests of wealthy taxpayers and the economic elite (Grotz & Schroeder, 2023). After its exit from the Bundestag in 2013, the FDP quickly reorganised, regaining its campaign capabilities, making adjustments to its image, and undergoing significant programmatic and organisational changes in leadership. This transformation led to the party's successful return to the Bundestag in 2017. The driving force behind this renewal and electoral success was Christian Linder as Chairman and the party's new strong figure, who concentrated on personalising the party's public image while modernising its core identity by focusing on digitalisation in education, the economy and infrastructure (Dostal, 2021; Angenendt & Kinski, 2022). While the pandemic has increased the urgency of this issue even further, the emphasis was intended to reach a younger, internet-savvy generation as a potential voter group. Prior to the 2021 federal elections, the FDP had positioned itself as a market-libertarian party that remains skeptical of state interventionist approaches, despite a certain degree of moderation. For the liberal party, the focus is on tax relief for middle and low incomes in particular, the transformation of the pension system into fund-based capital financing based on the

Scandinavian model and maintaining the debt brake in federal budget spending (Langenbacher, 2022; Lemke & Nyhuis, 2023). In line with its liberal self-image, the FDP promotes the self-responsibility of the individual in terms of performance and equal opportunities with the slogan “Advancement through personal achievement” (Jun, 2021, p. 20), and thus clearly differentiates itself from parties prioritising the welfare state.

6. Methodology

The following chapter delineates the methodological framework for the study and emphasises the relevance of qualitative research. For this purpose, the research design is presented, focusing on a single-case study approach based on semi-structured interviews. This chapter discusses data collection and analysis techniques, sampling methods, quality criteria and ethical considerations. It lays the foundation for a thorough and in-depth examination of the FDP's campaign strategies in the 2021 German parliamentary elections.

6.1 Research Relevance

This study aims to analyse the political campaigning strategies applied in the planning and implementation of the Liberal Party (FDP) in the federal German parliamentary elections of 2021. With 11.5% of the votes (+0.8% compared to 2017), the FDP managed to become part of the first governing three-party coalition in an election characterised by the challenges of COVID-19 policies, climate change, social security, and the digital transformation of the economy. Given the complexity and diversity of strategic planning, alignment, and implementation of an election campaign strategy in a highly pluralistic and competitive German party landscape, it seems valuable to examine the FDP's campaigning strategy as a factor of a successful election outcome in the 2021 federal elections in greater depth.

Moreover, observing the existing scientific literature on political campaigning, which is based on interdisciplinary research in the fields of communication, marketing, economics and political science, several challenges can be identified, as outlined in more detail in section 4.1.2. Thus, US-centric research approaches as the origin of comparative and single-country campaign analyses continue to influence the international state of research. Specific cultural, social, and political circumstances, albeit gaining in relevance, indicate highly individualised and country-specific political campaigns. In this sense, it also seems beneficial from a scientific

perspective to conduct a qualitative, in-depth study of a specific contemporary political campaign on a national, non-US level (Strömbäck & Kiouisis, 2014).

In addition, a review of the existing research on political campaigns in Germany reveals three notable gaps that underscore the relevance of this study:

- I. A noticeable deficiency is detected in the coverage of contemporary digital instruments in overall political campaigning strategies for the German political system. Much of the existing literature, including studies by Althaus (2008), Holtz-Bacha (2007), and Leggewie (2009), focuses on earlier periods, thereby neglecting the rapid evolution of digital campaigning techniques that have become critical in recent elections.
- II. Political campaign strategies at national level in Germany are being examined from a meta-perspective that appears to be too superficial and merely quantitative (Angenendt et al., 2022; Borucki & Kettelman, 2024).
- III. There is a marked trend towards prioritising research into specific facets of political campaign strategies. For instance, considerable attention has been given to the role of social media strategies in political campaigns (Haßler et al., 2023; Kelm et al., 2023; Righetti et al., 2022), campaign effects on German voting behaviour (Angenendt & Bukow, 2024; Leitner et al., 2024), and comparisons between traditional and digital advertising measures (Steffan & Venema, 2020). While these studies generate valuable insights, they often do not address the broader strategic planning and implementation processes of a specific party in a distinct election campaign.

This study aims to fill these gaps by providing a comprehensive analysis of the FDP's political campaign strategies for the 2021 federal election in a holistic manner. This approach not only contributes to the academic discourse by refreshing and expanding the comprehension of political campaign strategies in Germany but also improves the practical knowledge applicable to future political campaigns.

6.2 Research Question and Research Objectives

This research aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on political campaign strategies by examining the political campaign implementation and execution of the FDP in the 2021 German federal parliamentary election campaign. The following research question has been

constructed to guide the data collection procedures and analysis, grounded on the scientific status quo and theoretical framework elaborated within the political campaigning literature. On a general level, the research question has to fulfil the condition of feasibility, presuming that a topic has been selected that is suitable for a research purpose and for which the research question can be answered directly. This qualitative research question satisfies the required inductive and holistic parameters to develop and derive concrete research objectives.

Research Question:

"What were the key strategies and implementation methods employed by the FDP in their 2021 federal parliamentary election campaign?"

Research Objectives:

To outline and analyse the strategic milestones and decisions within the planning and implementation phases in the campaign strategy by the FDP.

- The intention here is to assess and comprehend the strategic decisions made for the various milestones by unfolding the chronological framework of the campaign's strategic planning and execution.

To identify the core strategies and statements that were central to the FDP's 2021 election campaign.

- This objective aims to pinpoint and analyse the key messages and strategic themes that the FDP prioritised during the election campaign, shedding light on the party's focus and approach to voter communication.

To analyse which campaign methods were employed in the implementation process by the FDP, including its communication channels.

- This involves exploring how the FDP deployed its campaign strategies across different platforms (digital, print, television, etc.), assessing the effectiveness and reach of each media channel in their strategy.

To evaluate the techniques used by the FDP to engage and motivate its voter base and supporters.

- The objective here is to analyse the specific tactics and activities undertaken by the FDP to boost voter and supporter participation and enthusiasm, such as community outreach, digital engagement strategies, and promotional events.

These objectives will guide an in-depth analysis of the FDP's campaign strategies and implementation methods, providing a comprehensive view of how the campaign was designed, executed, and managed. They also align closely with my overarching research question, ensuring that each aspect of the campaign is explored in detail to contribute effectively to the academic discourse on political campaigning.

6.3 Research Design

The purpose of the subsequent section lies in providing a methodological roadmap, situating myself as the investigator in the world of experience by connecting, exploring, and analysing a specific social phenomenon. A research design provides a versatile framework that links theoretical frameworks to methods of inquiry and the collection of empirical data (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). Building on the guidelines from Denzin and Lincoln (2018b), the following empirical research design is intended to answer questions such as "How will the design connect to the paradigm or perspective being used?" or "What methods or research tools for collecting and analysing empirical materials will be used?" with the aim of generating a methodological frame of orientation for the data and results evaluation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018b, p. 549).

6.3.1 Foundations of Qualitative Research

Prior to concretising the methodological strategy of my thesis, it is first necessary to identify which indicators might suggest a certain methodological path based on the transition of my dissertation's topic to the research question **"What were the key strategies and implementation methods employed by the FDP in their 2021 federal parliamentary election campaign?"**. The essential prerequisites of qualitative research questions as defined by Leavy (2017) can be considered as justification for my qualitative research approach:

- I. Qualitative research questions are inductive, open-ended and based on observed patterns and insights gained directly from the data, without the constraints of existing models or hypotheses. They emerge from the data itself rather than being imposed prior to data collection. Lofland & Lofland (1995) characterise this approach as *emergent analysis*, highlighting its creative and intuitive nature distinguishing it from more rigid, mechanical processes.

- II. Qualitative research questions tend to involve words such as *what* or *how* to allow a flexible approach to exploring phenomena without pre-defined predictions. This empowers researchers to study people in their natural environment and to interpret naturally occurring, ordinary events in natural settings from the perspectives and meanings associated with the individuals involved (Miles et al., 2014; Leavy, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018a).
- III. Qualitative research is characterised by its in-depth focus on human aspects and interactions, covering a specific time frame. This approach is interpretative by nature and is suitable for analysing socially constructed phenomena such as political campaigns. The election campaign strategies of the FDP during the 2021 federal election, in which the strategic and communicative tactics that develop over time can be explored, seem to be suitable for a qualitative research approach regarding the criteria (Daymon & Holloway, 2011).
- IV. A qualitative research approach seems suitable for my research question and objectives as it encourages a holistic examination of environments and people. Unlike quantitative methods, which often reduce subjects to mere variables, qualitative research considers individuals and groups as integrated wholes. The richness of qualitative data provides "thick descriptions" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 30) and allows a deep, personal understanding of participants to develop and capture their everyday realities and social challenges.

Considering the topic, the research question, and the objectives of this study in greater detail and examining these in relation to the characteristics of qualitative approaches, it seems only natural to select a qualitative method to conduct the empirical part of the study. Furthermore, reevaluating the literature review, the development of a theoretical framework of political communication and campaigning, the collection of models and explanatory approaches of political campaign strategies, a holistic and inductive approach seems logical. Since my study aims to explore in-depth experiences of individuals of a phenomenon delimited by time and space, i.e., to examine an event/situation from an 'emic' or insider perspective, the next step is to determine which qualitative method might be suitable for this purpose (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). However, it should also be noted that the documentation and interpretation, while seeking objectivity, are always characterised by the personal values, attitudes, and beliefs

of the researcher. Therefore, any interpretation is ultimately a reflection of what the researcher observes (Miles et al., 2014).

6.3.2 Research Paradigms

Reflecting on the assumption that reality is constructed through social processes, a constructivist perspective is applied in my thesis (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). This ontological perspective seems to be suitable as it allows me to explore the campaign planning and implementation strategies of the FDP, revealing each step of the underlying structures shaped by human decisions within a definitive timeframe in the political campaign plan. From a philosophical point of view, an interpretive position has been chosen, focusing on the subjective experiences and perceptions of individuals involved in the FDP's federal campaign in 2021, such as their members of parliament, their office management, as well as members in the communication department of the FDP (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018a; Leavy, 2017). A concrete methodological approach can be determined by building on the ontological and epistemological paradigms and combining them with the justification of why my research has to be qualitative. To provide in-depth insights into the political campaigning strategies of the FDP in the 2021 federal parliamentary election, a qualitative case study relying on semi-structured interviews enables me to gather enriching data on subjective interpretations and meaningful actions in the complex social dynamics and decision-making processes within the election campaign of the FDP in 2021.

6.3.3 Rationale for Case Study Methodology

After establishing the dissertation's relevance, research question and objectives as well as justifying the qualitative nature of my research approach, a specific qualitative methodology can finally be presented in greater precision, as it was already indicated in the last section. My research topic aims to comprehensively and in-depth explore a specific social phenomenon (the political campaign strategies of the FDP) in a particular time period (the 2021 federal election period) by gathering and analysing the insights and perceptions of insiders within the FDP at the parliamentary level. Why is the case study ideally suited as a qualitative research method for my master's thesis? Following the characteristics of case study research proposed by Daymon & Holloway (2011), Yin (2014) and Simons (2014), a case study seeks to deeply and narrowly describe, explore and explain a particular context, issue, event, process, institution,

or system in real or retrospective time. The case study method is defined by its specific boundaries in place and time, whether a snapshot or a longitudinal examination of events with historical and present perspectives. Swanborn (2010) identified that cases can exist at different levels, including the micro level (individuals and their interactions), the meso level (organisations and institutions), and the macro level (communities, democracies, and societies), encompassing both single and multiple actors. This approach allows for a detailed, holistic analysis that explores connections and relationships within a particular social phenomenon. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018b), the qualitative case study offers as a concrete case in this context a greater value “than the vain search for predictive theories and universals” (p. 557). It provides the basis for the generalisation of a single case to support future theory testing and formation (p. 557). In application, qualitative researchers are often faced with the challenge of defining the exact parameters of their case, especially when setting boundaries. However, the flexibility of this method makes it possible to focus on the core aspects of the study while considering the somewhat indeterminate boundaries of what is excluded from the analysis. This approach is suitable for either a single case or multiple cases and provides a clear framework for detailed investigation and contextual understanding (Miles et al., 2014).

6.3.4 Case Study Design and Focus

Having established the qualitative case study as my methodological approach, it can now be further refined based on the research question and objectives, providing an empirical foundation for data collection and analysis. When conceptualising case studies, a fundamental decision involves choosing between a single-case design and a multiple-case design. This decision must be made prior to data collection, determining whether the study will investigate one case or several cases (Yin, 2014). The advantage of an individual case study is that a specific phenomenon can be investigated in depth. The investigation centres on small numbers, which are observed and analysed in detail at a singular event or over a period of time. For my dissertation, the methodological approach of a single-case study lends itself to obtaining specific insights and a focused investigation into the individual planning and implementation stages from distinct perspectives in a specific period in the FDP election campaign. The second criterion for categorising a case study is the distinction between an explanatory, exploratory and descriptive approach. While the former identifies common features and variations, it develops and tests an explanation against conflicting evidence (for example, negative cases) to refine or constrain it (Yin, 2014). With regard to my research topic and based on my objectives,

a methodological decision between an exploratory and descriptive approach seems to be more suitable. Exploratory designs aim to develop theories, formulate research questions for future studies or assess the feasibility of research procedures and are linked to theoretical ideas or propositions of interest (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Schwandt & Gates, 2018). In comparison, the descriptive approach develops a comprehensive portrayal of a phenomenon, which is researched intrinsically, holistically, and interpretively (Yin, 2014; Schwandt & Gates, 2018). Descriptive case studies are particularly valuable for giving a thorough account of events and processes within their real-life context, which matches my aim to comprehensively document and provide an overview of the complexities of the FDP's campaign approach. This in-depth study illustrates how political parties such as the FDP in the German political landscape are developing strategies and adapting to the dynamic and digital environment of federal elections. Based on this specific approach, future research may compare and further develop existing theories on the planning and implementation of political campaigns that could apply to broader contexts. Based on the table (Figure X.) compiled by Hancock and Algozzine (2006), five steps that are required to conduct a case study can be identified. The initial step, the identification and definition of a concrete phenomenon, has previously been fulfilled by the previous subsections; in the following, the population and the sampling of this qualitative case study will be examined in greater detail.

<i>Procedure</i>	<i>Case Study</i>
Intent, appropriate design, and how intent relates to research problem are defined.	The problem focuses on developing an in-depth understanding of a "case" or bounded system. It is related to understanding that an event, activity, process, or one or more individuals and the type of "case," such as intrinsic, instrumental, or collective, is delimited.
The plan to receive approval and gain access to study sites and participants is defined.	Approval from institutional review board is obtained. A research site is located using purposeful sampling procedures. Number of cases is determined and gatekeeper to provide access is identified. Provisions for respecting the site are defined.
Data are collected emphasizing time in the field, multiple sources of information, and collaboration.	Extensive information is gathered using multiple forms of data collection (observations, interviews, documents), including audiovisual materials and other relevant sources.
Data are analyzed and interpreted relative to the design.	Data are reviewed to develop an overall understanding. Case(s) is (are) described in detail and a context for the description is delimited. Key issues or themes about the case(s) are developed. A cross-case analysis is conducted if appropriate.
Research report suitable for dissemination is prepared.	Reporting focuses on describing the case with description, analysis, and interpretation addressed differently or equally. Decision is made to emphasize objective or subjective reporting, including biases and generalizations to other cases.

Figure X.: Procedures Commonly Used in Case Studies, Source: Hancock, D. R., & Algozzine, R. (2006). *Doing case study research: A practical guide for beginning researchers*. Teachers College Press, p. 24.

6.4 Population and Sampling

The research aims to use a qualitative single-case study to gain in-depth insights into the internal processes and strategies employed by the FDP during their campaign planning for the 2021 federal elections. It also seeks to capture the internal and hands-on experiences, observations, and perceptions of the FDP's key actors involved in the campaign. Similar to the dissection of the research question into individual objectives, this procedure can be applied for the determination of the population and sampling sizes. The research question begins with the interrogative pronoun 'what' which initiates a concrete investigation. The passive verb phrase 'were employed' and the compound subject 'strategies and implementation methods' give the research meaning, specifically referencing the FDP as the object. Temporal and spatial factors, such as '2021' and 'federal parliamentary election campaign,' further define the scope and boundaries of the study. Furthermore, with the guidance of the four research objectives, which were defined with the aim of identifying, analysing and evaluating the implementation phases, core strategies, campaign and communication methods from an intrinsic FDP perspective, it seems now possible to identify the population of my study. To obtain this internal and comprehensive knowledge, actors from within the FDP at the federal level must be selected, specifically those who were involved in or encountered the Liberal Party's campaign strategies in the period leading up to the 2021 elections. As categorised in section 4.2 in a general sense, the stakeholders in political campaigning can be narrowed down to the internal actors of the FDP in the federal election process. Thus, the required qualifications were met by members of the federal campaign team from the FDP's national headquarters, managing directors of the FDP's state associations and the party's political leadership, including their directors and campaign managers. In qualitative research, sampling aims to enhance understanding of the phenomenon by selecting participants relevant to the research topic rather than representing the population as required in quantitative studies (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). In preparation for the data collection and data analysis of my case study, which, as discussed in detail in sections 6.5 and 6.6, will be conducted through semi-structured interviews, I estimate a sample size of 5 to 8 participants of FDP representatives. From a methodological perspective, qualitative case studies favour smaller sample sizes embedded in their context and investigated in greater depth (Leavy, 2017; Miles et al., 2014). Overly large samples may result in redundant data, leading to a "saturation point" (Leavy, 2017, p. 78). The methodological justification of my sample is based on two characterisations: my study's sample is purposive, which means that the participants, the location, and the time period of the study can be derived from the

purpose of my master's thesis. As a second attribute, my sample is determined by its homogeneous nature, the respondents belong to the same subculture of specialists (FDP employees at federal level) in the field of politics and campaigning. Reviewing the second step of Figure X., the required approval of an institutional review board can be related to the Católica Portuguesa University, which has authorised the topic as well as the underlying theoretical and methodological approach of my master's thesis as scientifically relevant. The research site and the case number have been examined; potential gatekeepers are of secondary importance in my sampling, as the initial enquiry to potential interview candidates is based on pre-existing relationships from personal and professional experience at the federal level of the FDP.

6.5 Data Collection Procedures

Subchapter 6.5 provides a detailed overview of the methodology and framework for data collection in this qualitative single-case study of the FDP's 2021 federal election campaign. The first section thoroughly describes the methodological data collection approach with semi-structured interviews. The characteristics of this approach are elaborated, the in-depth character is emphasised, and a content-related frame of reference is created. In addition, the criteria for my interview guide are defined in subsection 6.5.1. In subsection 6.5.2, a conceptual framework for data collection is concretised and thematic blocks with predefined questions for the interview guide are provided. Based on established models and literature, this interview framework progresses from general to specific questions and encourages open-ended responses based on the research objectives. Together, these sections ensure a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the FDP's campaign strategies, communication methods and voter mobilisation.

6.5.1 The methodical approach of Data Collection

The data collection methods should be chosen based on their effectiveness in addressing the research purpose and providing sufficient coverage to answer the research question and the specific objectives. This section outlines the systematic approach and specific methods for collecting data in this qualitative single-case study, focusing on semi-structured interviews with purposeful and homogeneous sample participants selected from FDP representatives involved in the 2021 federal parliamentary elections campaign. My data, which addresses the research

topic, will be collected using semi-structured interviews (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). Regarding my methodological approach of a qualitative single-case study, data collection utilising in-depth interviews offers the advantage of flexibility in the respondent answers. They emerge in the course of the conversation and reflect the subjective views of the interviewees in a social context (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). In addition, Leavy (2017) states that in-depth interview questions have an inductive and open-ended character, encouraging the participants to elaborate on their thoughts, experiences, and impressions. My findings will be, therefore, based on the participants' interpretations of their personal experiences, expressed in their own words, and using the linguistic style and terminology that is meaningful to them. As a further selected parameter, I will conduct semi-structured interviews (Figure XI.), which are defined as “an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 6). Semi-structured interviews use a pre-designed interview guide outlining the questions and topics to be covered in the qualitative case study. The order of questions varies depending on the interview's flow and participants' responses, ensuring similar data is collected from all informants. Although the interview guide can be quite long and detailed, it does not have to be strictly followed; it allows flexibility to understand participants' perspectives and collaboratively produce a meaningful report on the research topic (Daymon & Holloway, 2011; Brinkmann, 2014; 2018).

With regard to the purposeful selection of interview participants and the choice of questions in my interview guide, the two-vote electoral system at the German federal level affects the campaign planning and implementation of each FDP member of parliament. As explained in detail in Section 5.1.2, parliamentary candidates include personalised local and municipal agenda items in their constituency election campaigns in the hope of winning a direct mandate to enter the Bundestag. Since the second vote is used to elect the party, and most parties win most of their parliamentary seats in this way, a consistent, coordinated and overarching election campaign is of fundamental importance. Based on my research question and objectives, my qualitative single-case study refers to the overarching political campaign strategies and the implementation of the FDP in the 2021 federal elections.

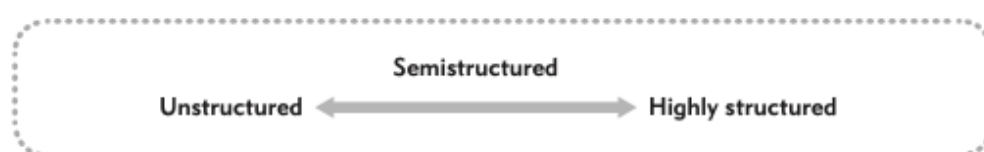


Figure XI.: Continuum of level of structure in interviews, Source: Leavy, P. L. (2017). *Research design: Quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, arts-based, and community-based participatory research approaches*. The Guilford Press, p. 139.

In this sense, the selected participants of my semi-structured interviews were primarily interviewed from a holistic perspective on the election programme, campaign strategies and planning phases conceptualised at the federal level by the party. Thus, local and personalised campaign content focusing on specific constituency topics (primarily of relevance for the first vote) are of secondary interest and were not included in the questions of the interview guide.

Finally, the following criteria determine my interview guide (Appendix B) and, consequently, the data collection and analysis procedures:

- Semi-structured interviews, in-depth, open-ended, and inductive, with a timeframe in length of approx. 45 to 60 Minutes.
- Within the framework of qualitative sampling, six interview participants were selected in accordance with purposive and homogeneous parameters, including FDP campaign experts from the federal office, managing directors of the state-level FDP associations, office directors and campaign managers from the party leadership.
- The interviews are conducted individually, preferably on-site and in a face-to-face setting. If an on-site appointment is not feasible, the interview process can be alternatively completed via video call using Microsoft Teams.
- Prior to the interview process, a consent form is handed out, in which the interviewee's consent to conduct and process the data is obtained and issues of anonymity and confidentiality are clarified (more details in section 6.7).
- The interviews are held and recorded in German and translated into English during the transcription process.
- The audio recording is carried out using digital tools and is taped with double coverage (Apple Voice Memos and Microsoft Teams).
- The transcription is conducted with an AI-based audio-transcription software (Sonix.ai) and is processed according to the methodological transcription guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2013).

6.5.2 The conceptual framework of Data Collection

Initially, an interview guide was designed for my semi-structured interviews. The interview script was adapted from the model "How to Plan and Conduct an Interview" by Hancock and Algozzine (2006, p. 42), and was further optimised with the designs for semi-structured questioning by Daymon & Holloway (2011) and Leavy (2017). The series of questions have been structured in such a way that the interview opens with an introductory question and

specific questions subsequently follow within different thematic blocks. Since the interview guide follows in-depth and semi-structured guidelines, the questions are formulated for open-ended and inductive responses. The aim is to encourage the interviewee to describe the campaign strategies of the FDP in the 2021 federal elections from an individual perspective and to share experiences, observations and perceptions about specific strategic milestones and communication methods within a timeframe and implementation channels. The questions are designed to progress from general questions to specific questions (Leavy, 2017) or, as initially defined by Spradley (1979), first to provide an overview with ‘grand tour’ questions and then to specify these with follow-up or ‘mini tour’ questions. In order to maintain a more fluent dialogue during the interviews, the order of the questions can be adapted by following the flow of the interviewee's conversation, allowing for questions to be posed in a contextually appropriate manner. To minimise misunderstandings, straightforward and clear language is employed, with brief introductions to key concepts and clarifications of definitions provided when necessary. Furthermore, to avoid steering the respondent's answers in a particular direction, close attention was paid in the formulation of the interview guide to ensure that no leading questions incorporated the interviewer's view or opinion. Nonetheless, as noted by Brinkmann (2014), qualitative semi-structured interviews are designed for the interviewer to take a more visible part in the interview process by “focusing the conversation on issues that he or she deems important in relation to the research project” (p. 286).

The following table depicts the conceptual framework with the different concepts, developed from the research question, its objectives, and the four thematic chapters of the literature review (Strategic Communication, Political Communication, Political Campaigning, and the Federal Elections in Germany 2021). For this purpose, it is essential to formulate the interview questions in such a manner that the interviewee contributes to answering the research question with their content-related responses (Kaiser, 2014).

Table I: Conceptual Framework. Developed by the author.

1st Phase: Introduction

Introductory remarks and initial briefing	Hancock and Algozzine (2006), Daymon and Holloway (2011), Taylor et al. (2016), Yin (2014), Braun & Clarke (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduction to the researcher and study. - Review with the interviewee the purpose of the interview and the approx. timeframe planned. - Discuss with the participant how and when the interviewee may expect to receive results of the research. - Consent form, issues of anonymity and confidentiality and authorisation of recording and transcription are clarified.
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2nd Phase: Data Collection

Interview Topics or Items	Authors	Developed questions in the interview guide
Interviewee's Introduction and Role in the Campaign		→ Please tell briefly about yourself and your role in the FDP and the election campaign. What was your specific position and responsibilities in the FDP's federal election campaign in 2021?
The strategic process of political campaign planning	Simerson (2011), Zerfass et al. (2018), Van Ruhler (2018), Baines (2011), Burton and Shea (2010), Strömbäck and Kiouisis (2014)	The FDP's election manifesto was adopted and published at the federal party conference on 14-16 May 2021: → Can you describe how and whether your team was involved in the thematic design in the planning phase of the campaign? Where there any guidelines from the Federal Executive Board of the FDP given to you for your election campaign in your constituency? → Which objectives/mission statement have/has been determined as the heart of the campaign? How was this message internally propagated?

		→ In your opinion, what were the main strategies and statements that characterised the FDP's 2021 election campaign?
Political Campaigning	Farrell and Schmitt-Beck (2002), Baines (2011), Strömbäck and Kiouisis (2014), Burton and Shea (2010), Ormrod (2020), Tenscher et al. (2012)	<p>→ Could you please describe the strategic approach (timeline and phases) of how you implemented the campaign? Can you identify for example a shift to intensified online campaigns as a turning point?</p> <p>→ How was the implementation of the election campaign structured in your team?</p> <p>→ Was there a clear distribution of roles in the campaigning process?</p> <p>→ Were external consultants brought in to support and supervise the process?</p>
Political Communication: Channels and Methods	Blumler (2015; 2016), Borgebund (2019), Goncalves (2018), Jamieson and Kenski (2017), Strömbäck and Kiouisis (2020)	<p>→ Which communication methods and channels were favoured in the execution of the campaign? (Online vs. Offline)</p> <p>→ Were different communication strategies used for traditional media and digital media?</p> <p>The terms 'hypermedia' and 'digital campaigning' characterise campaign strategies in the USA.</p> <p>→ Are you familiar with these terms? If so, can you explain which social media/ targeting strategies were used in the FDP campaign? Were personalised election advertisements deployed via your social media channels?"</p>
Supporter and Voter Mobilisation	Sampugnaro and Montemagno (2021), Burton and Shea (2010), Ward et al. (2018)	<p>→ How was the FDP's message adapted to different target groups?</p> <p>→ Which methods were used to motivate and mobilise the party's voter base and supporters to get involved themselves? Were there different</p>

	<p>mobilisation strategies for online and offline communication?</p> <p>→ Finally, which impact does direct voter contact (constituency appearances, door-to-door campaigning, information points in the constituency) have on your campaign?</p>
Final remarks/review of the campaign	<p>The FDP were among the winners of the federal elections with 11.5 percent, which ultimately led to their participation in the government.</p> <p>→ Reflecting on the 2021 election campaign, are there any aspects that you feel could have been improved in terms of internal communication or campaign planning and execution?</p>

6.6 Data Analysis Techniques

During the interview phase, six interviews were conducted between July 7th and August 28th, 2024. Three of the six interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams at the request of the participants. The remaining three were conducted on-site and recorded using the audio recording software Voice Memos. The semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim using the AI-based audio transcription software Sonix.ai and the transcription notation system for orthographic transcription by Braun and Clarke (2013) to ensure that both the contextual component and linguistic nuances and emotions were captured. Since the interviews were conducted in German, the original German version was used for the subsequent data analysis to prevent any loss of meaning due to translation and misinterpretation errors. Therefore, references from the transcripts relate to the German script and, to ensure comprehensibility, to an English translation. Both can be found in Appendix D (File 2). Furthermore, the English versions were translated using the translation tool DeepL, which complies with the German and European data protection regulations, to not violate the confidentiality and anonymity assured in the consent form for the interviews. Two of the six interviewees requested anonymity in the transcripts and, therefore, are labelled as Participant A and Participant B. All information from these interviews, such as direct superiors, specific constituencies and other aspects that could lead to the anonymised interviewees being identified, has been redacted in accordance with the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2013).

Based on the preceding methodological framework of this master's thesis, which employs a qualitative single-case study to conduct an in-depth investigation of a specific phenomenon within a particular social context, thematic analysis emerges as a fitting approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Given that the study draws on emic expert perspectives and observation through semi-structured interviews, this method is well-suited for identifying, analysing, and interpreting specific patterns within the collected data. Thematic analysis is a highly flexible and accessible method that aims to explore and examine themes and patterns in a given data set, in which the researcher is ascribed an active and reflexive role “to make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). The data analysis of my dissertation is based on the six phases of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022), which are elaborated in greater detail below about my research. Although the six phases of analysis are organised in a logical sequence, it is notable that the process was not linear. Instead, it is recursive and iterative, requiring to move back and forth between phases as needed (Byrne, 2021). Therefore, the six-phase model should be viewed as a set of flexible guidelines rather than rigid rules that allow for adjustment based on the data and the researcher's needs (Braun & Clarke, 2013; 2022).

In the first step of familiarisation with the collected interview data, the six transcribed interviews were examined comprehensively and in-depth. This involved not only re-reading the six transcribed texts but also familiarising myself with the content and structures by making notes and markings. As the semi-structured interview process resulted in expansive answers that went beyond the questions, further leading to follow-up questions and a resolving stringency in the order of the interview questions, the aim of this first phase was to immerse myself in the data to become intimately familiar with potentially relevant content for the research of my study.

In the second step, codes were applied in an attempt to give the interviews' data meaning and a systematic structure by coding each item and segment of data that could be of relevance to addressing the research question and the underlying objectives. This step was carried out using the data analysis software MAXQDA, which complies with the method of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2022). As elaborated by Byrne (2021) and Maguire & Delahunt (2017), codes should be specific, concise, and short while also providing sufficient detail to fully grasp patterns and particular components of a concept, such as codes referring to mobilisation strategies in political campaigning or items relating to the role of candidate-centrism as part of an election strategy. The flexibility of thematic analysis offers several possibilities in creating

code labels. On the one hand, codes can be descriptive and work on a superficial level (semantic); on the other hand, they can emphasise the role of the researcher in an interpretative (latent) way. A similar principle applies to the creation of codes that are already predefined from theoretical knowledge (deductive) or in-vivo codes (inductive) emerging during the open coding process. The great strength of the thematic analysis resides in the fact that no decision has to be made here; instead, a mix of the coding elements is produced in my analysis. As noted by Braun and Clarke (2022), the most important thing is ensuring that "your coding orientation fits your purpose" (p. 56). The third, fourth and fifth phases involve a continuous and fluid transition and constitute the transformation of the coded segments and excerpts into themes, seeking overlaps and similarities in "aggregated meaning and meaningfulness across the datasets" (Byrne, 2021, p. 1403). While in the third phase, codes with similar attributes were initially clustered in an active process in order to create and interpret a familiar pattern, the fourth phase involved re-evaluating and refining the established themes. In this sense, certain themes were specialised into subthemes or dissolved in cases where a sufficient relation to the research question could not be successfully determined. An example from my data analysis is the theme 'Electoral programme and campaign planning at regional level', which is merely of secondary importance for the research question of the FDP's key strategies and implementation methods in the 2021 federal parliamentary election campaign. Although there is a correlation between the federal and regional levels in the German federal elections (see section 5.1.2), this

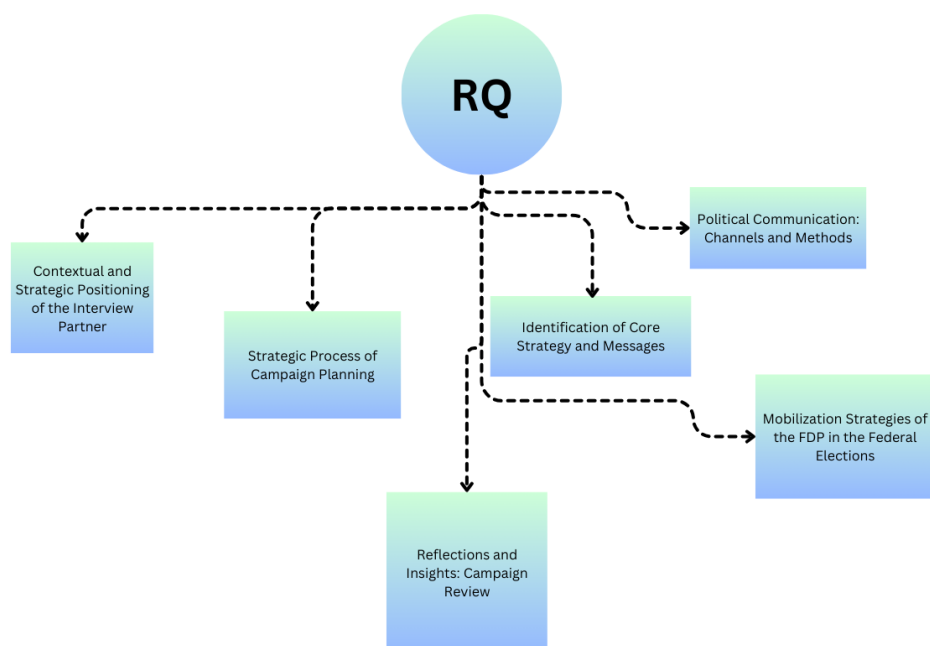


Figure XII.: Thematic Map. Source: Developed by the Author.

was not the focus of my research. However, some codes from this theme could also be subordinated to other themes, while codes with specific regional themes were removed.

In the fifth phase, ‘Defining and naming themes’, the individual themes were developed in such a way that they are coherent and distinct from each other. Each theme of my thesis draws out individual relevant aspects and interpretations from the dataset; simultaneously, the individual themes are interrelated and generate rich and detailed insights in relation to my research topic. The creation of my themes is both deductive and inductive in character. The six topic sets from my interview guide and the four research objectives were aggregated with the inductively derived themes and sub-themes, illustrated in Figure XII., as a thematic map. In some cases, the themes depicted in the graphic constitute subthemes, such as in the theme ‘Strategic process of campaign planning’, which is divided into different levels with sublevel 1, including ‘Planning and execution of the campaign’ and ‘Strategic Milestones’. Whereby the former theme is further subdivided into two subthemes level 2 with ‘Internal organisation and planning’ with codes such as *volunteers*, *inner-party campaigning teams* and ‘campaigning phases’ a second subtheme including codes such as *first*, *second* and *third* stage of campaigning.

Furthermore, a distinctive feature of the thematic analysis is the double coding of certain text passages found in the interviews, which, as Braun and Clarke (2012, 2022) note, is explicitly intended to demonstrate the interconnections between the themes. In this sense, (sub)themes such as ‘Offline mobilisation strategies’ and ‘Offline communication strategies’ have overlapping elements, whereby different interpretations and accentuations have taken place within the coding process in the data sets. A detailed overview of the themes, sub-levels, and codes, along with additional descriptions, is presented in the coding guide, which can be found in Appendix C. The sixth phase ‘Writing up’, according to Braun and Clarke (2022), is elaborated in chapters 7 and 8 of my thesis. In the results section (Chapter 7), the six themes were placed in context with the support of the codes taken from each individual interview. In addition, all themes were analysed and interpreted in depth according to connections and patterns. In the discussion (Chapter 8), the outcomes from the results section were assessed from a theoretical perspective and linked to the existing literature to bring meaning to the field of political campaign research and provide a useful foundation for future research.

6.7 Ethical Considerations

As my empirical research relates to a "contemporary phenomenon in its real-world context", the core of the data consist of the explanations and perspectives of human subjects (Yin, 2014, p. 124). For the protection of all participants, the highest ethical standards were upheld in all phases, especially in the data collection and data analysis. The interview participants' data was handled with sensitivity and special consideration (Miles et al., 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Yin, 2014). Based on the Code of Human Research Ethics according to the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2021), four primary principles were applied in my thesis:

- I. Respect for the autonomy, privacy, and dignity of individuals.
- II. Scientific integrity.
- III. Social responsibility.
- IV. Maximising benefit and minimising harm.

In the first step, the interview participants were comprehensively informed about the research topic, the course of the study and the processing of the data. Each interviewee received an exposé in advance, which gave a detailed overview of the research question, research objectives, research relevance of the topic, potential relevance of the topic for the participant and the procedure and framework conditions of the interview. In addition, a written declaration of consent for the digital recording, temporary storage and processing and transcription of interview data as part of my master's thesis was signed by the participants, which also emphasises the integrity and honesty of the researcher (both documents are attached in Appendix D). Furthermore, the researcher has confirmed with this declaration that all sensitive and person-related information and data will be processed in conformity with the European and German data protection regulations. The interviewees were entirely free to participate in the interviews or not. Before the interviews were conducted, the interviewer certified that the interviewees had given their consent and ensured that confidentiality was maintained at all times. In addition, each participant was free to decide whether they wanted to take part in the interview in an anonymised form and whether the further processing of the recorded data should be made accordingly unidentifiable, preventing any conclusions being drawn about gender, exact job position or other factors associated with the participant. Ultimately, each participant was assured that any consent for personal data could be withdrawn at any time. Moreover, the interviewees were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the data collection process in order to further optimise the ethical standards of my master's thesis.

6.8 Quality Criteria

Since my master's thesis is a qualitative single-case study that involves an in-depth examination and analysis of a specific social phenomenon limited by a natural setting in space and time, certain quality characteristics must be met in order to fulfil the strengths of qualitative research (Miles et al., 2014; Yin, 2014). With the aim of my dissertation to analyse qualitative data in its “richness and holism, with strong potential for revealing complexity”, the conduction of semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis has revealed the purposeful character by creating meaning through contextual and interpretative patterns in the data collection and analysis (Miles et al., 2014, p. 30). Four overarching quality criteria are at the centre of my master's thesis:

I. Objectivity/ Confirmability

Although the goal of qualitative research by conducting a single-case study is to generate an emic insider's perspective on a specific research topic, in which the participant's perspective should be dominant, the influence of the researcher can hardly be avoided (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). According to Miles et al. (2014), a researcher's data collection and analysis can never be truly objective, as it is influenced by the interpretation of personal values and biases, starting with the design of the interview guide, the relationship and conversational progression during the interview, and the weighting and prioritisation of meaning derived from the codes and themes of the data analysis. As Brinkmann (2014) emphasises, an active role of the researcher in semi-structured interviews in the context of qualitative research is explicitly encouraged, "knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues" in which the interviewer can control the course of the conversation according to importance have significant relevance for the quality of the data (p. 286). Nevertheless, according to Miles et al. (2014), there are clear guidelines that were applied in this work. These include a detailed and stringent description of the methods and procedures used, including an explicit structure for data collection, analysis, and transmission of results, which should provide the reader with a comprehensive picture of the entire research process. As a researcher, I am well aware of potential personal preferences, values and prejudices that could have impacted on my study.

II. Reliability

To ensure reliability, careful attention was given to maintaining consistent definitions of the codes throughout the analysis. This was achieved by continuously and iteratively aligning the data with the codes and providing precise descriptions in line with the thematic analysis steps of Braun and Clarke (2022). Reliability was further strengthened by an iterative coding process using MAXQDA software, an extensive German and English transcription of the interviews and implementing a coding guide (Yin, 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2013). While the exact execution and description of the methodological procedure would allow the underlying operations to be repeated, the influence of the researcher on the process and the generated knowledge prevents an exact replication of the results. However, this also reflects the advantage of qualitative research to the case study, in which individual opinions, observations and experiences are coloured by a context, whereby the concrete case knowledge is to be regarded as more valuable than the search for predictive universal theories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2013).

III. Validity

Internal validity was achieved through the precise elaboration of thematic and analytical patterns in the data analysis, which logically relate codes and themes to each other and establish a causal relationship to the research topic, the research question and the objectives through a coding guide with descriptions (Yin, 2014). General validity was achieved by carefully ensuring the standards of trustworthiness, authenticity and credibility, which entails a transparent and accurate process of data collection, processing and results (Cresswell & Miller, 2000). Since the data collection of my research centres on the insider perspectives of participants in my interviews, ecological validity was also confirmed. Ecological validity evaluates the significance and quality of the data in a "real world context (and is so meaningful to 'real life') and sometimes as to whether the results can be applied to real world settings" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 280).

IV. Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which qualitative findings can be applied to other groups or contexts. The context, participants and setting of my study were characterised in detail in the methodology; according to the principle of transferability, the

responsibility for assessing this applicability resides with the reader as to whether the results are applicable to other set-ups and conditions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In my master's thesis, which examines the campaign strategies of the FDP in the 2021 federal elections through semi-structured expert interviews, transferability is supported by offering detailed insights that could be relevant for understanding the campaign strategies of other political parties or similar electoral contexts. A verification of generalisation through triangulation is not necessary in the case of a single-case study, as Yin (2014) attests.

7. Results

This chapter presents the key findings of the qualitative data analysis, organised into six core thematic areas using a thematic analysis. It provides insights into the FDP's campaign strategies, including planning processes, communication methods and mobilisation efforts. These findings provide a comprehensive assessment of the planning and implementation phases, which were influenced by internal and external factors that determined the success of the campaign. The results form the basis for discussion and interpretation in the following chapters.

7.1 Contextual and Strategic Positioning of the Interviewpartners

The first theme, with its semantically designed coding, is intended to provide a well-founded overview of the interview participants, their position in the FDP and their role in campaign planning and execution in the 2021 Bundestag election campaign. The homogeneous sample group with six individual interviews embodies the complexity and multi-layered nature of the FDP's Bundestag election campaign organisation, in which different operating profiles are incorporated in the individual phases of the election campaign. In the first step, the participants' profiles are concretised in chronological order and connected to each other. Two codes *Position in the FDP* and *Field of activity in the 2021 federal elections* form and determine the subsequent participant profiles:

The first interview was conducted with **Dominik Konrad**, who acted as the campaign manager with a focus on digital strategies in the campaign team of the frontrunner candidate and party chairman Christian Lindner in the 2021 Bundestag elections. The conversation with Konrad

shows that his political beliefs closely match those of the political party FDP. In addition to his position as campaign manager, he was the district chairman of the FDP in Würzburg in southern Germany and, before that, he increasingly professionalised the party with regard to digitalisation as deputy chairman of the FDP in Bavaria for the youth organisation of the FDP, the Junge Liberale. His primary role in the FDP's 2021 federal election campaign is related to the responsibility of the *“the social media channels and digital campaign organisation in the office of the federal chairman Christian Lindner. Developing new formats, such as the YouTube channel that was launched there at the time, [...] and also accompanying the federal chairman to all kinds of appointments on a daily basis”* (Interview Konrad, box 3, Eng., p. 17, Ger., p. 1). His responsibilities included developing online formats and campaign/content plans for the strategic and digital election campaign based on images, videos, and interviews with Lindner, as well as monitoring all of the party leader's social media accounts. Konrad's significant role in the creation of an Instagram posting by Lindner at an event concerning the COVID-19 measures in front of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin should be emphasised, which expresses the critical stance of the party leader and thus of the entire FDP party towards the corona policy of the formerly ruling parties. As Konrad has highlighted, this black-and-white posting attracted enormous media attention and, in his perception, launched the FDP's election campaign on a digital level. This was commented on in social media with statements such as *“the FDP is now switching to election campaign mode”* or *“the FDP is getting serious now”* (Interview Konrad, box 55, Eng., p. 24, Ger., p. 9). Furthermore, it can be seen from the interview with Konrad that he attaches great importance to the linkage of online and offline strategies, which he repeatedly emphasises in the interview. Both planned physical events and spontaneous and unforeseeable external factors, such as the cooperation with the meme account *“Hedgofonds Henning”* (Example: Interview Konrad, box 83, Eng., pp. 28-29, Ger., p. 15), shape the content of the digital campaign and therefore unfold simultaneously (cf. Interview Konrad, box 23, Eng., p. 20, Ger., pp. 4-5).

The second person I interviewed for my research is **Torsten Grau**, who was head of the department for campaign organisation and election events at the FDP's federal headquarters. His primary responsibility in the FDP's 2021 federal election campaign was to implement the campaign in terms of planning and organising election campaign events, both with the top candidate Lindner and other leading politicians from the FDP party executive board. Grau was in charge of realising the advertising materials, distributing and coordinating all posters, flyers and advertising surfaces to the various regional branches and constituencies. Grau and his team

also supervised and monitored the campaign's budget planning and compliance in the individual election campaign phases (cf. Interview Grau, box 14, Eng., p. 45, Ger., p. 32). As the divisional manager of one of the five departments that, alongside the federal managing director and the party leadership, significantly contributed to the 2021 federal election campaign, the interviewee was able to provide revealing and detailed insights into the structures and key actors regarding the interplay between internal and external stakeholders (cf. Interview Grau, box 20, Eng., p. 46, Ger., p. 33). In addition, Grau provided specific insights into the communication and mobilisation methods activated at different election campaign phases.

Christan Renatus has a unique role to play in the selection of my interview candidates. He has been the election campaign coordinator of the FDP federal party since 1990. In the last 10 years, he has managed 14 FDP election campaigns at federal and state level and provided strategic and organisational advice to the FDP federal party in the 2021 federal elections (cf. Interview Renatus, box 4, Eng., p. 67, Ger., p. 56). The interviewee is a self-employed and freelance external consultant who coordinates and organises election campaigns exclusively for the FDP. In the federal elections, he is firmly integrated into the FDP's campaign staff; from this perspective, Renatus can be regarded as an extended arm of the party rather than an external actor (cf. Interview Renatus, box 8, Eng., p. 68, Ger., p. 57). According to his motto, “*Election campaigns are not rooted in democratic decision-making, but leadership*” (Interview Renatus, box 14, Eng., p. 69, Ger., p. 58), Renatus demonstrated an enormous wealth of experience in the organisation and planning of the strategic core of the 2021 parliamentary election campaign and highlighted personification tendencies tailored to the federal party chairman Christian Lindner as the top priority. During my thematic analysis, the ‘Personification Strategy Christian Lindner’ was introduced as an isolated code under the theme ‘Identification of the Core Strategy and Message of the Campaign’ and is interpreted and analysed in detail in section 7.3.

As my fourth interview candidate wished to be anonymised, the interviewee is listed under the pseudonym **Participant A**. Specific information about his/her position in the FDP has been generalised so that no precise conclusions can be drawn about his/her identity. Participant A worked as the office manager of an FDP member of parliament during the 2021 federal elections, who was also elected to a leading position on the FDP's federal party executive committee. As the office manager of an FDP member of the Bundestag, the main task before

the 2021 elections was to develop a strategy for the successful re-election of the MP in his own constituency/state. Accordingly, Participant A's task profile consisted of analysing the previous legislative period of the MP according to factors and indicators in order to be able to determine key issues for a successful re-election. As part of the Federal Executive Committee of the FDP, the direct superior of the interview candidate was involved in the strategic alignment of the Bundestag election campaign, especially for *“domestic and legal issues in the party and reserves the right to intervene in other issues as well. At the time, we were very, very interested in coronavirus policy and campaigned for it. And that was our main focus. And since the response was correspondingly positive, we continued to do so, [...] from a general perspective, he was the face of the FDP when it came to coronavirus policy”* (Interview Participant A, box 7, Eng., p. 86, Ger., p. 78). The handling of corona policy was repeatedly taken up in the conversation with Participant A and was also examined as a central code of the theme ‘Identification of the Core Strategy and Message of the Campaign’ in the other interviews. In addition, the interviewee was able to provide in-depth explanations of the planning process and the adoption of the election programme through his role as office manager of a member of the executive committee, which was emphasised as a code by the views of the other interviews (cf. Interview Participant A, box 23, Eng., p. 88, Ger., p. 79).

The fifth interview was conducted with **Alexander Von Elmbach**, who has taken on the role of executive director of the FDP in the state of Hamburg since 2018 and was thus responsible for the election campaigns of all FDP Bundestag candidates in 2021 as head of the election campaign commission and campaign coordinator. As state managing director, Von Elmbach acted as a connecting point between the FDP at federal level and the concrete implementation of the parliamentary election campaign at state level (cf. Interview Von Elmbach, box 11, Eng., p. 109, Ger., p. 95). His responsibilities included tailoring the strategic campaign guidelines to the city-state of Hamburg, as he notes: *“you don't just fire any topics into this without coordination and promise the people of Hamburg what is not in the federal election programme. [...], but you try to break down things that are in the federal election programme for Hamburg. [...] And that's why, when you break it down later, i.e. really in flyers and in short election programmes, you have to break it down to the people of Hamburg and say: Hey, pay attention, this and that has a concrete influence on you”* (Interview von Elmbach, box 21, Eng., p. 110, Ger., p. 97). Furthermore, he planned, coordinated and executed the election campaigns for federal parliament of the two Hamburg candidates Michael Kruse and Ria Schröder. Specifically, he was responsible for the financial budgeting of the campaigns in

Hamburg, while he and the candidates developed the planning and execution of online and offline communication and mobilisation efforts for each phase of the election. This included strategic positioning of election posters and information stands, as well as organising election events, both with and without the national frontrunner Christian Lindner (cf. Interview Von Elmbach, box. 39, Eng., p. 113, Ger., pp. 99-100). Von Elmbach has also provided important insights into the planning process and the adoption of the election programme, explaining the influence of the state delegates on its creation.

The last interviewee wished to remain anonymous and is referred to in my research as **Participant B**. Similar to Von Elmbach, this person acted as the managing director of a regional association of the FDP in one of the 16 federal states in the 2021 federal elections. The interviewee's main focus in the federal election campaign was on “*coordinating the campaign strategy at state level and ensuring that it met both local conditions and thus somehow also our requirements here on the ground, as well as being in line with the goals of the federal party*” (Interview Participant B, box 3, Eng., p. 130, Ger., p. 121). Participant B was responsible for ensuring that state-specific issues were appropriately considered and integrated into the campaign messages. This included coordinating with delegates from their association who attended national-level meetings to advocate for relevant demands and topics. Additionally, Participant B managed the allocation of resources, including personnel and budget, to ensure adequate representation across key constituencies. The responsibilities also included coordinating the campaign events of local candidates with the lead candidate, as well as working closely with the federal campaign team. As part of this role, the interviewee acted as the campaign manager and handled the daily operations of the campaign team, including organising campaign elements such as poster advertising, social media and public speaking events, while also implementing instructions from the federal level.

The purpose of the first theme, ‘Contextual and Strategic Positioning of the Interview Partners’, was to explore the strategic planning and execution of the FDP's federal election campaign from as many perspectives as possible within this homogeneous sample group of campaign experts. Concerning the selection of the individual interview participants, the aim was to provide a range of perspectives that reflected my research question and the four associated objectives (see 6.2). From their narratives and observations, specific patterns in the form of further themes emerged. With Christian Renatus and Torsten Grau, two experts were interviewed who held leading positions within the campaign organisation team in the federal

party headquarters of the FDP. In addition, with Dominik Konrad and Participant A, two campaign managers were interviewed who managed politicians at the party leadership level and whose political scope and personalities have shaped the strategic direction of the 2021 election campaign. The opportunity to speak with two FDP executives from different federal states also allowed the study to examine the extent to which strategic guidelines from the federal party headquarters were implemented to a similar extent in two federal states during different campaigning phases. In the following, the strategic process of the campaign, with its design and thematic orientation, the individual phases, including important milestones and involved internal and external actors, will be examined and analysed in greater depth.

7.2 Strategic Process of Campaign Planning

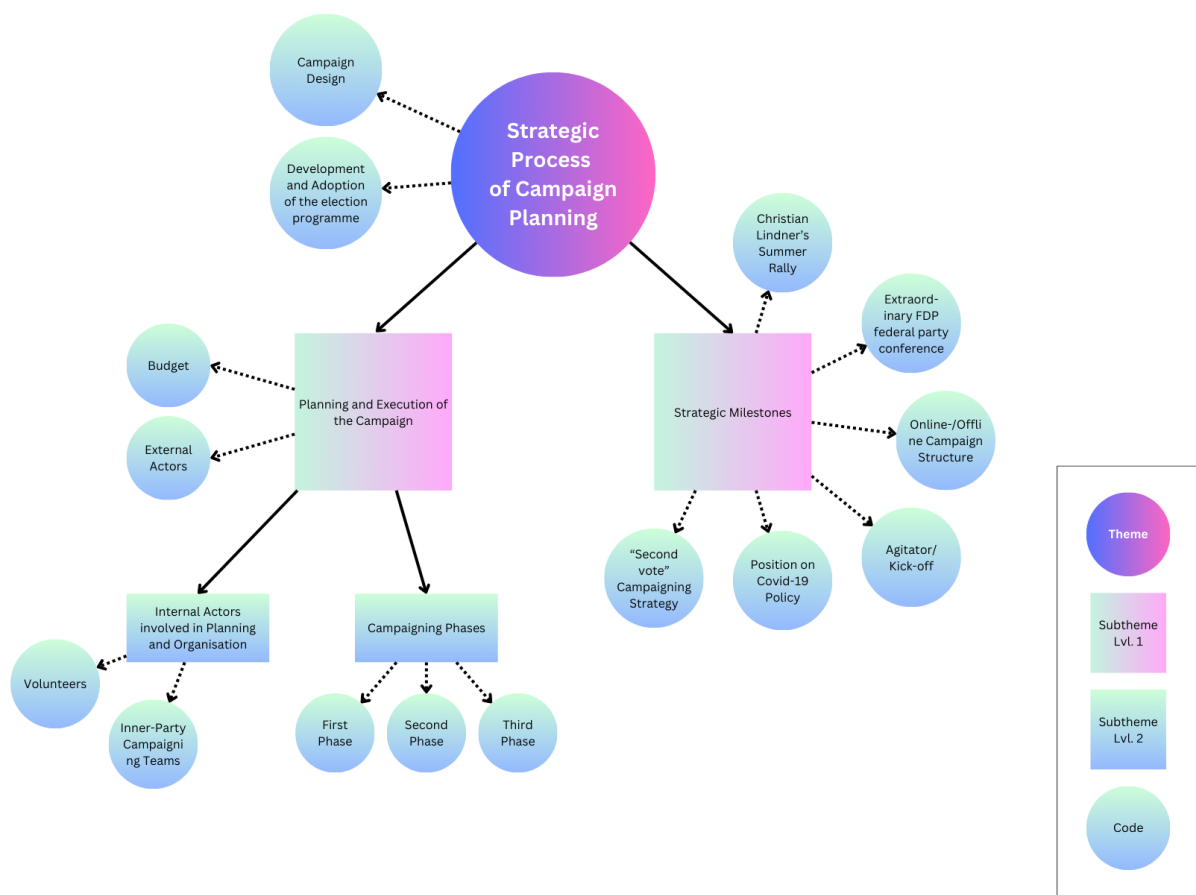


Figure XIII.: Theme ‘Strategic Process of Campaign Planning’. Source: Developed by the author.

The second theme of my thematic analysis aims to examine the strategic decisions in designing the campaign, outlining the procedures for developing the election programme and defining its distinctive phases, along with relevant milestones. Analysing the interview transcripts, the theme ‘Strategic Process of Campaign Planning’ had been developed (see Figure XIII.), divided into two direct codes, *Campaign Design* and *Development and Adoption of the Election*

Programme, and two subthemes at the first level, titled ‘Planning and Execution of the Campaign’ and ‘Strategic Milestones’. The first subtheme, ‘Planning and Execution of the Campaign’, in turn, has two direct codes with *Budget* and *External Actors* and is also interconnected with two subthemes at level 2, which, on the one hand, analyse the internal actors involved in the planning and execution of the federal election campaign and, on the other hand, break down the course of the campaign into three different phases. Exact descriptions of each code can also be found in the Coding Guide in Appendix C.

7.2.1 Development of Campaign Design and Adoption of the Election Programme

All six interviews revealed that the decision to implement the 2021 federal election campaign using a black-and-white design style had been evident from the early stages of campaign planning. Konrad describes the colour scheme as an attempt “*to stand for something modern and competent*”; it was “*very consciously aimed to have a bit more of this Neo Broker design*” (Interview Konrad, box 56, Eng., p 24, Ger., p. 10). Participant A characterises this as a consciously chosen visual language, which “*was black and white, the quick cuts. Always this very rhythmic music, this pounding*”, which was intended to fulfil a modern spirit, to represent progress and competence (Interview Participant A, box 60, Eng., p. 93, Ger., p 84). This feeling was further reinforced by the election slogan “*There’s never been more to do*” (Interview Konrad, box 15, Eng., p. 19, Ger., p. 3), as Renatus notes, “*clear, concise messages (were used), no watering down, no despondency, but rather clearly state what we want*” (Interview Renatus, box 55, Eng., p. 75, Ger., p. 65). As Participant A mentioned, clear language should prevail in every way, in both image and word language, which would give the party a unique and distinctive character that the electorate would associate with the party (cf. Interview Participant A, box 52, Eng., p. 92, Ger., p. 83). Another feature of campaign design that emerged from several points in the interview with Renatus was that stringency has been considered extremely important in the campaign, he noted: “*it’s crucial that there’s a consistency from top to bottom, both in terms of wording and design*” (Interview Renatus, box 18, Eng., p. 69, Ger., p. 59). In its implementation, the federal party of the FDP offers specific online tools with the support of the external service provider Universum AG to ensure standardisation beyond the federal level. Predesigned websites, newsletters and kits with social media tiles are offered for all possible platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Google (cf. Interview Grau, box 40, Eng., p. 48, Ger., p. 36).

In addition to the creation of the campaign design, the planning process in the formulation and adoption of the election programme was discussed in detail by the interviewees. On the one hand, there is the 'Politics and Analysis' department at the FDP's federal party headquarters, which forms a programme commission together with the FDP's federal committees and jointly designs the programme. Within the party headquarters, there are weekly *jour fixe* meetings with the other departments and the executive director in order to supply the federal parliamentary campaign with up-to-date information on the election programme. Grau explains it as follows: *"We have a programme commission in the party that takes care of that. And when we have the first, important things in there, then we also have a participation phase for the subdivision. So everyone can get involved. The whole thing ends with a programme convention, which we hold here once a year. So once in the run-up, usually in November. So almost a year in advance. Before anything is then decided at the federal party conference"* (Interview Grau, box 20., Eng., p. 46, Ger., p. 33). As further pointed out by Von Elmbach, the party programme was ultimately adopted at the federal party conference in May 2021, which involved delegates from all state associations. These delegates were often members of the respective state executive committee ensuring a continuous flow of information. The process was characterised by numerous consultations and the opportunity for every party member to participate, often via the intranet. Each regional association was able to make suggestions for changes, which meant that regional aspects were taken into account. Participant A considers this as *"the point of a democratic party, that you can then participate and say, that would be the symbolic basement for us locally"* (Interview Participant A, box 27, Eng., p. 89, Ger., p. 80). During the election campaign, the programme served as the basis for the party's positions and the candidates' strategic priorities. In the course of concrete implementation, certain topics from the Bundestag election programme are implemented for particular topics at the regional level, as Von Elmbach explains: *"That's what the programme is there for, to draw the topics from it. And then you think about it and then you say to Michael Kruse as the lead candidate, he doesn't have the topic of social issues, but rather the topics of harbour and economy are important to him"* (Interview Von Elmbach, box 31, Eng., p. 112, Ger., p. 98).

7.2.2 Planning and Execution of the Campaign

The interviews resulted in a well-structured set of codes (due to the abundance of applied codes, respectively further divided into Subtheme Lvl. 1 and Subtheme Lvl. 2), which thoroughly delineate the planning process of the federal election campaign with its factors budget, internal

and external actors and furthermore provide a path to structure the election campaign of the FDP into three different campaign phases based on the interviewees' explanations and complementary materials.

The first step entails identifying the internal and external actors involved in campaign planning and implementation. Two levels can be observed here: on the one hand, all representatives involved at the federal level and linked to the creation of the party programme, operating at the top level within a central body, and on the other hand, at the state/regional level, where each state party organisation is responsible for the appointment of its own parliamentary candidates and their election campaigns. At the federal level, as Renatus stated, the planning of the election campaign initiates from the leading candidate and hence the federal chairman of the party, "*who is of course the decisive man or woman. He or she is also the one who has the say when it comes to certain responsibilities in the election campaign*" (Interview Renatus, box 14, Eng., p. 69, Ger., p. 58). Simultaneously, the federal chairman was supported in designing the campaign's strategic direction by the FDP secretary-general and the federal managing director. While the general secretary primarily supervised the contextual development and integration of the party programme into the campaign, the managing director of the FDP coordinated the campaign's organisational implementation (cf. Interview Konrad, box 13, Eng., p. 18, Ger., p. 3). This organisation core was complemented by the campaigning team at the FDP's federal headquarters and the personal campaign managers of the top candidate and the general secretary (cf. Interview Renatus, box 14, Eng., p. 69, Ger., p. 58).

In addition, two external agencies operate at federal level, one of which is the previously mentioned Universum AG. This data analysis company that can be described as a "*digital control room*" (Interview Von Elmbach, box 55, Eng., p. 116, Ger., p. 103) and "*supports the federal FDP party in the digital implementation in the targeting area*" (Interview Participant A, box 44, Eng. p. 90, Ger., p. 82). As Renatus recalled, social media/targeting strategies are in some cases outsourced and created together with Universum in data analysis, website construction and other more specific online tools (cf. Interview Renatus, box 32, Eng., p. 71, Ger., p. 61). The agency Heimat has been involved in the FDP's federal election campaigns since 2014 as a second external service provider. Heimat was recruited by Renatus for the FDP and was also instrumental in the communication strategy and campaign design of the 2021 federal election campaign. The agency delivered an overall package that rolled out the complete corporate identity for the individual federal state associations of the FDP, whether

through design specifications for flyers and posters or for the general visual appearance of the party (cf. Interview Participant B, box 27). As Von Elmbach testified, the state associations had little say in this and did not “*didn't design anything ourselves with Heimat in the federal election campaign*”, but simply tailored the designs to their own candidates and implemented them accordingly (Interview Von Elmbach, box 37, Eng., p. 112, Ger., p. 99).

As the interviews with the two federal state managing directors, Von Elmbach and Participant B in particular, revealed, each federal state managing director takes on a leading role in the implementation of the campaign strategy provided by the federal level and simultaneously adapts it to relevant campaign content in the specific federal state. The regional/federal state director is ultimately the coordinator of the election campaign. For example, in the party organisation for the liberal party in Hamburg, Von Elmbach is supported by “*a team with people who take on operational tasks*”, such as a social media employee, a programme expert and an operational coordinator, who is responsible for the offline campaign implementation (Interview Von Elmbach, box 47, Eng., pp. 114-115, Ger., pp. 101-102). In addition, there is a campaign committee at this level, on which this small campaign team sits, the Bundestag candidates and campaign helpers from the individual constituencies in the federal state. However, this committee is mostly purely informal “*so that you get the information from the federal government to the state association, the districts and the counties*” (Interview Von Elmbach, box 47, Eng., p. 115, Ger., p. 102). The reports from these two interviews revealed that as the level of implementation of the federal election campaign deepens, the support of volunteer staff becomes increasingly essential. Activities such as “*hanging up and putting up posters was very much done by volunteers, in some federal states this is also professionalised, but for us it was mostly the Young Liberals*” as Participant B acknowledged (Interview Participant B, box 15, Eng., p. 133, Ger., p. 124). Renatus considers the voluntary nature of committed helpers and members, especially from the ranks of the youth party, the Young Liberals (JULIS), to be an advantage, as it would build credibility, especially in door-to-door dialogues and information stands. In this way, even the volunteers identify themselves with the party ideology and can use it to mobilise voters. According to Renatus, this would also be the difference to elections in the USA, where even the lower levels of campaign implementation are professionalised (cf. Interview Renatus, box 47, Eng., p. 73, Ger., p. 63). However, von Elmbach also identifies an accompanying challenge, “*with voluntary work, you always have the problem that people, when they realise it's a bit too much work, suddenly say oh no, I can't do it anymore! That's something I often encountered as a regional manager*” (Interview Von

Elmbach, box 47, Eng., p. 115, Ger., p. 102). Nevertheless, this mobilisation of volunteers and members is of eminent importance, as the FDP, as a small party, is dependent on them both quantitatively and due to a significantly smaller budget than other parties at federal level, as Renatus remarked (cf. Interview Renatus, box 18, Eng., p. 69, Ger., p. 59).

The budget specifically allocated for the 2021 federal elections amounted to 6 million euros; in the end, over 9.5 million euros were spent, as Grau was able to precisely determine. He justified the increased campaign budget with “*good income from donations and had done well in the previous years. So we were able to spend it. And the result also justifies the use of funds*” (Interview Grau, box 26, Eng., p. 46, Ger., p. 34). Renatus was able to confirm these figures and further provided the comparison that the larger parties in Germany had around 15 to 20 million euros at their disposal for the election. In this sense, efficient strategic planning with volunteers in the implementation was an important aspect of the 2021 Bundestag election campaign for him.

7.2.3 Campaigning Phases

With the posed question from my interview guide, “Could you please describe the strategic approach (timeline and phases) of how you implemented the campaign?” all respondents were encouraged to divide the FDP's federal parliamentary campaign into different time phases based on their own perception. Forty-six segments were coded relating to this subtheme in the transcripts. A specific pattern emerged, which allowed the federal parliamentary election campaign to be divided into three phases based on the respondents' descriptions. The pattern was supported by two campaign plans, one provided by Grau from the federal headquarters as an overarching master plan and the second by Von Elmbach in relation to the campaign coordination in Hamburg, representing the implementation at the federal/regional state level. Since each of the respondents can be positioned in different fields of activity within the FDP during the planning and execution of the 2021 federal election campaign, the descriptions of the individual phases vary in some cases and are not exactly synchronised, however, each phase has a strategic uniqueness that serves as a clear demarcation and was confirmed in all interviews.

The first phase is called the “*pre-election campaign phase*” (Interview Participant B, box 9, Eng., p. 131, Ger., p. 122) or “*preparation phase*” (Interview Von Elmbach, box 39, Eng. P. 113, Ger., p. 100), in which initial organisational issues were considered. The first phase is the

most dynamic; the exact starting point varies depending on the interviewee, "*you usually do a backward calculation from election day [26th of September 2021] and then you start phase one as early as possible*", as explained by Von Elmbach (Interview Von Elmbach, box 41, p. 113, Ger., p. 100). For the state managing director of the FDP Hamburg, this election campaign began in May 2021 and ended at the beginning of July (see Figure XIV.) and was characterised by organisational aspects such as finding a service provider for printing posters, cooperating with a communications agency for campaign design, and scheduling key events with the party's lead candidate. Similar insights emerged from the conversation with Participant B, who confirmed that the campaign started at a comparable early stage (6-8 months before the election) and also emphasised the exchange with party headquarters regarding monetary resources during this organisational phase, which influenced the allocation of funds during the execution of the campaign (cf. Interview Participant B, box 9, Eng., p. 131, Ger., p. 122). For Konrad, this first phase was initiated at the end of 2020 and officially launched by the FDP's federal party conference on Epiphany in January 2021 (cf. Interview Konrad, box 31, Eng., p. 21, Ger., p. 4). Grau and Renatus regard the launch of the strategic planning for the federal election campaign as taking place a year before the election date, with initial organisational and budgetary issues being discussed. In addition, a programme convention took place in November 2021, at which the programme commission set the preliminary course concerning agenda items. In this context, Grau emphasised the importance of strict strategic planning: "*We have precise ideas about what we have to do and when. When do we have to draw up budgets, when do we have to approve them. When do we have to organise a kick-off with our agency? When do we have to talk to the Executive Board to discuss the direction of the campaign? We discuss all these aspects at an early stage*" (Interview Grau, box 20, Eng., p. 46, Ger., p. 33). Furthermore, Renatus highlighted that with an established mid-term contract in hand with Heimat, preparations with the agency for the election campaign began some ten months before election day, simplifying the process by eliminating the time-consuming task of selecting an agency. The initial cooperation included a detailed written briefing and kick-off meetings focused on strategic concepts and specific campaign measures (cf. Interview Renatus, box 12, Eng., pp. 68-69, Ger., p. 58).

The second phase was described by the respondents as the "*implementation phase*" (Interview Von Elmbach, box 39, Eng. P. 113, Ger., p. 100) or "*activation phase*" (Interview Participant B, box 9, Eng., p. 132, Ger., p. 123). Approximately eight to ten weeks before the election, the second phase of the FDP's federal election campaign intensified at the federal/regional state

level. This phase included launching poster campaigns, increasing social media efforts, and initiating local events in pedestrian zones and public squares, as became clear from the conversation with Participant B. The latter highlighted the significance in this phase of “*a continuous presence in the constituencies. To show people that we are there. We are approachable and want to make a difference with you. So then with the aim of raising public awareness of the election campaign and bringing the issues that were important to us - digitalisation, the economy, education - to the fore*” (Interview Participant B, box 9, Eng., p. 132, Ger., p. 123). From the interviews with the respondents Grau and Von Elmbach, it also emerged that this activation phase depended on legal regulations. These are precise directives in the federal states and municipalities as to when large-scale posters may be set up. This would usually be between 10 and 6 weeks before the election (cf. Interview Grau, box 56, Eng., p. 50, Ger., p. 38). During this period, there would also be an online pre-campaign “*to arouse interest in the party, to get the party and the campaign talked about*” (Interview Renatus, box 24, Eng., p. 70, Ger., p. 60). In this context, Grau mentioned the simultaneous online teasing of the campaign, which took place about 8 to 10 weeks before the election (cf. Interview Grau, box 56, Eng., p. 50, Ger., p. 38).

Phase three was referred to in the interviews as the “*operational campaign phase*” (Interview Von Elmbach, box 39, Eng. P. 113, Ger., p. 100), the “*crunch time*” (see Figure XV.), which began between six and two weeks before the election, depending on the interviewee. In the final phase of the election campaign, the aim was to mobilise supporters, whether through unregulated billposting, television appearances or the final election events with the party's leading candidate, Christian Lindner (cf. Interview Von Elmbach, box 39, Eng. P. 113, Ger., p. 100). For Renatus, the third phase is the decisive phase of the election campaign, especially for the FDP, because “*despite a high proportion of postal voters, it is the case that FDP voters decide very late. As a rule, over 30% of them only make up their minds in the last few days and hours*” (Interview Renatus, box. 36, Eng., p. 72, Ger., p. 61). The respondent further explained that it is, therefore, crucial to implement a mobilisation strategy in the third phase, including online media and social media platforms. This should also be taken into account in the early budgeting and planning of measures. In addition, according to Renatus, the FDP managed to reach as many FDP-affiliated households as possible shortly before the end by means of unaddressed mailings, in which the eye-catching reinforcement at the end was reinforced again with particularly effective advertising media that were likely to generate positive responses (cf. Interview Renatus, box. 36, Eng., p. 72, Ger., p. 61).

first and second waves of the large-scale billposters were carried out. In the “Main Campaign” from the 30th of August to the election day on the 26th of September 2021, mobilisation and communication activities included a special campaign event with running candidate Lindner and Hamburg’s candidate Michael Kruse (cf. Interview Von Elmbach, box 53, Eng., p. 116, Ger., p. 103). A further wave of billposting and the extraordinary federal party conference has been organised, gathering the entire FDP leadership from all federal states to raise media awareness and boost the party's visibility (cf. Interview Grau, box 74, Eng., p. 52, Ger., p. 41).

The “Master-Plan Campaign” provided by Grau and translated into English by the author in Figure XV. displays a significantly elaborated campaign plan structured in a 10-month timeline (horizontal arrow) with eight different factors (vertical axis, left side). The campaign schedule from the FDP's highest executive body also divides the organisation of the campaign into three phases. The first phase can be identified in the months -10 to -6 before election day (the aforementioned backward calculation is indicated by the minus sign). The factors of the vertical axis “Pol. Lead.”, “Strategy”, “PR” and “Online” are primarily served in this period. It can be identified that in this ‘pre-election campaign’ phase, strategic and planning processes were initially realised, specified by the establishment of a “Front Runner Team”, the development of the campaign strategy (workshop, campaign design, rebriefing and presentation), the simultaneous creation of a PR campaign (testimonials, slogans, answer and question sample interviews, front runner speech) and an online content plan. At the “LWV” event (federal election conference of the FDP) in May 2021, the election programme and campaign were confirmed and adopted by all regional party organisations and the party leadership, launching the second phase of implementation. This included the “FG18/1” strategy factor, releasing the large-format billboards, which were distributed in three waves in line with Von Elmbach's Hamburg campaign plan. An important aspect of the second phase of the campaign involved the “Agitator”, a provocative starting idea in terms of content (and visuals) in order to gain media attention. It can also be deduced from the “Master-Plan Campaign” that advertising, PR and online activities were executed in the *“implementation phase”*, such as Lindner's “Front Runner Speech”, the allocation and distribution of advertising posters (“E18/1”) and the creation of a campaign homepage including landing pages. The aim of the PR and online campaign in this phase was to “expand reach, outpace competitors if necessary”, as can be recognised in the plan. Starting in the sixth month prior to the election, various fundraising

activities were also actively launched, such as the “Dinner with Insights” and budget planning at the State Election Conference.

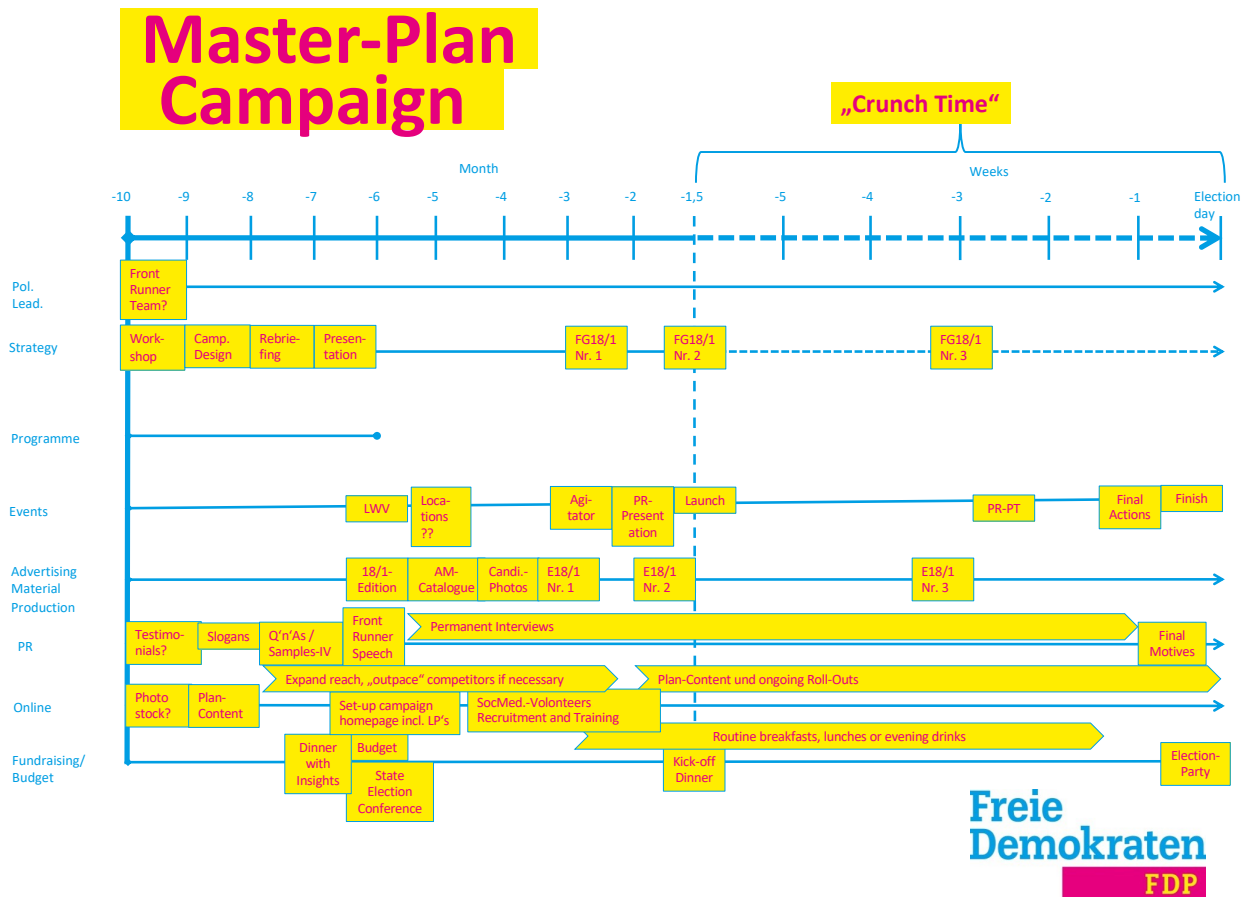


Figure XV.: Master-Plan Campaign Federal Level. Source: Interview Torsten Grau; translated by the Author.

The third and final phase of the campaign plan is referred to in the plan as “Crunch Time” and was embarked upon six weeks before Election Day with a “Launch event”, the second wave of large-format campaign billboards and a “Kick-off Dinner” for the final mobilisation of donations for the campaign. In addition to the “Permanent Interviews” that spanned the second and third phases, about two weeks before the election, the “PR-PT” (extraordinary federal party conference) was held. Furthermore, an intensified online campaign with ongoing roll-outs was realised. Three weeks before the election, the third wave of large-scale posters “FG18/1 No. 3” and the final poster campaign “E18/1 No. 3” were also carried out. The election campaign was finalised with the “Final Actions” event, the “Final Motives” of the PR campaign and an election party on Election Day.

The three phases established from the observations and statements of the six respondents were confirmed and specified by the campaign plans of Grau at federal level and Von Elmbach at regional level. The following section aims to identify key milestones that, according to the interviewees, may have influenced the trajectory of the FDP's federal parliamentary election campaign.

7.2.4 Strategic Milestones

Subtheme Lvl. 1 'Strategic Milestones' emphasises six codes identified in the interviews with the experts questioned. First of all, it should be said that my inquiry from the interview guide, "Could you please describe the strategic approach (timeline and phases) of how you implemented the campaign? Can you identify, for example, a shift to intensified online campaigns as a turning point?" clearly confirmed three different campaign phases, but "a shift to intensified online campaigns as a turning point" cannot be considered a validated milestone in the campaigning process of the federal parliamentary election campaign. Four of the six respondents reported that the planning and execution of online and offline campaigns proceed simultaneously. Grau explained it as follows: "*So our campaign is not just posters on the street, but also the online campaign. It's absolutely synchronised with each other. Motifs that are now being used on the street in the analogue area are also being used online in parallel [...] even if there are now different communication channels online and offline, they are very thematically orientated towards each other*" (Interview Grau, box 58, Eng., p. 51, Ger., pp. 38-39). Similar assumptions can be made from the interview with Renatus, as he reported, that "*everything is running pretty much in parallel. So it's not like, now the event is coming up, then comes the billposting, then the online election campaign, but rather the online election campaign is accompanying the party from the outset*" (Interview Renatus, box 24, Eng., p. 70, Ger., p. 60). Instead, strategic alignment of the real-life events and the affiliated online campaign can be identified as a strategic benchmark, with the content of on-site events being incorporated into the online campaign. The visual language in the campaign design is therefore composed of real images and videos (cf. Interview Participant B, box 9, Eng., pp. 131-132, Ger., pp. 122-123).

As a further strategic benchmark of the FDP campaign, the narratives of the respondents revealed a focus in the election campaign on the second vote (Code "*Second vote*" *Campaigning Strategy*), in which the federal party of the FDP as such is at the forefront of the

election campaign in the constituencies. As explained by the two regional managing directors, Von Elmbach and Participant B, the FDP does not gain seats in the Bundestag through the first vote for local candidates but relies on the second vote, where the party itself is elected. In the 2021 parliamentary elections, the second vote was identified as significantly more important, and the campaign strategy was consequently aligned to emphasise this. According to Participant B, *“there is always the difficulty that the FDP traditionally never enters the Bundestag via direct mandates. Not even our party chairman Christian Lindner has won a direct mandate in his constituency in North Rhine-Westphalia. So the party vote, i.e. the second vote in the elections, is all the more important for us”* (Interview Participant B, box 25, Eng., p. 136, Ger., pp. 127-128). Rénatus recognised its advantage in terms of popularity, which is more likely to be carried by the visibility of the federal party with its strong chairman and lead candidate than by local candidates (cf. Rénatus interview, box 20, Eng., p. 46, Ger., p. 59). Von Elmbach confirmed the focus on the second vote as an important element of the campaign through predetermined billposting in the election campaign, which emphasised the party rather than the candidates (cf. Interview Von Elmbach, box 71, Eng., p. 119, Ger., pp. 106-107).

A fundamental shift in the election campaign emerged as a result of the FDP's political stance on the coronavirus policy of the previous federal government, which also formed part of the core strategy of the FDP's election campaign (see section 7.3.3). According to Konrad, Christian Lindner's speech at a rally in front of the Brandenburg Gate in early 2021 was considered one of the milestones in the 2021 Bundestag election campaign, which was received by voters as the initiator of the election campaign and led to quotes such as *“and people then commented enthusiastically ‘the FDP is now switching to election campaign mode’”* (Interview Konrad, box 55, Eng., p. 24, Ger., p. 10). As highlighted in the interview with Rénatus, the excessive measures of the Corona policy were effectively instrumentalised and aligned with the FDP's core values of individual and personal freedom. This strategic emphasis allowed the party to attract voters by positioning itself for *“critical voices on the GroKo (Abbreviation former governing coalition) regulation”* (Interview Rénatus, box 10, Eng., p. 68, Ger., p. 57).

Another approach that was mentioned by Rénatus and can similarly be found in Grau's “Master-Plan Campaign” is the *Agitator* as a milestone in the FDP's federal election campaign. Grau characterised this campaign tool as a provocative starting signal in terms of content and appearance to raise media publicity. As Rénatus further detailed, this was a PR campaign with *“different possibilities and measures that are simply intended to set a new accent and bring an*

intensification” (Interview Renatus, box 38, Eng., p. 72, Ger., p. 62). Renatus provided two specific examples of how attention was deliberately generated in social and traditional media by an agitator. Firstly, this involved a PR campaign, such as projecting a scoreboard with the real-time national debt onto the chancellor's administration, or *"by placing a large mountain of sand in front of the state parliament and then inviting the press. And the party reduces this mountain of debt"* (Interview Renatus, box 38, Eng., p. 72, Ger., p. 62).

According to the interviewees, there were three major national FDP party conferences in the election year, which were decisive for the course of the campaign. As the first milestone, the ‘Epiphany meeting’ on the 6th of January marked the start of the party's political year with national political significance and also launched the FDP's election campaign medially (cf. Konrad, box 27-31, Eng., pp. 20-21, Ger., p. 5). The second shift was completed by the ‘ordinary federal party conference’ at the beginning of May, at which the campaign plan from the executive level of the party and the national headquarters was agreed and adopted by all of the FDP's federal state associations (cf. Interview Grau, box 20, Eng., p. 46, Ger., p. 33). As Von Elmbach noted, this event marked the start of the proactive phase of the campaign, during which the communication strategy was mapped out: *"You don't actually sit down and look at the programme and then pick it apart. Instead, you think about what you are going to do in the election campaign. So how do I put up posters, what flyers do I make? Which tiles do I try to put online?"* (Interview Von Elmbach, box 31, Eng., pp. 111-112, Ger., p. 98). The ‘extraordinary federal party conference’ two weeks prior to the election in Berlin is considered to be the final milestone in terms of specific events, which, as outlined in detail by Grau, was intended to signal the unity of the party as a final mobilisation and additionally provide a further media boost as a major event closely before election day (cf. Interview Grau, box 72-74, Eng., p. 53, Ger., pp. 41-42).

As a final milestone, the code segments show that the respondents perceived the summer tour of the leading candidate Lindner as an important publicity initiative strategically conducted in locations where large populations spend their summer holidays. This extended from the coast of northern Germany to Lake Tegernsee in Bavaria. As Grau emphasised, these small events aimed to establish direct contact with voters and demonstrate a sense of approachability. Even if the potential voters reached served as multipliers, the *“presence is more important there”* (Interview Grau, box 76, Eng., p. 54, Ger., p. 42). It also became apparent from the interview with Konrad that such publicity measures are ideally suited as online content and, therefore,

underlined the significance of simultaneous online/offline campaign planning. Konrad stressed the casual appearance of Lindner as an incentive for obtaining publicity "by suddenly having Christian Lindner standing on the beach promenade in a chino and polo and you can somehow just shake the guy's hand and listen to a bit of what he has to say" and also pointed out the opportunities to instrumentalise this appearance for the FDP's social media accounts: "But of course, there's no other way around it, this thing also had to be publicised online at the same time to show 'oh, that's cool, what's that guy doing there?'" (Interview Konrad, box 23, Eng., p. 20, Ger., pp. 4-5).

7.3 Identification of the Core Strategy and Message of the Campaign

Through the analysis of the interview transcripts, a third theme was identified from the coded segments, addressing the strategic core of the campaign and the most important statements of the FDP's 2021 federal election campaign. Two questions from the interview guide have significantly shaped the theme: firstly, "Which objectives/mission statement have/has been determined as the heart of the campaign?" and secondly, "In your opinion, what were the main strategies and statements that characterised the FDP's 2021 election campaign?".

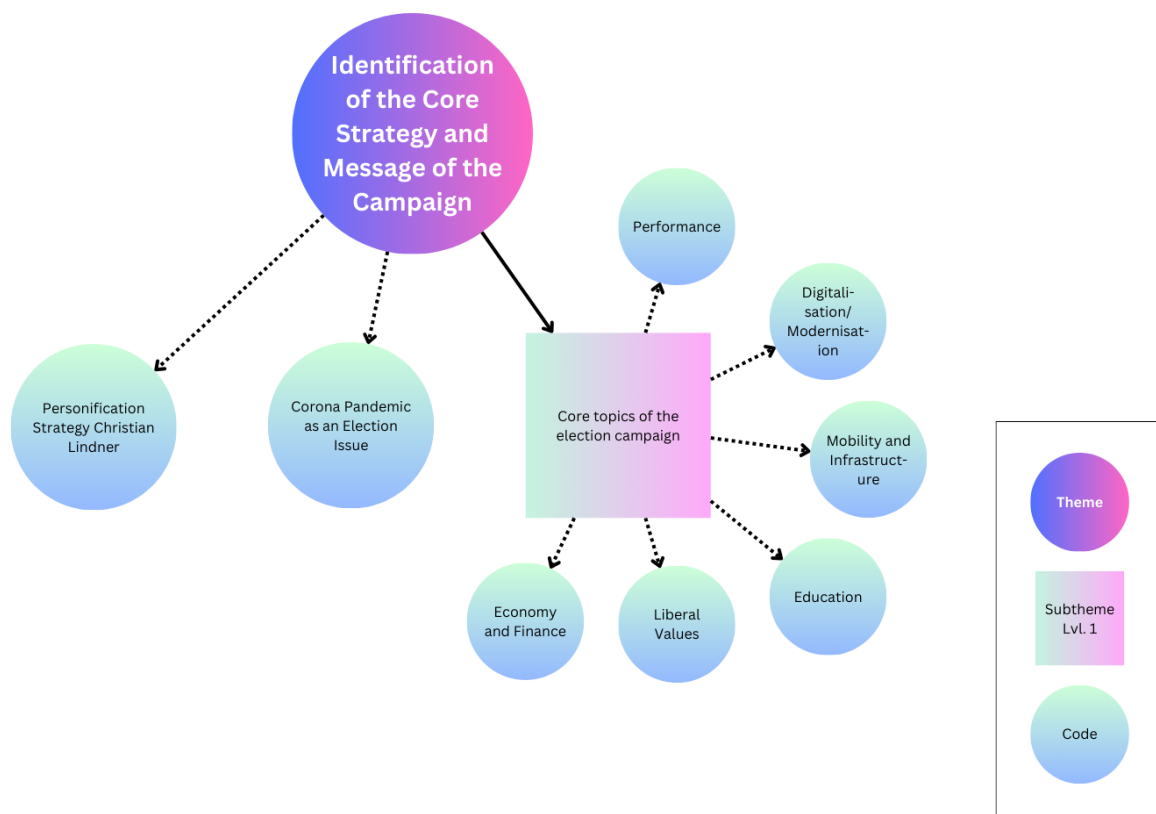


Figure XVI.: Theme 'Identification of the Core Strategy and Message of the Campaign'. Source: Developed by the author.

As depicted in Figure XVI., the theme is further divided into two principal code segments: the *Personification Strategy of Christian Lindner* and the *Corona Pandemic as an Election Issue*, representing the campaign's two main strategic focal points. Additionally, a first-level subtheme, “Core topics of the election campaign”, was identified and organised into distinct codes that encapsulate the core messages of the campaign program.

7.3.1 Core Topics of the Election Campaign

Six central codes can be identified, reflecting the campaign's core topics in relation to the main strategies and messages. Sorted by absolute frequency, a bar chart (Figure XVII.) has been created, depicting the number of occurrences of the codes in the six interviews can be created.

All respondents emphasised the importance of the FDP's *Liberal Values* as a core issue in the election campaign. Renatus described this as the FDP's strategic baseline: “*We are the party of freedom and the party of the individual. That was the basic orientation of the election campaign. And also the accentuation [...]. That was a very important message at the time and it overshadowed everything else*” (Interview Renatus, box 10, Eng., p. 68, Ger., p. 57). As Participant A inferred, the importance of this idea correlated with the pandemic at that time, whereby the FDP was perceived as “*a liberal voice or a voice based on the rule of law [...] to at least review the proportionality*” (Interview Participant A, box 13, Eng., p. 87, Ger., p. 78). This presumption was confirmed during the conversation with Participant B, who attributed this to the uncertainty in the population, which “*may even have played into our hands a little, as we then focused even more strongly on the issues. Especially the liberal core aspect of freedom, I suppose we were able to win many people over*” (Interview Participant B, box 5, Eng., p. 130, Ger., p. 122).

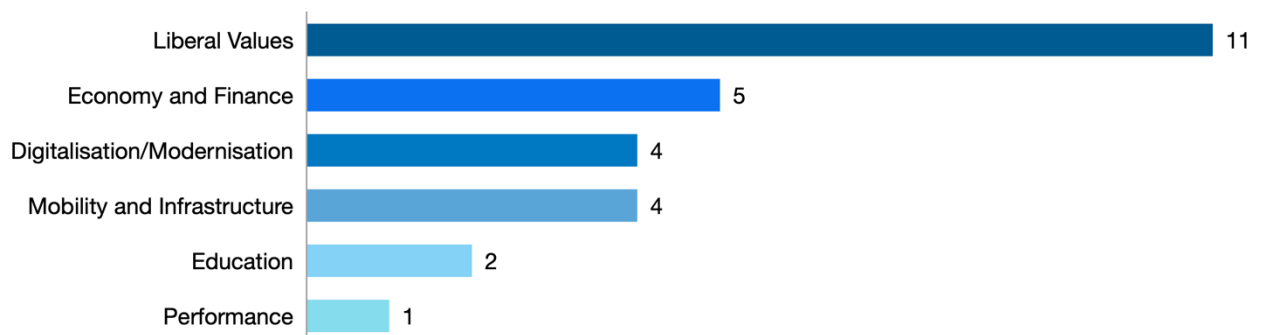


Figure XVII.: Absolute Frequency of the Campaign’s Thematic Core Topics. Source: Developed by the author.

With the frequency of five mentions, a strong focus was also devoted to the topics of the *Economy and Finance*. Participant B gave this issue a central role, since many FDP voters are employed in the economic sectors, particularly in industry and medium-sized companies. Their communication emphasised that the FDP is committed to a market-friendly policy that reduces bureaucracy and creates incentives for companies (cf. Interview Participant B, box 23, Eng., p. 135, Ger., p. 127).

Digitalisation/Modernisation were also considered relevant topics in the FDP's campaign strategy for the 2021 federal elections. In particular, the party's focus on "*nationwide expansion of fibre optics and 5G was particularly clear. In rural constituencies in particular, we have repeatedly emphasised this issue at events and in discussions with citizens*" (Interview Participant B, box 23, Eng., p. 135, Ger., p. 127).

With regard to the *Mobility and Infrastructure* Code, content-related factors such as the shortage of inner-city housing and the modernisation of the road and rail network were highlighted. In addition, as emerged from the dialogue with Renatus, the topic of the car as a good of free movement was also given importance. In his opinion, this was an important campaign issue in rural areas with poor access to public infrastructure (cf. Interview Renatus, box 53, Eng., p. 74, Ger., p. 64).

In addition, *Performance* and *Education* were mentioned in the interviews as election programme topics with strategic relevance for the campaign. For Renatus, the topic of *Performance* received more attention. As the interviewee explained, after the longstanding period of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in government, the neglected idea of performance had to be strengthened again because, as he emphasised, "*without performance, there can be no innovation and no further development of the country*" (Interview Renatus, box 53, Eng., p. 74, Ger., p. 64). In addition to these content-related components, the FDP campaign was dominated by two core strategic decisions outlined in the subsequent sections.

7.3.2 Personification Strategy Christian Lindner

Two central campaign strategies for the 2021 Bundestag election campaign can be discerned from all six interviews with the respondents. The first strategic core of the campaign was revealed to be a distinct personification strategy centred on the party chairman and lead candidate, Christian Lindner; according to Grau, the election campaign in 2021 "*was*

completely and utterly focussed on the lead candidate” (Interview Grau, box 16, Eng., p. 45, Ger., p. 32). For Grau, Christian Lindner as a figure made the difference, as he personified the central campaign topics such as the economy, digitalisation and finance. In addition, he argued that a centralisation of the party on one single candidate resulted in enormous alignment and cohesion, which was demonstrated both internally and externally (cf. Interview Grau, box 70, Eng., p. 52, Ger., p. 41).

Grau further explained that *"the people outside are largely voting for heads. Very few of them know what the parties have in their programmes"* (Interview Grau, box 38, Eng., p. 48, Ger., p. 35). Renatus reaffirmed this theory and justified it with the general trend in politics that *"election campaigns are becoming increasingly personalised. Citizens are deciding more strongly today than they did ten years ago, not only rationally but also emotionally. This means that when a top candidate is judged not only on the basis of his or her professional knowledge and expertise, but also on the basis of very human aspects, this plays an increasingly important role. And it is particularly important for the FDP, which is actually seen as a very stringent, sometimes cold party"* (Interview Renatus, box 20, Eng., p. 70, Ger., p. 59). From this excerpt, the last sentence can also be highlighted: the FDP, as a liberal economic niche party with an even smaller election campaign budget than the major people's parties, needed increased emotionality as a reason to vote for it. As Renatus went on to explain, it would be a mistake not to use this, given the strong party leader with a high level of public awareness (cf. Interview Renatus, box 20, Eng., p. 70, Ger., p. 59).

Konrad and Grau pushed the narrative even further, comparing Lindner's impact on the party's voters to that of a celebrity from the entertainment industry. As Grau reported, *"Christian Lindner was received everywhere as if he were the local rock star. The masses surrounded him, all wanting selfies with him, and it was really blatant, you could tell. So the person [Lindner] worked very well"* (Interview Grau, box 80, Eng., p. 54, Ger., p. 43). Konrad also noticed this when he accompanied the party chairman to numerous events; as he explained, Lindner was welcomed frenetically and *"had to sign autographs and people took off their shoes, said, here's a sharpie, then sign an autograph for me and so on, that was kind of cool"* (Interview Konrad, box 55, Eng., p. 24, Ger., p. 9). As Renatus elaborated, this emotional personification was multiplied by an election campaign fuelled by online media. For the strategist, the consequences of constant sensory overload and information saturation lead to citizens or voters

being more easily convinced by symbolism in images and headlines than by strict programmes (cf. Interview Rénatus, box 22, Eng., p. 70, Ger., p. 59).

The two managing directors at the federal state level also identified the strong personification of Lindner as the core strategy. As the driving force and public face of the party, Lindner played a crucial role in enhancing the visibility of regional top candidates by appearing alongside them at public events. This approach underscored the message that a vote for the FDP was not just a vote for the local candidate but for the entire party, with Lindner prominently leading the way. For Von Elmbach, this was also noticeable in the majority of posters in the federal state of Hamburg, where there was a surplus of designs featuring Lindner (cf. Interview Von Elmbach, box 33-35, Eng., p. 112, Ger., p. 99). According to Participant B, this strong personification strategy in the 2021 election campaign was reflected "*both in the campaign materials, i.e. the posters, and in the campaign appearances. For us at state level, this means that we naturally try to get the lead candidate to visit us as often as possible. When Christian Lindner was physically on-site, we tried to advertise the event in particular and of course had our lead candidate make an appearance. That's how you generate the media presence and somehow also the necessary mobilisation of our supporters*" (Interview Participant B, box 5, Eng., p. 131, Ger., p. 122).

7.3.3 Corona Pandemic as an Election Issue

As can be deduced from the interview scripts, the issue of the prevailing coronavirus pandemic in 2021 was instrumentalised for the campaign topic of *Liberal Values* described in section 7.3.1. As Konrad pointed out, the issue of individual and personal freedom, which is embedded at the party's core, became hugely relevant among the electorate due to the government's strict regulations during the coronavirus pandemic. Interferences in the citizens' rights and everyday life led to widespread criticism, prompting the FDP to be one of the few critical voices of the political approach at the time. The campaign manager explained: "*You could really see from these events that we had there that we already knew what kind of visual language we wanted to use, what kind of feeling we needed*" (Interview Konrad, box 19, Eng., p. 19, Ger., 4). This specific focus on upholding civil rights received high approval ratings and "*in purely social terms, it played perfectly into our hands. And it was also very clear in which direction this campaign had to go*" (Interview Konrad, box 29, Eng., p. 20, Ger., p. 5).

Interviewee Participant A confirmed the importance of the coronavirus pandemic as an election campaign issue, with the FDP assuming the role of a constitutional voice that scrutinised or questioned the proportionality of specific regulations in the interests of the population. The clear positioning of the FDP on coronavirus policy would have been one of the decisive election arguments, as the interviewee stated, “79% of FDP voters voted for the party because of its stance to the coronavirus policy” (Interview Participant A, box 9, Eng., p. 87, Ger., p. 78).

Von Elmbach, on the other hand, saw the issue of the coronavirus policy primarily as momentum, which was used by the party leadership at the federal level and probably contributed to the good election results but was not prioritised in the FDP's election campaign in Hamburg. Instead, he saw the theme of the coronavirus pandemic as correlating with the theme of liberal values, without this being accentuated in the election programme. In his opinion, the coronavirus pandemic primarily influenced the election campaign regarding planning and execution, meaning numerous events had to be held online (cf. Interview Von Elmbach, box 29, Eng. pp. 111-112, Ger., p. 98).

7.4 Political Communication: Channels and Methods

After analysing the synchronised implementation of online and offline campaign structures in section 7.2.4, whereby linguistic patterns, images and video material for the social media content were obtained from offline events, the following section outlines and interprets the communication channels and methods that emerged as important campaign components identified in the interviews with the respondents. Divided into ‘Online’ and ‘Offline Communication Strategies’ as the two subthemes at the first level (Figure XVIII.), the communication channels and measures applied will be outlined to clarify how political candidates, core issues and election programme content were articulated from the political sphere with the media and public sphere.

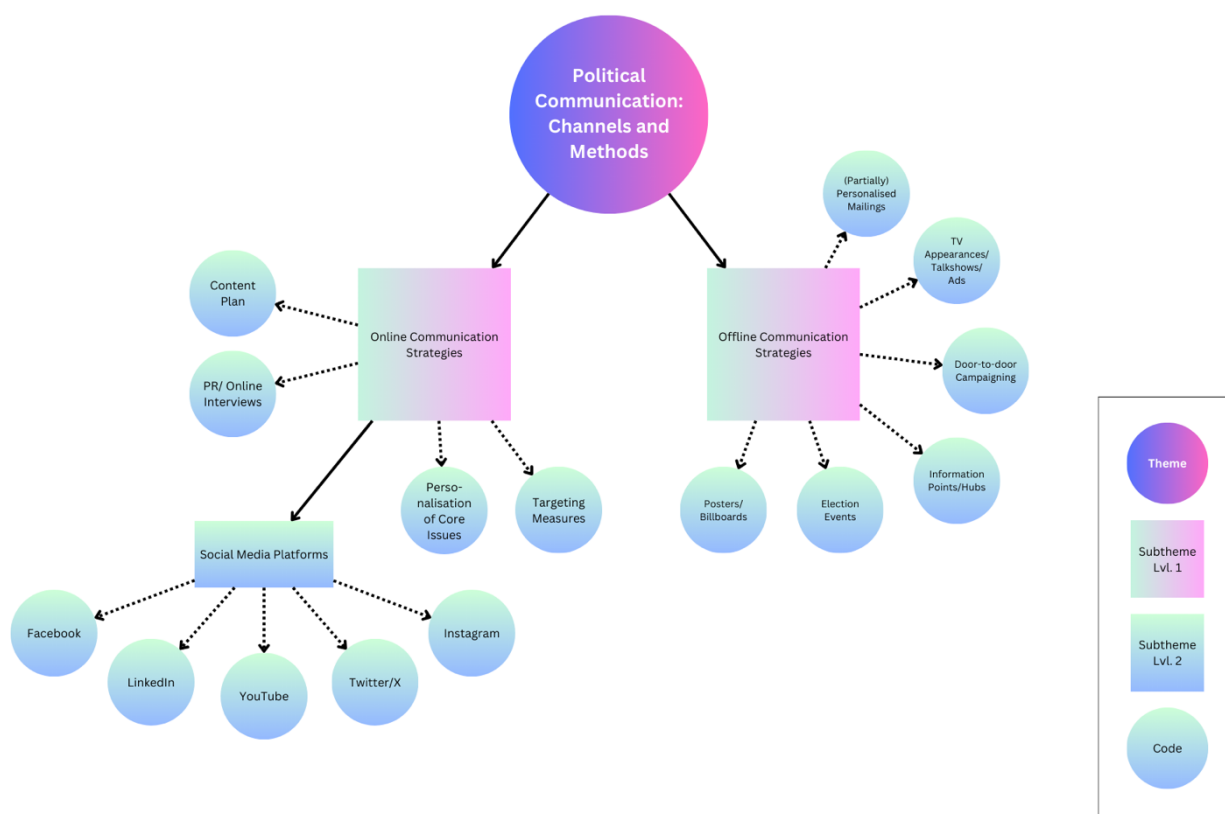


Figure XVIII.: Theme ‘Political Communication: Channels and Methods’. Source: Developed by the author.

7.4.1 Online Communication Strategies

The first subtheme has four direct code segmentations. The codes *Personalisation of Core Issues*, *Content Plan* and *Targeting Measures* represent three distinct communication strategies for the planning and implementation of the online communication campaign on social media platforms (subtheme level 2.) *Press Relations/Online Interviews* is an isolated code that defines the interactions with the online press and the conduct of interviews over online platforms.

As the campaign manager of party chairman Lindner, who was primarily responsible for the digital communication strategies, Konrad particularly contributed detailed descriptions of the exact approaches in the online section of the FDP's 2021 Bundestag election campaign. He reported from his area of responsibility that there was a precise *Content Plan* for the different social media platforms of the party chairman in his role as the FDP's most important political figure with the widest reach. The individual accounts were analysed in detail and monitored on a weekly basis, including a weekly meeting with Lindner every Monday during the election campaign to re-evaluate the posted social media content (cf. Interview Konrad, box 33-37, Eng., p. 21, Ger., p. 6). As he mentioned about the planning, Lindner's team had "*timetables*

for when we wanted to have something ready or when the campaign motifs would go out successively after the campaign presentation. So the campaign presentation as such was a fixed date. Even something like the summer tour, it all followed a timeline. That definitely” (Interview Konrad, box. 21, Eng., p. 20, Ger., p. 4). Up to four postings a day were made for Linder as a top candidate, which were adapted to events and talk shows and posted directly afterwards via online platforms to increase awareness. According to Konrad, the personification in social media was quite professionalised, with three employees permanently taking care of the playout of content (cf. Interview Konrad, box 47-49, Eng., p. 23, Ger., p. 8). Furthermore, Participant A mentioned in this context that the most significant aspect of content planning is *"simply that you have a message that people can grasp. Yes, it has to be funny somehow. It has to be provocative. It can also be offensive to some extent. So it has to be something where people say: Oh, that sticks in my mind. If you hand out some kind of consensus sauce, then nobody will be interested, it won't stick“* (Interview Participant A, box 38, Eng., p. 90, Ger., p. 82). The fact that precise content planning for the online area has been conducted at the federal level can be confirmed by the ‘Master Plan Campaign’ provided by Grau, in which this is noted under the factor Online on the vertical axis as ‘Plan Content’ between the ninth and eighth month before election day.

Concerning the coded segment *Press Relations and Online Interviews*, an additional objective of the content plan was to encourage online press outlets to pick up and amplify content posted by the FDP and Lindner on social media platforms. Participant A concretised this based on the relevance of Twitter posts by fuelling this platform with relevant messages, which would then be further disseminated by German press agencies such as Dpa or Afp (cf. Interview Konrad, box 38, Eng., p. 90, Ger., p. 82). This view was confirmed in the interview with Von Elmbach, who specified: *"It's about ramping up online work. Of course, the aim is to get the press to write as much as possible about the election of the lead candidate. Ideally, as soon as the lead candidate has been chosen, they should do a big interview with him afterwards. So these are the kinds of things you try to do to generate attention with the resources you have at the time”* (Interview Von Elmbach, box 43, Eng., p. 114, Ger., 101).

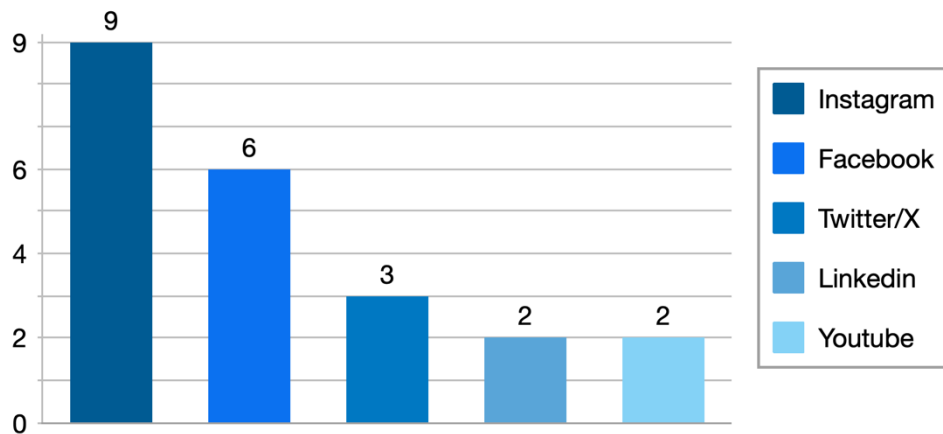


Figure XIX.: Frequency of mentioned Social Media Platforms deployed in the Online Campaign. Source: Developed by the author.

The respondents indicated that five ‘Social Media Platforms’ (Subtheme Level 2) were utilised as communication channels for the FDP's online campaign in the 2021 federal elections, which can be found in a total of 22 coded positions in the transcripts. While all interview participants were able to confirm the use of the different social media platforms for campaign communication and emphasised the five providers shown in Figure XIX. to a similar extent, detailed observations on the different degrees of importance of each individual social media platform resulted from the interview with Konrad. In this regard, the campaign manager generally recognised Lindner's social media accounts as the FDP's most important media representation, whereby each platform pursued a different strategy and additionally addressed different target groups (cf. Interview Konrad, box 33-37, Eng., p. 21, Ger., p. 6). Von Elmbach reported that an independent strategy had to be considered for each platform; as he explained, the social media team “*have already thought about what to run on Instagram, what on Facebook, what on Twitter and have adapted their strategy accordingly and, of course, both thematically and how the content is generated. Are there more video formats, are there more tiles as a social media strategy tool? So that is already taken into account. Sure, you have different strategies, definitely. And yes, it definitely depends on age. And also age-dependent on the individual platforms. So not just offline vs. online, but also in terms of the platform. Because you have a completely different average age on Facebook than on Instagram*” (Interview Von Elmbach, box 57, Eng., p. 117, Ger., p. 104). Konrad revealed that Instagram and Twitter were the most important social media platforms in the election campaign, with Instagram being highly frequented due to its pictorial language and Twitter “*was by far the most important channel for sending short, precise messages, which were then at best sent via the German press agency throughout Germany. That had to be right and no mistakes were*

allowed. But in order to be represented in all media again very quickly, simply through a quote, which then runs on the TV stations or in the newspaper, without having to somehow stand in front of a camera again, the focus was of course also on having a very good presence on Twitter” (Interview Konrad, box 33, Eng., p. 21, Ger., p. 6). For Participant B, the primary aim of online communication was to reach younger voters who were very active on social media. In addition to Instagram and Facebook, YouTube was also employed to distribute the election campaign advert. However, YouTube would not be as relevant as Instagram and Facebook due to the smaller number of followers. As the federal state director differentiated, Instagram focused more on visual content and short videos, while Facebook offered more space for more extended and in-depth content, which could also be aimed at older voter target groups (cf. Interview Participant B, box 11, Eng., pp. 132-133, Ger., p. 124). As Konrad added, LinkedIn seemed more relevant for distributing guest articles or subject-specific content for the tech sector. However, for him the focus was primarily on Twitter and Instagram (cf. Interview Konrad, box 37, Eng., p. 21, Ger., p. 6). In overall terms, it can be concluded from the six interviews that each of the interviewees’ attached similar importance to Instagram, while the importance of Twitter or Facebook varied depending on the interviewee; for Participant A, for example, Facebook was more relevant and Twitter was hardly used, while for Konrad Facebook was not as important in the election campaign. On the other hand, Grau, Von Elmbach and Participant B saw advantages and disadvantages in all platforms and favoured them more strongly depending on the required online communication strategy.

7.4.2 Online Communication Strategies: Personalisation of Core Issues and Targeting Measures

Following the identification and assessment of the individual social media platforms used by the FDP in the election campaign, a more detailed analysis based on the two codes of *Personalisation of Core Issues* and *Targeting Measures* reveals the extent to which online communication has been professionalised, enabling targeted content to be tailored specifically to different voter groups. Konrad acknowledged a personalisation of the content plan adapted to different target groups without sacrificing the authenticity of the party chairman in his style of expression. At the same time, it was analysed which statements and photo material were most suitable to which platform (cf. Interview Konrad, box 49-53, Eng., p. 23, Ger., pp. 8-9). The interview with Rénatus confirmed that the electorate has been categorised into specific target groups to which all online communication measures are tailored. As he explained,

"Campaigning on social networks has grown enormously in importance [...] And we can now analyse exactly who our voters are and where our voters are located, which means that we can use direct mail to address them in a very targeted way. But not only that, we can also regionalise and focus on specific topics online. And that is an important aspect that has gained enormously in importance in recent years and decades" (Interview Renatus, box 26, Eng., p. 71, Ger., p. 60). Grau explicitly referred to the concept of geo-targeting in this context, for which a unique FDP Maps tool was developed by the data analysis company Universum AG. This approach allows specific voter groups to be segmented into precise electoral districts based on postal codes, enabling a street-level view of where FDP-affiliated voters are located. As he further elaborated, 80% of the area in Germany has been covered with such systems (cf. Interview Grau, box 46-48, Eng., pp. 49-50, Ger., p. 37).

As Renatus emphasised, the importance of *Targeting Measures* in election campaigns has significantly increased and was used extensively by the FDP. The entire range of targeting and analysis would be extremely important as a link between online and offline, as analysed by the example of geo-targeting. This would also help determine the areas where the offline campaign would need to be strengthened through billposting and other measures. In relation to targeting, there were permanent feedback loops, where, according to Renatus, an ongoing analysis was carried out to identify which specific topics needed to be played out more firmly within the respective voter groups (cf. Interview Renatus, box 28-34, Eng., p. 71, Ger., pp. 60-61). On the subject of targeting, Von Elmbach confirmed the cooperation with the external company Universum AG, which was responsible for placing labelled advertising together with the online team. The regional manager of the FDP Hamburg also pointed out that there was a special budget for the online campaign, adding that one challenge was to avoid overspending on paid advertising (cf. Interview Von Elmbach, box. 55, Eng., p. 117, Ger., p. 104). Participant B considered online communication channels an effective way of engaging with voters, particularly in light of the coronavirus pandemic and the restrictions for on-site events. Precise targeting was carried out to reach the desired voter groups. As he explained, different personalised issues were addressed; for example "*in urban regions we then emphasised more business-friendly policies or topics such as housing and so on. In more rural areas, completely different things are important, such as the issue of cars or, in times of the coronavirus pandemic, the issue of individual freedom*" (Interview Participant B, box 11, Eng., pp. 132-133, Ger., p. 124). In addition, Participant B stated it is even more important for the FDP, as a smaller party, to have a strong digital presence. Performance marketing and targeting are so

important because many voters would vote from home using postal voting, so "*we have to be present in their living rooms when they make their decision*", he stated (Interview Participant B, box 19, Eng., p. 134, Ger., p. 126).

7.4.3 Offline Communication Strategies

The second subtheme on the first level covers the offline methods and strategies of political communication in the FDP's 2021 federal election campaign, applied or observed by the respondents to engage with potential voters. As can be recognised in Figure XVIII., six code segments could be grouped into the theme of offline communication strategies. Despite the intensive communication in the online area via social platforms, Renatus considered that "*direct contact is crucial because it emotionalises [...], (and) because the personal contact of the candidate in the constituency, the top candidate at state level or the top candidate at federal level is crucial for the voter's impression of the party*" (Interview Renatus, box 42, Eng., p. 73, Ger., p. 62). With regard to the FDP's offline communication, six strategies have been derived from the interviewees' responses, which are analysed in coded units below.

The first code to be highlighted is the FDP's (*Partially*) *Personalised Mailings*, which are only partially personalised due to complex data protection regulations, making it challenging to address potential voters directly by name. As Grau explained, addresses are acquired via certified letter shops, which then receive postal election advertising, for example, addressed to all of „*the residents of Rheinhardtstraße 16*” (Interview Grau, box 30, Eng., p. 47, Ger., p. 34). Nevertheless, Renatus justified the importance of addressing voters directly through direct mailings and target group letters with the fact that this would enable the FDP to reach as many households with an affinity for the FDP as possible, especially shortly before the election, which had been identified quite precisely through the online analyses despite the regulations (cf. Interview Renatus, box. 26, Eng., p. 71, Ger., p. 60).

Konrad continued to assign an enormous role to communication via the traditional media, public television with the ‘Summer Interviews’, political talk shows with candidate rounds or the TV format ‘Report from Berlin’ before the 20:00 evening news would reach an audience of millions and triggered a multiplier effect via the reactions and resharing on online platforms subsequent to the broadcast of those programmes (cf. Interview Konrad, box 63-71, Eng., pp. 26-27, Ger., pp. 12-13). The leading candidate's digital campaign manager also took the view that there would be no saturation point for publicity „*the more, the better*" (Interview Konrad,

box 67, Eng., p. 26, Ger., p. 12). For this reason, the candidates were also interviewed by other niche channels such as ‘BildTV’ and ‘NTV’, which, as part of the Springer publishing house with its major daily newspapers, would have included certain quotes from the interviews in their print articles, thus generating further synergy effects (cf. Interview Konrad, box 69, Eng., p. 26, Ger., p. 12). Grau expressed his criticism of communication via the traditional public media, stating that the allocation of broadcasting time was linked to the size of the party, as he specified: “*We as the FDP basically get a maximum of four slots, and they are all outside of prime time too. So it is an unfair distribution for smaller parties*” (Interview Grau, box 62, Eng., p. 51, Ger., p. 39).

The analysis of the interviews revealed that despite all the digital resources available, *Door-to-door Campaigning* is still considered relevant to the success of the campaign. Participant B explained that the personal approach was particularly crucial in undecided constituencies, because door-to-door campaigning allowed them to reach voters who were still unsure whether they should go to the ballots or for which party they should vote. Direct convincing was said to greatly influence such voters (cf. Interview Participant B, box 21, Eng., p. 135, Ger., pp. 126-127). Rénatus believed that the employment of FDP members as volunteers in door-to-door campaigning and at information stands provided credibility due to their liberal beliefs, which is different from the US, where external agencies are increasingly being used for such mobilisation work (cf. Interview Rénatus, box 47, Eng., p. 73, Ger., p. 63).

In addition, Rénatus shared important insights regarding the status of public *Information Points/Hubs*: “*Ten years ago, we considered whether we still needed an information stand at all. Is it still necessary? When social networks emerged and played a greater role in the election campaign, today we know that this is enormously important. Personal contact with voters, i.e. information stands, are hugely important*” (Interview Rénatus, box 42, Eng., p. 73, Ger., p. 62). Participant B added that with this communication strategy, always-visible locations had to be chosen, such as areas near shopping centres or, with permission, market squares, in order to be present in places where many people are on the move, as the federal state director pointed out, were these information points a great opportunity “*not only to distribute information material, but also to talk directly to citizens and answer their questions. These personal encounters were invaluable, especially in the hot phase of the election campaign*” (Interview Participant B, box 21, Eng., p. 135, Ger., p. 127).

However, according to the interviews with the six experts of the liberal party, the two primary strategies of offline communication consisted of *Election Events* and advertising with *Posters and Billboards*. As emerged particularly from the interview and the attached “Master-Plan Campaign” by Grau as head of campaign organisation and election events at the federal headquarters, three different types of campaign events were scheduled and executed in the 2021 FDP federal elections. Firstly, the planned election events of the party leadership and the top candidate Lindner, such as the ‘Epiphany Conference’ on the 6th of January, the ordinary federal party conference in May and the extraordinary federal party conference shortly before the elections in Berlin in September, followed the methodology of generating the greatest possible public attention among a wide range of people by demonstrating cohesion, unity and strength within the party (cf. Interview Grau, box 72-74, Eng., p. 53, Ger., pp. 41-42). Secondly, Lindner's summer tour must be emphasised as one of the core strategies of offline communication, in which a degree of accessibility between the population and the lead candidate was created, based on the choice of location for the events “*we're picking up people offline who are now somehow on their beach holiday, up at the Baltic Sea for example*”, or on the deliberate choice of appearance by Lindner “*having Christian Lindner standing on the beach promenade in a chino and polo and you can somehow just shake the guy's hand and listen to a bit of what he has to say*” (Interview Konrad, box 23, Eng., p. 20, Ger., pp. 4-5). For Grau, the focus of the summer tour consisted of presence, showing up where people were on holiday and speaking in front of a maximum of 500 people. The aim of the tour was not to attract media attention, but to reach potential voters directly and thereby generate multipliers in the dissemination of the election campaign (cf. Interview Grau, box 76, Eng., p. 54, Ger., p. 42). Thirdly, the respondents highlighted the campaign events in the federal states with the federal candidate and Lindner as an influential element of offline communication in the federal election campaign. Particularly from the perspective of the two federal state managing directors Von Elmbach and Participant B, it was of utmost importance for the strategic positioning of the local candidate “*to get the lead candidate to visit us as often as possible. When Christian Lindner was physically on-site, we tried to advertise the event in particular and of course had our lead candidate make an appearance. That's how you generate the media presence and somehow also the necessary mobilisation of our supporters. So the attention was brutal when Lindner was with us*” (Interview Participant B, box 5, Eng., p. 131, Ger., p. 122). Von Elmbach reaffirmed this spolitical communication strategy for the election campaign in Hamburg. A joint campaign appearance by Michael Kruse (top candidate for Hamburg) and Lindner demonstrated the unity between the federal and state levels. As the managing director reported,

it was also crucial for Kruse to speak prior to Lindner as a way of raising the visibility of the local candidate and, to a certain extent, giving the FDP Hamburg a distinctive face (cf. Interview Von Elmbach, box 53, Eng., p. 116, Ger., p. 103).

It arose from the conversation with Grau that, despite assumptions about the dwindling relevance of posters in times of social media and internet advertising, billboards are still perceived as one of the main advertising instruments employed in political campaigns and therefore the number of posters has been even increased for the election, the Wesselmann company produced over 100,000 advertising posters for the FDP in the 2021 federal election (cf. Interview Grau, box 36, Eng., pp. 47-48, Ger., p. 35). According to Grau, it would be rather a question of budget and depending on legal requirements in the municipalities of how many large billboards and posters were put up (cf. Interview Grau, box 58-60, Eng., p. 51, Ger., pp. 38-39). As Renatus noted, is poster presence enormously important for the FDP. One reason may be the direct "*perception of the FDP, also because we don't have this strong response in the media. The posters are important, also for the press. They also perceive us very strongly through the poster media. Posters have the most direct effect. That's why posters have not lost any of their importance. Despite new media, despite the online election campaign*" (Interview Renatus, box 26, Eng., p. 70, Ger., p. 60). Participant A highlighted raising public awareness as the main advantage of posters and billboards. As a result, the electorate would be introduced to the topic of elections through visual language (cf. Interview Participant A, box 38, Eng., p. 90, Ger., p. 82). With regard to planning and organisation, the interviews with respondents Grau and Von Elmbach revealed that legal regulations also constrained the billposting. Specifically, federal states and municipalities have strict guidelines on when large-scale posters can set up, typically allowing them only within 10 to 6 weeks prior to the election (cf. Interview Grau, box 56-60, Eng., pp. 50-51, Ger., pp. 38-39). However, there would be certain possibilities for generating attention at an earlier stage via the offline communication channel of billposting. Von Elmbach revealed that these would be event posters, which would have to follow certain rules: "*So it has to advertise an event and then there are rules, the title of the event has to be on it etc. and you need a permit for every poster you put up. And the idea is that you start putting up these posters in phase two because they are of course also placeholders for the posters that come later*" (Interview Von Elmbach, box 43, Eng., p. 114, Ger., pp. 100-101). As Grau and Renatus explained, the campaign design and the campaign strategies (e.g., focus on second vote/party/Christian Lindner) were incorporated into the motifs of the posters and billboards and, depending on the positioning (urban space vs. rural areas), different

thematic accentuations would also take place (cf. Renatus, box 34, Eng., pp. 71-72, Ger., p. 61). Based on the phases and milestones in the federal election campaign in Hamburg shown in Figure XIV., a timetable for poster communication dictated by regulatory constraints can be determined:

- **16th August:** 1st Wave large-scale billboards
- **27th August:** Start of unrestricted postering
- **30th August:** 2nd Wave large-scale billboards
- **13th September:** 3rd Wave large-scale billboards
- **26th September:** Election Day

7.5 Mobilisation Strategies of the FDP in the Federal Elections

The participants' comments and explanations regarding the FDP's mobilisation strategies in the 2021 federal election campaign were preceded by the questions “Which methods were used to motivate and mobilise the party's voter base and supporters to get involved themselves?”, “Were there different mobilisation strategies for online and offline communication?” and also “What impact did direct voter contact (constituency appearances, door-to-door campaigning, information points in the constituency) have on your campaign?”. These specifically tailored set of questions from the interview guide were designed to encourage the respondents to reveal the specific mobilisation strategies used for the offline and online communication campaign with the aim of creating and maintaining excitement around the election race, keeping the volunteers and supporters motivated throughout their campaign efforts, and engaging potential voters in disseminating campaign content.

Theme 7.5 (Figure XX.) is divided into the direct code segments *General Mobilisation Strategies* and *Online Mobilisation Strategies* and the subtheme of ‘Offline Mobilisation Strategies’ with five associated codes. The *Online Mobilisation Strategies*, in this case, do not require a subtheme of their own since no platform-specific characteristics emerged from the interviews that would have been sufficient for specially created codes.

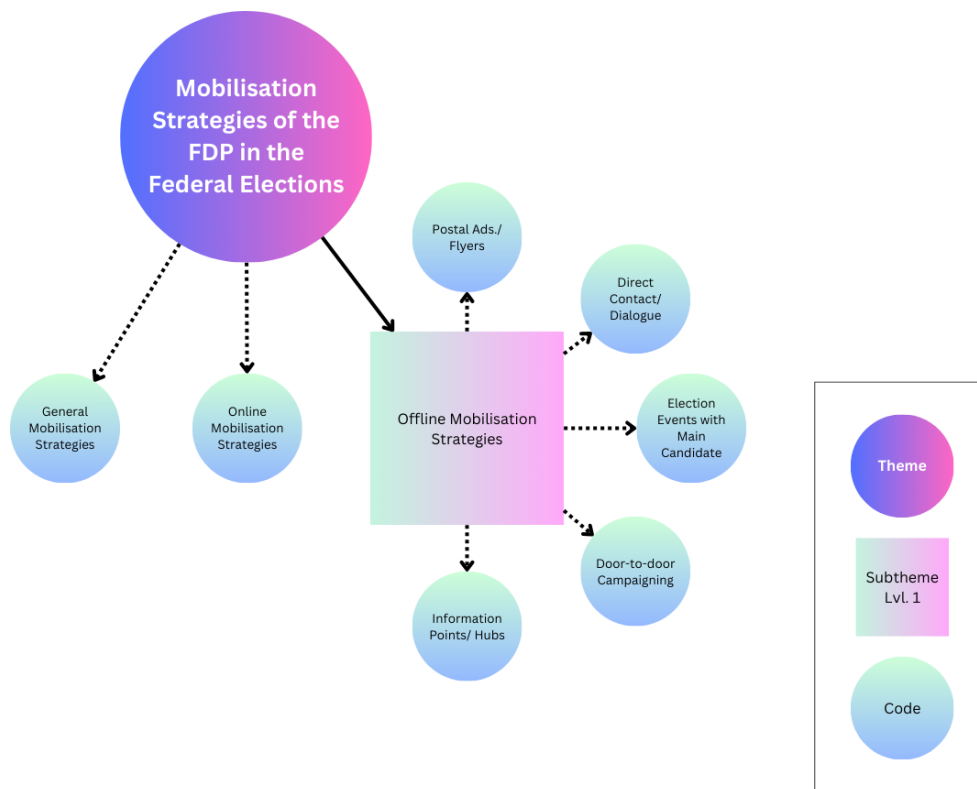


Figure XX.: Theme 'Mobilisation Strategies of the FDP in the Federal Elections'. Source: Developed by the author.

7.5.1 General Mobilisation Strategies

The first code *General Mobilisation Strategies* is composed of segments from the transcripts in which the respondents shared their views on strategic details and aspects of mobilisation within the 2021 federal election campaign, addressing online and offline communication strategies. Firstly, a mobilisation through stylistic elements of the campaign can be highlighted. As Participant A observed, the first mobilisation factor was a clear, well-defined message that could be understood by the public and addressed issues of social relevance (cf. Interview Participant A, box 44-50, Eng., pp. 91-92, Ger., pp. 82-83). In essence, the federal office manager proclaimed that this incisive and substantive narrative was communicated through emotionalisation to evoke a reaction that transcended short-term visual stimulation and ultimately resulted in ideologising the potential voter (cf. Interview Participant A, box 62, Eng. p. 93, Ger., p. 85). The conversation with Renatus confirmed the mobilising effect of an emotional election campaign, meaning that "*a top candidate is judged not only on the basis of his or her professional knowledge and expertise, but also on the basis of very human aspects*" (Interview Renatus, box 20, Eng., 70, Ger., p. 59). In this context, the element of personification can be effectively combined with emotionalisation, which, according to Renatus, is best conveyed through direct contact despite the numerous communication opportunities available

online. As Renatus emphasised, "*direct contact is crucial because it emotionalises*" (Interview Renatus, box 42, Eng., p. 72, Ger., p. 62). The second general mobilisation strategy, which cannot be specifically assigned to the areas of online or offline communication, refers to the internal mobilisation of party members, supporters and volunteers. Von Elmbach regarded the factor of (self-)motivation as crucial, which even varied at the level of the candidates standing for election. The fact that the FDP won no direct mandates and, in most cases, only the top candidate in the federal state and occasionally the second candidate on the list would enter the Bundestag based on the second vote meant that "*even the person in third place [on the second vote party list] no longer has the motivation to run a huge campaign to get in, because that is simply unlikely*" (Interview Von Elmbach, box 49, Eng., p. 115, Ger., p. 102). Mobilisation strategies played a decisive role in motivating the party members and volunteers involved in implementing the campaign, ensuring that the campaign was implemented with consistent determination. As Renatus explained, there were several support services and resources available to party branches to provide assistance to campaign volunteers, such as the provision of posters, postcards and flyers and access to the FDP Maps, which made it easier for members to conduct street and doorstep campaigning through the use of digital tools (cf. Interview Renatus, box 36, Eng., p. 72, Ger., p. 61). However, according to Konrad, the most important aspect in mobilising campaign volunteers was to foster intrinsic motivation by awakening "*the commitment for the liberal cause*" through a particular ideological spirit, ensuring that identification with the party and its liberal values would be the source of each volunteer's motivation (Interview Konrad, box 55, Eng., p. 24, Ger., p. 9). The inner conviction of the volunteers to represent liberal values and everything the FDP stands for was also perceived by Participant B as the decisive motivation in the mobilisation of party members (cf. Participant B, box 19, Eng., p. 134, Ger., p. 126).

7.5.2 Online Mobilisation Strategies

In addition to the provision of digital tools to party members, which had a mobilising effect on campaign volunteers through continuous support, further *Online Mobilisation Strategies* were highlighted by the respondents. Konrad considered digital mobilisation to have the advantage of reaching significantly more members, voters, and undecided voters in a fraction of the time. For example, party members received all core messages for mobilisation in the FDP app and via newsletters (cf. Interview Konrad, box 57-59, Eng., p. 25, Ger., pp. 10-11). Simultaneously with the ongoing optimisation of online communication strategies via online platforms, two

online mobilisation measures have also been intensified by personalising and targeting more specific target groups with tailored content for the FDP. As Participant B stated, their emphasis was on being “*present in their living rooms when they make their decision. And that can be done either via traditional media or, even easier for us as a small party, via social media. We have also increasingly focussed on performance marketing to ensure that our messages reach the right target groups. And in this respect, you can already personalise, i.e. target certain groups of voters and then mobilise them to a certain extent*” (Interview Participant B, box 19, Eng., p. 134, Ger., p. 126). The second online mobilisation strategy identified by Renatus was the possibility of additionally multiplying emotionalisation and personalisation through online channels (online platforms and online media), as he affirmed: “*Campaigning on social networks has grown enormously in importance, even if it does not decide an election on its own, but must always be seen in the context of other measures*” (Interview Renatus, box 26, Eng., p. 71, Ger., p. 60).

7.5.3 Offline Mobilisation Strategies

The interviews consistently highlighted that ‘Offline Mobilisation Strategies’ primarily centred on direct engagement with the electorate. The code *Direct Contact to the Electorate/ Dialogue* was applied to analyse code segments that describe instances of direct interaction between the campaign and voters, highlighting dialogue and engagement tactics. For Participant B, “*physical presence*” as a mobilisation tactic proved relevant in order to bring the regional party's top and direct candidates together with the electorate in the constituencies despite the second-vote campaign of the FDP headquarters (Interview Participant B, box 9, Eng., p. 132, Ger., p. 123). As the federal state director outlined, it was “*not about big, media-effective appearances [...] but about a continuous presence in the constituencies. To show people that we are there. We are approachable and want to make a difference with you. So then with the aim of raising public awareness of the election campaign*” (Interview Participant B, box 9, Eng., p. 132, Ger., p. 123). As Participant B went on to explain, nothing could replace direct contact because, particularly “*in smaller constituencies or rural areas, people attach great importance to getting to know the candidates personally. Many voters want to feel that their concerns are being heard, and the best way to convey this is through direct dialogue*” (Interview Participant B, box 21, Eng., p. 135, Ger., p. 126). This thesis could also be derived from Konrad's observations that the FDP could not afford to be absent in the pedestrian zone or on the voters' doorsteps despite all the online mobilisation measures. For him, there were two reasons for this: Firstly, it is about filling spaces with presence in relation to the other

parties standing up for election, which are simultaneously represented and competing for attention at public places with campaign staff and information points. The FDP “*can't afford not to have a local presence in the pedestrian zone. And especially as a party, not as such, so it's noticeable when suddenly the yellow tent is somehow missing and so on, so the FDP is obviously no longer interested in the normal citizen*” (Interview Konrad, box 59, Eng., p. 25, Ger., p. 11). Secondly, according to Konrad, personal contact is so important in order to re-establish proximity to the voter. As he explained, the assumption must be counteracted in the election campaign that contact with the campaign office, for example via email, would only be with the staff and that specific concerns would not reach the candidate at all. For this reason, the direct candidates had to make a visible appearance in the constituencies through offline communication strategies to create mobilization ultimately. This opinion was also held by Renatus, who believed that “*the personal contact of the candidate in the constituency, the top candidate at state level or the top candidate at federal level is crucial for the voter's impression of the party*” (Interview Renatus, box 42, Eng., p. 73, Ger., p. 62).

As the interviews with respondents revealed, this direct contact with the potential electorate was established through three mobilisation initiatives. As a first measure, *Information Points/Hubs* were accentuated, which were primarily intended to mobilise older voter groups from a demographic perspective, who had a lower online affinity and were to be convinced through personal contact (cf. Interview Grau, box 44, Eng., p. 49, Ger., p. 37). Choosing convenient locations, such as market squares and shopping areas, provided an opportunity to engage directly with citizens and respond to specific issues. As Participant B also added, information material about the candidates and the most important programme topics of the election campaign was also distributed during these conversations, with the intention of increasing the mobilisation effect (cf. Interview Participant B, box 21, Eng., p. 135, Ger., p. 127). Grau also noted that efforts were made to engage younger generations at the campaign stands by digitising them with scannable codes, enabling the FDP to conduct mobile phone surveys and interactive games (cf. Interview Grau, box 44, Eng., p. 49, Ger., pp. 36-37).

Secondly, the *Door-to-door Campaigning* can be pointed out as a mobilising measure in the execution phase of the FDP's 2021 federal election campaign. As Participant B remarked, the personal dialogue had a particularly mobilising effect in undecided constituencies “*to reach voters who were still unsure whether they should go to the polls or which party they should vote for, including the classic door-to-door campaign. It's amazing how much influence a*

personal conversation can have when it comes to convincing voters” (Interview Participant B, box 21, Eng., p. 135, Ger., pp. 126-127). According to Rénatus, the credibility of the door-to-door campaign was enhanced by the fact that the direct candidates, accompanied by volunteer supporters, actively engaged in discussions with voters in their constituencies (cf. Rénatus, box 47, Eng., p. 73, Ger., p. 63).

As a third offline mobilisation strategy, segments from the interviews were analysed to indicate a mobilising effect achieved by *Election Events with the main candidate* in each federal state. In order to achieve the greatest possible mobilisation of voters at campaign rallies, the events had to be planned in such a way that extensive media attention would be given to them beforehand. Grau derived this from three conditions that an election campaign event had to fulfil. Firstly, the federal states that were considered structurally important regions, such as North Rhine-Westphalia, Baden Württemberg and Bavaria, were taken into account in the planning. Election events with Lindner were prioritised there. As a second indicator for determining the location of election events, the geographical location of the media presence was evaluated. As Grau explained: *“Then we look at where our media are actually based. Because they should also report and if I organise an event in Rostock and the NDR is up there somewhere in Hamburg or something, it hardly ever comes there. And neither does the regional studio. So I'm definitely going to Hamburg. I definitely go to Düsseldorf and I definitely go to Berlin”* (Interview Grau, box 72, Eng., p. 53, Ger., p. 41). The third factor was defined by the location of the target voter groups. Election events are held in regions where, according to surveys and previous election results, many electoral groups have voted for the FDP in order to create a positive mobilising momentum (cf. Interview Grau, box 72-72, Eng., p. 53, Ger., pp. 41-42). As the interview with Participant B revealed, a lot of energy was spent on promoting election events in the federal state with the top candidate Lindner, *“as it would ultimately appeal to all voters, especially undecided voters or those who are interested in the FDP but still need a final kick. We really pushed the event both offline by putting up posters and distributing flyers and online through social media and targeted advertising. Lindner's appearance helped us enormously, I would say. Achieving greater media attention, it was clearly noticeable that his presence was mobilising and also somehow motivating for our local candidates and election workers”* (Interview Participant B, box 7, Eng., p. 131, Ger., p. 122). For Participant B, the election event was also intended to create a mobilising momentum in which a willingness for change is triggered among the electorate in order to ultimately amplify the engagement level (cf. Interview Participant B, box 5-7, Eng., p. 131, Ger., pp. 122-123). A

fundamentally important mobilising effect emanated from the reports by Grau and Konrad, who both rated the accessibility of the candidates at the election events as essential. Lindner and the local top candidates made time to take selfies with the event participants and hand out autographs. Personal contact before and after the events was seen as crucial in influencing voter preferences (cf. Interview Konrad, box 61, Eng., pp. 25-26, Ger., p. 11; cf. Interview Grau, box 74, Eng., p. 53, Ger., pp. 41-42). For Participant A, another mobilising factor resulted from the general political climate at the time of the 2021 federal election campaign. The FDP's stance on the coronavirus measures implemented by the former government sparked a major thematic mobilisation of voters, which led to extremely well-visited election events organised by the FDP (cf. Interview Participant A, box 38, Eng., p. 90., Ger., pp. 81-82).

Another offline mobilisation strategy highlighted by interviewees was the effective use of *Postal Advertisement and Flyers*. These were intended to complement other offline communication measures, such as direct engagement at events, door-to-door campaigns, and information points, and served as an additional driver for voter mobilisation. For Von Elmbach, the direct personal approach was supported by the distribution of flyers, as he explained, "*People will vote for you if they're thinking about what to vote for anyway and there's a flyer of yours lying around and they find you reasonably likeable, then you still have the best chance of getting personal votes by addressing them directly*" (Interview Von Elmbach, box 51, Eng., p. 115, Ger., p. 103). For Rénatus, using advertising material at information stands was vital to maintaining the potential voter's identification with the party beyond the conversations with the voters. As the campaign strategist further explained, another mobilisation strategy would be to send unaddressed mail to FDP-affiliated households shortly before the elections (cf. Interview Rénatus, box 36, Eng., p. 72, Ger., p. 61). However, as Rénatus also aptly put it, summarising the situation about all mobilisation strategies, none of the individual measures were decisive separately. According to him, it was instead the combination of online and offline communication strategies and the mobilisation of potential voter groups that would ultimately make the difference (cf. Interview Rénatus, box 36, Eng., p. 72, Ger., pp. 61-62).

7.6 Campaign Review: Reflections and Insights

The last topic, 'Campaign Review: Reflections and Insights' of my thematic analysis, was coded with text passages that encapsulate key learnings from the campaign, including the participants' perceptions and evaluations of the campaign's successes and shortcomings.

Initiated by the interview guide's question, "Reflecting on the 2021 election campaign, are there any aspects that you feel could have been improved in terms of internal communication or campaign planning and execution?", each respondent was encouraged to analyse and evaluate the political campaign planning and implementation in all its facets from their role and perspective. In addition, the discussion was intended to provide valuable insights into combining future trends and strategies with the outcomes derived from the campaign.

In the following, the perceptions and thoughts on the challenges and possible future improvements of the campaign for each participant are displayed and brought together:

- **Dominik Konrad:**

Konrad attested himself and the party a highly successful election campaign, which resulted in an excellent outcome of 11.5%. As the campaign manager of party leader Linder with a focus on digital campaigning, Konrad remarked on three aspects that could be optimised in the planning and execution of the campaign in future federal elections. From a political and thematic point of view, a different narrative has to be chosen since the FDP would no longer be able to run an election campaign as an oppositional challenger after taking on government responsibility in 2021. Reflecting on the 2021 campaign, he expressed a desire for a broader and more efficient use of online platforms and formats. In his view, YouTube could have been leveraged with more specific, longer-form content. However, he noted that the party leadership at times lacked an understanding that this would have required greater time investment and financial resources (cf. Interview Konrad, box 73, Eng., p. 27, Ger., p. 13). He further mentioned that, in 2021, it was a reasonable decision not to utilise the TikTok platform. However, for the upcoming campaign, he acknowledged that "*TikTok is too big to actually refuse*" (Interview Konrad, box 78, Eng., p. 28, Ger., p. 14). Thirdly, from a personal point of view, Konrad would have liked the decision-making process in the campaign implementation to have been less bureaucratised; organisational efficiency was sometimes lacking; for example, there were too many lengthy approval loops for posting online content on the platforms (cf. Interview Konrad, box 74, Eng., p. 27, Ger., pp. 13-14).

- **Torsten Grau:**

From his expertise in organising the election campaign for offline communication and mobilisation, Grau saw potential for improvement in billposting. For him, in the upcoming federal election, outdoor advertising should also be carried out using digital screen surfaces, which "*opens up new opportunities, such as targeted advertising, also thematically [...] I could*

well imagine that here in Berlin, on a busy street, the motif would be: 'Infrastructure, cars, combustion engines must stay!' On the other hand, in Pankow or whatever, I might prefer a topic on education or something" (Interview Grau, box 68, Eng., p. 52, Ger., p. 40). In addition, Grau acknowledged the importance of TikTok for reaching younger voters. As a valuable lesson from the European elections, FDP candidates were able to achieve a high reach and good click rates on the platform. As he concluded: *"And since we will be running the next parliamentary election campaign in a very personalised way again, I don't think we can avoid incorporating channels like this"* (Interview Grau, box 68, Eng., p. 52, Ger., p. 40).

- Christian Renatus:

As an experienced campaign manager for the FDP, Renatus explained that he typically compiles a to-do list of key learnings after each campaign, from which actionable conclusions can be drawn. Reflecting on the 2021 federal election, he identified three main insights. First, he emphasised that the complexity of targeting needs greater attention across all party levels. While substantial progress had been made, he stressed that effective targeting should be implemented in every constituency and for each candidate (cf. Interview Renatus, box 51, Eng., p. 74, Ger., pp. 63-64). He linked this increased focus on targeting with his second insight: the need for the FDP to *"link online measures and online election campaigns even more closely with offline election campaigns, and vice versa"* (Interview Renatus, box 51, Eng., p. 74, Ger., p. 64). As his third key takeaway, Renatus highlighted a mobilisation challenge, emphasising the need to better motivate and activate all party levels during election campaigns. He suggested that this process requires further development. On a more general level, Renatus also pointed out that the strong personification strategy on Lindner would not only bring advantages. One current problem for the FDP in government is that few other leading FDP politicians are well-known to the public, which in turn weakens the attachment to the party as a whole. Fundamentally, he sees a problem in the FDP's long-term personnel strategy, as there is currently no suitable successor to lead the party should Lindner ever resign (cf. Interview Renatus, box 61, Eng., p. 76, Ger., p. 66).

- Participant A:

According to Participant A, the lessons learned from the 2021 federal election campaign were somewhat limited, as the FDP will need to adopt a different narrative in the next elections, shifting from an opposition stance to one reflecting its position in government. Additionally, since the FDP was able to slightly increase its share of the vote compared to the 2017 federal

elections, many aspects of the campaign were considered successful by Participant A (cf. Interview Participant A, box 58, Eng., p. 92, Ger., p. 84). However, the office manager believes in a new campaign design in the 2025 federal elections, shifting away from the black-and-white imagery and the fast, very technical video editing towards a more emotional portrayal of the core topic of liberal freedom (cf. Interview Participant A, box 60, Eng., pp. 92-93, Ger., p. 85). Participant A summarised that emotionalisation in times of constant stimulation from different online platforms and digital media has to be achieved differently than through the previous very technical campaign design. In consideration of the next election campaign, it seems crucial to *“analyse the extent to which you manage to win voters emotionally, to win them ideologically, to reach points that are really important and move away from a visual language created from a chic advertising agency style”* (Interview Participant A, box, 62, Eng., p. 93, Ger., p. 85).

- **Alexander Von Elmbach:**

As the state managing director and campaign coordinator of the FDP Hamburg, Von Elmbach described the planning and execution of the 2021 federal election campaign as a smooth process despite last-minute personnel changes within the Hamburg FDP leadership. In hindsight, he reflected that he would have preferred to appoint both the lead candidate and the new party leadership in Hamburg earlier to allow more time for joint campaign planning. Once Michael Kruse was elected as federal state chairman and lead candidate for Hamburg, the team promptly addressed all outstanding tasks, working cohesively and professionally from that point onward (cf. Interview Von Elmbach, box 71, Eng., p. 119, Ger., p. 106). A particular challenge occurred with the poster campaign: the team had decided to print large posters with a second portrait of Michael Kruse and a message to secure the second vote for the FDP. Shortly afterwards, the national party changed its strategy and started advertising ‘all votes for the FDP’. Since the posters had already been printed, the team decided to stick to its initial focus, targeting the second vote. Such unexpected tactical changes by the federal party made executing the established regional strategies difficult. Nevertheless, Von Elmbach noted that unexpected challenges are inevitable in every election campaign and were successfully overcome in the 2021 federal election campaign (cf. Interview Von Elmbach, box 71, Eng., p. 119, Ger., p. 107). Von Elmbach further elaborated on the future consideration of employing TikTok as a platform for mobilisation and communication strategies in election campaigns. However, he assumed that the use of TikTok would come from individual politicians/federal

election candidates and would not be introduced as a party-wide campaign strategy (cf. Interview Von Elmbach, box 59, Eng., p. 117, Ger., p. 104).

- **Participant B:**

Participant B, a state managing director of the FDP, reflected on the planning and execution of the 2021 federal election campaign. Overall, he considered the campaign successful, as evidenced by the election result of 11.5%, indicating that many strategies had been effectively implemented. However, he acknowledged that there were areas for improvement, particularly in terms of internal coordination. He noted communication gaps between the campaign team, the party leadership, the state-level leadership, and between the state association and the local constituencies with their respective candidates. For instance, content posted by the state association on social media was not always consistently shared by the candidates, which could have strengthened a unified message. Additionally, he pointed out the challenge of maintaining alignment across various campaign activities, ranging from poster campaigns to online efforts and in-person events, within a highly dynamic environment. Despite these challenges, Participant B maintained that the campaign was largely successful. He recognised that some issues are likely to persist in future campaigns but viewed this dynamic nature as an exciting aspect that requires continuous adaptability and flexibility (cf. Interview Participant B, box 31, Eng., p. 136, Ger., pp. 128-129).

The key challenges for the FDP in the 2021 federal election campaign were internal coordination, adapting narratives and optimising digital strategies. Konrad emphasised the need for broader use of platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, which requires more time and resources. Grau and Rénatus highlighted the importance of targeting and integrating online and offline efforts but pointed out gaps in public awareness of FDP personalities beyond Lindner. Participant A suggested moving towards more emotional messages as the FDP transitions from opposition to the governing party. Von Elmbach and Participant B emphasised the need for better communication at all party levels, especially when adapting to short-term strategic changes by the national leadership. As for the future, the focus will be on improving digital reach, emotional engagement, and internal cohesion.

8. Discussion

As the six themes are made up of code segments that were derived not only from inductive patterns but also from partially deductive codes through the predefined theme groups of the semi-structured interview guide, a strong correlation with the research question and the four research objectives can already be detected in the structure of the themes. In the following, the substantiated patterns and findings from the results section are contextualised with the existing literature for each theme from a theoretical perspective – with the intention of adding value to the field of political campaign research and providing a valuable foundation for prospective research. Before discussing and interpreting the key aspects of the data analysis, it is noteworthy to highlight the precision of the German language concerning political campaign terms. The interviewees spoke of personalisation in terms of communication and mobilisation methods tailored to the voter, while the personification strategy referred to the focus on the lead candidate, Christian Lindner. International campaign research shows no division in the concept of personalisation, as can be deduced from the research by Rahat & Kenig (2018) and Pedersen & Rahat (2019)

The employment profiles and responsibilities of the six interviewees already uncover in the first theme a high degree of professionalisation in the planning and implementation of a political campaign at the federal level in Germany and reveal the involvement of several different stakeholders from both the federal and the state level in the conceptualisation. This corresponds with the concept of professionalisation in political campaigning, as defined by Maisel et al. (2007), Tenscher et al. (2012), and Schlipphak (2018), in which campaign experts with specialised skillsets are engaged in specific phases and tasks of the campaign, including internal and external communication, the coordination of offline and online strategies, and the targeting and mobilisation of electoral groups. Konrad's role as a campaign manager for digital campaign strategies, primarily responsible for developing online formats and content plans for social media platforms, serves as an initial indicator that political communication processes within the German political ecosystem have transitioned into the fourth phase of communication (Blumler, 2016; Esser & Pfetsch, 2020; Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2020) or the fourth era of campaigning (Ward et al., 2018), driven by dynamics of professionalisation, hypermediatisation, and digitalisation.

The second theme, 'Strategic Process of Campaign Planning', is closely related to the **first research objective** in outlining and analysing the strategic milestones and decisions within the

planning and implementation phase of the FDP's campaign strategy. Here, the aim was to evaluate and understand the strategic decisions taken for the various milestones, such as the campaign design, thematic priorities, and budgeting, by structuring the chronological framework of strategic planning and implementation into distinct phases of the campaign. Furthermore, the second theme examined the internal and external actors involved in the campaigning process. As the political campaign in connection with technological advances in the media landscape has become increasingly professionalised, different internal and external actors are required for strategic planning and implementation to effectively engage with the growing number of stakeholders from politics, business, society and the media. What can be deduced from the results is that the FDP's campaign organisation for the 2021 federal election was structured at two levels: at the national federal and regional state level. At the federal level, the campaign was led by the party leader and top candidate, supported by the general secretary, who was responsible for integrating the party programme into the campaign, and the federal managing director, who oversaw the organisational implementation. A federal campaign team and external agencies, Universum AG (data analysis and digital targeting) and Heimat Agency (communication strategy and campaign design) complemented this structure. At the state level, regional managing directors coordinated the implementation of federal strategies and adapted them to local needs. Small campaign teams and informal committees facilitated communication between the federal, state, and district levels, with heavily relying on volunteers, particularly for activities such as putting up posters and directly addressing voters. If the structure of the FDP's campaign organisation is compared with the model of the 'Notional Campaign Organisation' by Burton and Shea (2010) presented in Figure IV. (Section 4.2), the three-pillar model (campaign manager, advisors, and outside consultants) reveals very similar role delineations, including a specific dependency on external organisations in contemporary political election campaigning.

Due to the large number of different stakeholders emerging at all levels, the respondents attached great importance to optimal alignment between the various actors with regard to the campaign content and strategic objectives during the planning and implementation phases of the campaign. The concept of alignment, as presented by Volk and Zerfass (2018), is divided into a primary alignment of the communication strategy with an overarching strategic direction and, secondarily, into the alignment of all communication activities of the involved entities with the overarching strategy, was emphasised by the interviewees on multiple occasions. It became clear that alignment shaped all important facets of the campaign's planning and

execution processes. Renatus, for example, described how *"it's crucial that there's a consistency from top to bottom, both in terms of wording and design"* when implementing the campaign design (Interview Renatus, box 1 8, Eng., p. 69, Ger., p. 59), or for the synergy between the online and offline communication campaigns specified by Grau: *"it's absolutely synchronized [...] even if there are now different communication channels online and offline, they are very thematically orientated towards each other"* (Interview Grau, box 58, Eng., p. 51, Ger., pp. 38-39). Alignment across the various levels of the FDP was reinforced during the key campaign phases through specific milestone events. These included the 'Epiphany Meeting' on the 6th of January, marking the campaign's launch, the 'Ordinary Federal Party Conference', where the campaign plan developed by the party's executive and national headquarters was approved by all state associations, and the 'Extraordinary Federal Party Conference' held two weeks before election day to foster unity and achieve final internal mobilisation.

In the results section, three distinct campaign phases in the FDP's 2021 federal election campaign were determined, based on the descriptions of the respondents, and supported by the campaign plans of Grau (Figure XV.) at the federal national level and Von Elmbach (Figure XIV.) at the federal state level. Even though the three phases showed some differences in their temporal variations depending on the interview participant, each phase showed a strategic uniqueness serving as a clear demarcation and was confirmed in all interviews.

The *"pre-election campaign phase"* focused on organisational and strategic groundwork. This phase began at varying times depending on the respondent, ranging from late 2020 to May 2021. Key activities included budget planning, developing the campaign strategy, and securing service providers for campaign materials and design. The official campaign launch occurred during the FDP's federal party conference on Epiphany, with the Federal Election Conference in May marking the approval of the election program and strategy by all state associations. It should be emphasised that the strategic foundations in the first phase were established by the federal party headquarters and the party leadership, with the leading candidate at the centre. With the formation of a programme commission and weekly jour fixes, an initial outreach was made from the top level with a central body. In this regard, certain parallels can be drawn to Baines' model of political campaign management (Baines, 2011; Figure IX.). It describes a central body similar, with the 'Party and Constituency Campaign Organisation', from which all components of campaign planning are coordinated and directed. The *"implementation or*

activation phase”, initiated 8-10 weeks before election day, entailed intensifying campaign activities. These included billboard campaigns, increased public outreach on social media, and local events in constituencies to raise public awareness for the key programmatic and ideological issues of the liberal party. The respondents highlighted the necessity of visible presence in the constituencies, while legal regulations for billposting influenced the timeline of this phase. At the same time, online pre-campaigns aimed to generate visibility and engagement. The “*operational phase of the campaign*”, which began six weeks before election day, concentrated on voter mobilisation. Campaign activities included unrestricted billposting, high-profile events with top candidate Lindner, and targeted mailings to FDP-affiliated households. According to respondents, efforts on social media and advertising were intensified to reach undecided voters, of whom a significant proportion only made up their minds in the last few days.

When comparing the three phases of the FDP's 2021 federal parliamentary campaign with the strategic processes of political campaigning outlined in Section 4.4 and the strategic planning frameworks of Zerfass et al. (2018) and Simerson (2011) presented in Subchapter 2.4.1, it becomes evident that the FDP's campaign planning and execution align with both approaches, following specific steps in a precise sequential order. In particular, the first four levels of strategic planning (Analysis, Formulation, Action Planning and Execution) proposed by Simerson (2011) and shown in Figure II. apply to the three phases of the FDP campaign plan as well as to Grau's “Master-Plan Campaign”. However, the fifth step outlined by Simerson (2011), which aligns with van Ruler's (2021) concept of agility, emphasising continuous improvement through ongoing refinement of strategic planning and implementation methods to enhance efficiency and effectiveness, was only partially evident in the descriptions provided by the interview participants. In this sense, feedback loops tend to appear in more specific contexts, such as in the optimisation of targeting strategies (cf. Interview Renatus, box 30, Eng., p. 71, Ger., p. 61) or in the adjustment of social media content plans (cf. Interview Von Elmbach, box 63, Eng., 117, Ger., p. 105). The eight steps of political campaign planning (I. Setting the Objectives/Candidate, II. Opposition Research, III. Segment Analysis, IV. Fundraising, V. Polling, VI. Voter Targeting, VII. Communications, VIII. Direct Contact) as compiled from Bradshaw (1995), Burton & Shea (2010) and Baines (2011) are clearly recognisable in the three phases of the FDP's federal election campaign, despite not being implemented in precise order. Analogue to the simultaneous execution of the online and offline communication strategies, the individual steps from the theoretical campaign process similarly

overlap in the campaign phases of the FDP's Bundestag election campaign. This crossover is illustrated in Figure XV. in the 'Master Plan Campaign', in which the campaign factors on the left vertical axis overlap at many junctures in the period leading up to the election. For example, steps IV. Fundraising and VI. Targeting (referred to as Online in Figure XV.) proceed simultaneously.

In the analysis of the strategic milestones, it can be seen from the results section that three milestones of the campaign relate to fundamental principles within the overall strategic direction and three milestones specifically address time-related events during the election campaign. The overall strategic decisions that shaped the campaign's milestones were threefold: first, the emphasis on the party and second vote influenced all strategic elements, including design and implementation at the constituency level; second, the development of momentum with the FDP's political position on the coronavirus measures at the time and third, the strategic integration of real-life events with the online campaign, establishing a key benchmark where on-site event content was effortlessly incorporated into the digital strategy. The milestones shaping the temporal course of the election campaign included the three federal party conferences. Starting with the campaign launch on the 6th of January, the 'Ordinary Federal Party Conference' in May 2021, at which the campaign strategies were confirmed and adopted by all branches of the FDP, and the 'Extraordinary Federal Party Conference' held in Berlin shortly before election day, at which the party came together once again to boost media attention and mobilisation. The two other milestones with a direct impact on the timing of the FDP parliamentary election campaign were, on the one hand, an agitator mentioned by Grau and Renatus as part of the campaign, which acted as a provocative starting signal in terms of both content and appearance in order to raise media publicity (cf. Interview Renatus, box 38, Eng., p. 72, Ger., p. 62). On the other hand, the summer tour of the party chairman and leading election candidate Lindner can be accentuated to establish direct contact with voters and demonstrate a sense of approachability through local presence at holiday destinations within Germany.

Concerning the **second research objective**, which was "*to identify the core strategies and statements that were central to the FDP's 2021 election campaign*", the findings from the second theme of my thematic analysis led to the following conclusions:

On the one hand, the respondents identified core themes of the FDP's 2021 campaign that have always been part of the liberal party's ideological competencies, such as supporting a free-

market economy and minimising state intervention in matters concerning personal freedom (Langenbacher, 2022; Lemke & Nyhuis, 2023). All respondents emphasised the importance of the FDP's *Liberal Values* as a core issue in the election campaign. Renatus described this as the FDP's strategic baseline: “*We are the party of freedom and the party of the individual. That was the basic orientation of the election campaign. And also the accentuation [...]. That was a very important message at the time, and it overshadowed everything else*” (Interview Renatus, box 10, Eng., p. 68, Ger., p. 57). By focusing on modernisation and digitalisation in education, economy and infrastructure, a further emphasis was intended to reach different voter groups, such as rural areas with weaker structural developments.

In addition to these content-related components, two core strategic decisions stood out in the federal election campaign of the FDP. The first strategic core of the campaign was revealed to be a distinct personification strategy centred on the party chairman and lead candidate, Christian Lindner. As described by Grau, the campaign was “*completely and utterly focused*” on Lindner, who personified the central themes of the campaign, such as the economy, digitalisation, and finance (Interview Grau, box 38, Eng., p. 48, Ger., p. 35). This singular focus created internal alignment and external cohesion, projecting a unified party image consistent with the theoretical concept of secondary alignment proposed by Volk and Zerfass (2018). The respondents indicated that voters were influenced mainly by Lindner's personal charisma rather than by detailed party manifestos, which is in line with the general trend of increasing personality-centred politics. This dynamic is reflected by Strömbäck and Kioussis (2020) as a feature of the modernisation theory of political campaigning, in which the demand for personalised and professionalised election campaigns arises from the increased volatility of the electorate. In addition, the approach was reinforced by online communication strategies with symbolic images and slogans that made Lindner the central figure in the FDP's election campaign strategy. From a theoretical perspective, Stier et al. (2018) confirm the assumption that increased personification in digital campaigning promotes more apparent differentiation and positioning of a political candidate. Lindner's personification strategy at regional level elevated local candidates through joint public appearances and visible placement in campaign materials such as posters and billboards. The personification strategy was further emphasised by the overarching strategic focus of the campaign on the second vote/party. Renatus recognised its advantage in terms of popularity, which is more likely to be carried by the visibility of the federal party with its strong chairman and lead candidate than by local candidates (cf. Renatus interview, box 20, Eng., p. 46, Ger., p. 59). A possible explanation is

provided by the campaign model (Figure VII.) of party-, candidate-, and consultant-centred campaigns by Burton and Shea (2010), introduced in Section 4.3.2. This model suggests that within hybrid media systems (Esser & Pfetsch, 2020) and pluralistic individualisation trends in the public sphere (Davies, 2024), political campaigns increasingly adopt a style that prioritises both the political and private personality and charisma of candidates. These elements are increasingly important in influencing the electorate nationwide in a one-to-many format, ultimately shaping voting decisions (Burton & Shea, 2010). This evolving ‘new style’ of campaigning, shaped by the complexity of digital and media platforms, requires the expertise of communication and press advisors, as reflected by the variety of internal and external actors in the FDP campaign. As a result, the FDP's 2021 federal election campaign has become increasingly professionalised, combining a candidate-centred strategy with consultant-centred accelerations.

Without being explicitly mentioned in the election programme, the respondents identified the instrumentalisation of the coronavirus pandemic as one of the two key strategies in the 2021 federal elections. The pandemic, described by Dostal (2021) as one of the most transformative events shaping the election, brought societal restrictions such as lockdowns, curfews, and mandatory vaccinations, leading to widespread public criticism over perceived authoritarianism. This context allowed the FDP to position itself as a constitutional voice advocating for civil liberties, an issue that resonated strongly with its electorate. As Konrad explained, the FDP leveraged growing dissatisfaction with pandemic restrictions, building a campaign narrative centred on personal freedom and civil rights. This positioning was supported by careful planning, visual language, and emotional appeal, with Konrad stating, “*we already knew what kind of visual language we wanted to use, what kind of feeling we needed*” (Interview Konrad, box 19, Eng., p. 19, Ger., 4). The FDP’s approach to the pandemic exemplifies the core principles of modern political campaigning. Effective issue management, as highlighted by Waymer and Heath (2020), relies on formative research to understand voter attitudes and preferences, enabling the integration of outstanding issues into a broader campaign strategy. This reflects van Ruler’s (2018) concept of strategy as an adaptive, ongoing process and is supported by Marchiori and Bulgacov’s (2012; 2015) view of strategy as a dynamic construct shaped through continuous interaction and reflection. This approach, reinforced by research-driven adaptations to external challenges, enabled the FDP to use the coronavirus pandemic to strengthen its credibility as a defender of personal freedoms in a restrictive political climate. Lindner's participation in protest rallies against the former

government reveals the critical stance of the party leader and, thus, of the entire FDP party towards the corona policy of the formerly ruling parties, using the stylistic device of negative campaigning, in which any criticism of political opponents or their standpoints are being employed (Ude & Wendorf, 2018; Semetko & Tworzecki, 2018).

The **third research objective**, “*to analyse which campaign methods were employed in the implementation process by the FDP, including its communication channel*”, is investigated through the coded data from the fourth theme of my thematic analysis. This theme examines the FDP's online and offline communication strategies during the 2021 federal elections, as outlined by respondents' impressions and observations.

The first noteworthy finding in this regard revealed that the respondents perceived the offline communication campaign as being closely linked to the online campaign, which required a high degree of alignment. Content from the on-site events was incorporated into the online campaign, whereby the visual language in the campaign design was composed of photo and video material captured at offline events (cf. Interview Participant B, box 9, Eng., pp. 131-132, German pp. 122-123). This interconnected approach aligns with the concept of hypermedia campaigning, which emphasises the integration of online and offline communication networks to navigate the complexities of today's media landscape. As Bennett & Pfetsch (2018) and Lilleker (2015) argue, successful hypermedia campaigns actively engage both digital and traditional media ecosystems. The FDP's strategy of integrating offline event content into its digital campaign reflects this hypermedia approach, demonstrating how coordinated efforts across online and offline channels can amplify a campaign's reach and effectiveness in achieving its communication goals.

The online communication strategies of the FDP in the 2021 federal election campaign demonstrated a high degree of professionalisation, exemplified by a content plan that developed differentiated visual and textual styles for each communication platform and online media channel. This approach reflected what Lilleker (2017) describes as the ongoing mediatisation of political campaigns, where strategies and timetables are precisely aligned with media coverage. Depending on the medium, tailored linguistic, symbolic, and rhetorical techniques are employed to appeal to potential voters. According to the statements of the interviewees, the purpose of disseminating content via online platforms was twofold: firstly, to enable personal, immediate and interactive communication with potential voters and, secondly, to encourage online press outlets to pick up and amplify content posted by the FDP and Lindner

on social media platforms. This aligns with the hybrid media sphere described in the fourth phase of political communication (Chadwick, 2017), which fulfils a dualistic role: as mass media transmitting political messages and as decentralised, participatory platforms where political discourse unfolds in parallel online realities (Davie, 2024; Esser & Pfetsch, 2020). The FDP's 2021 online campaign highlighted the growing role of digital platforms in modern political communication. Using five key platforms—Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn—the campaign demonstrated professionalisation by tailoring content to specific demographics and target groups. This approach reflects McNair's (2018) observation that digital platforms have reshaped political behaviour and media consumption, as well as Lilleker's (2017) concept of marketisation, where campaign actions like voting or social media engagement are framed as value-based incentives to drive participation. Furthermore, the respondents highlighted how targeting content was personalised for specific voter groups across social media platforms, ensuring authenticity while aligning with the distinct characteristics of each platform (cf. Interview Konrad, box 49-53, Eng., p. 23, Ger., pp. 8-9). Targeting measures, such as geo-targeting enabled by the FDP Maps tool developed with Universum AG, allowed precise segmentation of voters by location, enhancing both online and offline campaign coordination (cf. Interview Grau, box 46-48, Eng., pp. 49-50, Ger., p. 37). This approach is consistent with Sweetser's (2011) view of digital communication as an indispensable, interactive tool that engages constituents emotionally and physically. Lilleker's (2015) concept of hypermedia campaigns further supports this, emphasising tailored strategies that use data and tracking instruments to respond to the constituents' preferences and provide feedback for campaign refinement. The integration of these tools underscores the hybrid nature of modern election campaigns, in which traditional and digital networks are combined to increase visibility, promote engagement, and secure resources such as donations and volunteers (Semetko & Tworzecki, 2018; Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018).

Nevertheless, the results regarding communication strategies showed that direct contact with voters via offline communication strategies remained a primary factor in the success of the 2021 federal election campaign. Key methods included door-to-door campaigning and information points, which provided opportunities for direct engagement with constituents and established emotional attachment and credibility through personal contact (cf. Interview Renatus, box 42, Eng., p. 73, Ger., p. 62). Large-scale election rallies such as Lindner's summer tour and joint appearances with regional candidates were crucial to demonstrating party unity and mobilising supporters. Posters and billboards also remained a focal strategy, with over

100,000 posters produced to raise public awareness and ensure a visual presence, particularly in areas where the FDP received less media attention (cf. Interview Renatus, box 26, Eng., p. 71, Ger., p. 60). Despite strict legal regulations on billposting deadlines, creative approaches such as event posters enabled the FDP to remain visible throughout all phases of the campaign. In this context, considering the model presented in subchapter 4.3.1 (Figure VI.) depicting the three stages of pre-modern, modern, and postmodern campaigning by Strömbäck and Kioussis (2014), a clear tendency of the FDP's campaign and communication strategies towards postmodern campaigning can be observed. The campaign leveraged multiple communication channels across various media and online platforms, employing narrowcasting and targeted messages tailored to specific voter groups. Furthermore, the professionalisation of the campaign was evident in the involvement of specialised party campaign teams and external consultants. However, despite digital advancements toward a consumer-oriented and voter-adaptive approach, the significance of offline campaign activities remained prominent. As Farrell and Webb (2002) further argue, the individual stages are not static, but can instead be considered as a continuous line on which campaigns might have specific characteristics from several stages at the same time. Bennett & Pfetsch (2018) confirm this assumption that hypermedia campaigns in today's communications landscape must integrate and actively engage in the broader communications ecosystem by connecting both online and offline communication networks.

The **fourth research objective** has been incorporated into the fifth theme of my thematic analysis, encouraging the respondents to reveal the specific mobilisation strategies used for the offline and online communication campaign to boost voter and supporter participation and enthusiasm. The FDP's mobilisation strategies in the 2021 federal election campaign integrated online and offline methods to reach and motivate voters and supporters, demonstrating the interplay between traditional campaigning tactics and digital outreach. Offline strategies, such as door-to-door campaigning, information booths and election events, played a crucial role in creating personal connections, with face-to-face dialogue and the distribution of flyers being essential to mobilise the electorate. The interviewees also emphasised that direct contact built an emotional connection with the voters as a mobilisation effect, thereby fostering greater trust and participation, especially in undecided constituencies. Events with the top candidate, Christian Lindner, attracted the attention of the media and voters, strengthened the unity of the party and motivated local supporters. This approach aligns with the theoretical assumption of Baines (2011), emphasising the continued importance of grassroots activities like door-to-door

campaigning and poster placement, supported by strong volunteer networks to drive voter mobilisation and campaign success. Online mobilisation strategies complemented these efforts, leveraging geo-targeting and performance marketing tools to personalise and expand outreach. Tailored digital content targeted specific voter demographics via social media platforms, while newsletters and apps kept supporters informed and engaged. This dual approach reflects the evolving media landscape, where hypermedia campaigns extend beyond the mere transmission of information, aiming to create interactive experiences that are easy for the recipient to distribute and comment on (Ward et al., 2018). As McNair (2018) and Davies (2024) argue, the participatory nature of digital platforms transforms audiences into proactively producing, selecting, and disseminating contributors, enhancing mobilisation.

As presented in the last theme, the reflections and insights from the 2021 FDP election campaign highlighted several key challenges and opportunities for improvement, consistent with the theoretical framework of political campaigning. The interviewees emphasised internal coordination problems, especially between the campaign teams at the federal and state level and underlined that coordination between the levels in relation to content and implementation was particularly relevant, as the FDP will be acting as a governing party in the next elections rather than in the role of the opposition. According to Konrad, digital communication strategies should be expanded, for instance by implementing content formats for YouTube and TikTok. In addition, Rénatus pointed out the fundamental need for continuous improvement in the integration of online-offline campaigning and the optimisation of targeting, particularly at the constituency level for individual candidates. Both Von Elmbach and Participant B noted gaps in communication between party levels and the difficulty of adapting to last-minute strategic changes. Future campaigns, thus, must focus on enhancing digital reach, fostering emotional engagement, and strengthening internal cohesion. These reflections echo the challenges outlined by Keller and Leder (2018), particularly the need for precise voter analysis, strategic planning that works backwards from election day, and careful integration of tactical elements within time and budget constraints. The unpredictable nature of events, such as managing the FDP's stance on coronavirus measures, further highlights the critical importance of adaptability in an increasingly competitive political landscape (Perloff, 2022).

One final consideration that can be derived from the results of the thematic analysis involves an overarching theoretical integration of concepts and disciplines arising from a holistic approach to strategic communication regarding the 2021 FDP Bundestag election campaign.

By examining the six themes from a holistic viewpoint, a multitude of different theoretical interrelationships can be identified, expressed through highly professionalised campaigning with distinct planning and execution phases and multi-layered campaign levels. The increased complexity and diversity of opportunities within a political communication ecosystem (Esser & Pfetsch, 2020) with its digital, social, and political shifts also demonstrated in practice a more comprehensive approach that bridged cross-disciplinary perspectives in developing a hybrid strategic approach to political campaigning (Jamieson, 2017; Blumler, 2015). With regard to my research question, it can be assumed that political campaigning adopts particular functions from other sub-disciplines such as political communication, public relations, public affairs and political marketing in the strategic process of planning, implementation and execution of an election campaign. The purpose-driven character behind all interactions in the campaign process can be emphasised as a common feature with the overarching goal of achieving political objectives (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2020). This conceptual diversity emerged repeatedly in the discussions with interviewees, reflecting a range of interconnected elements shaping the FDP's campaign strategy. From political marketing, the focus on building candidate reputation through personification was highlighted (Lee-Marshment, 2012), while political public relations emphasises relationship development and the persuasion of key publics (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2020). Furthermore, key features from the discipline of political advertising (McNair, 2018; Fowler et al., 2020) became evident in the communication and mobilisation strategies via traditional advertising channels and audience-specific online targeting, as well as the involvement of external communication experts such as the Heimat Agency as a characteristic of public affairs (Berg & Feldner, 2020).

9. Limitations and Future Research Proposals

As a qualitative single-case study employing semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, my research applies qualitative methods to deeply investigate a specific social phenomenon within a defined timeframe and among a homogeneous group of participants (Leavy, 2017). Consequently, quantitative analyses and statistical generalisations are not applicable to my specific research. It should also be noted that the small sample size of six interview participants from a homogeneous group of experts is thoroughly justified for my methodological approach and has led to comprehensive research results. However, the extent to which these reflect the entire spectrum of perspectives and behaviours within the campaign planning of the FDP, especially in the individual constituencies, or can be generalised to inter-party campaign

research in Germany, must be explored through further research and studies. Therefore, it is important to note that the results of this study cannot be easily extrapolated to the population, as the study was explicitly designed to gain in-depth insights from a specific and limited population group. Future research could follow a quantitative approach to further test and validate key messages from the underlying results section and discussion through statistical surveys and polls. In addition, the validity of qualitative research is limited by the self-reported data from interviews and transcription; although conducted carefully according to the specified quality criteria, there could still be bias due to the not entirely objective role of the researcher (Miles et al., 2014). As a concrete research example for future scientific work, the mobilisation strategies carried out by the FDP in the election campaign could be examined from the perspective of voters and supporters in order to understand their effectiveness in isolation from election results. Furthermore, it would be of interest if a subsequent study were to examine the campaign strategies of one or more of the other parties in the German party system in a similar framework to this work, in hope of obtaining a better comprehension of similarities and differences in the planning and execution of political campaigns in German federal elections. In addition, it would be beneficial to conduct comparative and cross-national research detached from national characteristics and specificities, filtering out the characteristics relevant to political campaign research from all studies and analysing them on a macro level.

10. Conclusion

This study has provided valuable insights into the current state of political campaign research by offering an in-depth analysis of the key strategies and implementation methods employed by the FDP in their 2021 federal election campaign. The research question “What were the key strategies and implementation methods employed by the FDP in their 2021 federal parliamentary election campaign?” aimed to comprehensively and thoroughly investigate a specific social phenomenon (the FDP's political campaign strategies) in a specific time period (the 2021 federal election) by collecting and analysing the insights and perceptions of insiders within the FDP at the parliamentary level. From a methodological perspective, a qualitative single-case study was adopted to provide an in-depth exploration of the subject matter. Semi-structured interviews based on emic expert perspectives and observations were compiled into six substantial thematic sections using the methodical framework of thematic analysis. Guided by four research objectives closely aligned with the overarching research question, the study provided a holistic understanding and evaluation of the campaign's diversified planning, implementation, and execution processes, accelerated by a high degree of professionalisation.

Therefore, the findings derived from this research not only satisfy the research objectives but also contribute to the broader discourse of political campaign research, offering significant insights into the strategic process of an election campaign on federal level in the contemporary German party landscape. The FDP campaign was characterised by a high degree of professionalisation, integrating both internal and external actors at federal and state level. Campaign managers, consultants and external actors were involved in various processes of campaign planning and execution, attaching great importance to optimal alignment with an overarching strategic direction and across the various levels. This professional structure was further reaffirmed by the different positions and fields of expertise of the interviewees within the FDP's federal election campaign.

The FDP's 2021 federal election campaign was structured into three distinct phases: the pre-election phase, the activation phase, and the operational phase. Each of the phases involved specific characteristics, such as developing a campaign strategy, design, and programmatic assets in the first phase, the activation of campaign activities on social media and offline events in the second phase and intensified voter mobilisation measures in the final phase. While three time-related milestones with the Epiphany Meeting, federal party conferences, and Christian Lindner's summer tour reinforced alignment across all organisational levels, distinct

fundamental strategic decisions served as milestones for the overall direction of the campaign, focusing on the second vote and the symbiosis of offline and online communication strategies.

At the core of the FDP's campaign strategy were two primary elements. First, the campaign's reliance on a personification strategy centred on Christian Lindner exemplified a personality-driven approach to campaigning. Lindner's role as the party's leading figure ensured a unified voice and public image, using his personal charisma to appeal to voters. Second, the FDP strategically capitalised on the societal context of the coronavirus pandemic to position itself as the voice for protecting liberal values. In the context of public dissatisfaction with the restrictions imposed by the former government, this narrative found great sympathy among voters and was reinforced by careful planning, visual language and emotional appeal. The combination of these strategic cores highlighted the party's adaptability in addressing emerging issues and its ability to utilise personality-centred and issue-based tactics in pursuit of electoral success.

The campaign's communication strategies displayed a hybrid model that combined traditional offline methods with professionalised online campaigns. Offline activities, such as door-to-door campaigning, information points and Lindner's public appearances, aimed to build trust among voters through personal interactions. The online campaigns used platforms such as Instagram and Facebook with tailored content, supported by digital tools for voter segmentation with FDP Maps and geo-targeting. Furthermore, the findings showed that the mobilisation efforts reflected this duality, combining grassroots activities such as voter participation and physical events with targeted digital engagement. Performance marketing and personalised digital mobilisation strategies reinforced voter activation and highlighted the growing significance of emotional and interactive engagement in political campaigning.

The reflections and insights of the participants in the FDP 2021 federal election campaign identified key challenges and practical recommendations for future federal election campaigns of the FDP. One of the main priorities is to continuously improve internal coordination in communication between the campaign teams at the federal and state level to ensure a fluid process during the individual campaign phases. The respondents considered this to be of utmost importance, especially in the event of unforeseeable and short-term changes to strategic guidelines from the campaign headquarters, allowing the teams in the constituencies to adapt quickly. Furthermore, digital communication strategies should be expanded, for instance by offering additional content on YouTube and TikTok. As the FDP will no longer be

campaigning as an opposition party in the upcoming federal election, the respondents suggested that future campaign planning needs to be adapted with the aim of embracing a more emotional narrative in the depiction of liberal values.

Overall, the findings demonstrate the FDP's successful integration of interdisciplinary concepts adopted from political communication, political marketing, public relations, and public affairs into a hybrid campaign strategy. By combining traditional and digital communication strategies, the campaign achieved a high degree of professionalisation that is consistent with modern theories of political campaigning and successfully navigates through a highly pluralised political ecosystem. Valuable insights from this contemporary campaign process of planning, implementation, and execution thus provide a suitable point of reference for further research to examine the findings obtained from a broader perspective. In this sense, further approaches could use a quantitative methodology to verify the core statements from the underlying results or further investigate the emic expert statements in a comparative study either with other election campaigns in Germany or detached from national specificities. Furthermore, this comprehensive analysis of the FDP's political campaign in the 2021 German federal parliamentary elections serves as a concrete benchmark for political parties, particularly the FDP, in planning and organising future election campaigns.

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Appendices:

Appendix A: Exposé Participant Information



UNIVERSIDADE
CATOLICA
PORTUGUESA

Konstantin Florian Toffert
Master's Program:
Strategic Communication & Leadership

Exposé Interview Master's Thesis "The planning and implementation of the FDP's political campaign in the 2021 federal parliamentary election"

Further information and framework conditions for the interview process:

- **Research Question:**

"What were the key strategies and implementation methods employed by the FDP in their 2021 federal parliamentary election campaign?"

" Welche Schlüsselstrategien und Umsetzungsmethoden wurden von der FDP in ihrem Bundestagswahlkampf 2021 eingesetzt?" [German Translation]

- **Research Objectives:**

The goal of my research is to identify and analyse the key strategies and their implementation in the campaign planning of the FDP during the 2021 German federal elections. My master's thesis aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of modern political campaigns by providing a detailed examination of the campaign methods and communication channels through the example of the FDP's successful election campaign in 2021. The first part of my thesis establishes the status quo of existing academic political campaign research, which will now be expanded and analysed with internal insights, individual impressions, and experiences of political experts from the Free Democrats at the federal level. The following research objectives are addressed in my study:

- I. DEstablishing a timeline for the individual planning and implementation phases of the FDP during the 2021 German federal elections.
- II. Identifying the core strategies and statements that were central to the FDP's 2021 election campaign.
- III. Analysing the campaign methods employed by the FDP during the implementation process, including their communication channels.
- IV. Evaluating the techniques used by the FDP to engage and motivate its voter base and supporters.

- **Research Relevance:**

The analysis of the FDP's election campaign strategies contributes to the understanding of modern political communication and campaign methods within political campaign research. It provides valuable insights into the strategic decision-making processes during the planning and implementation phases of a campaign by a well-established and nationally

significant political party. From an academic perspective, this topic is particularly relevant, as political campaign research in the interdisciplinary fields of political science, communication studies, and economics often relies on quantitative approaches. These studies typically either focus on micro-level aspects of campaigns (e.g., social media performance) or compare party programs across broad (inter)national studies. A qualitative study based on the individual perceptions of political experts involved in the campaign process helps fill this theoretical gap in the research.

- **Potential Relevance for the Interview Participants:**

Your participation in this interview will help create a detailed and practice-oriented understanding of election campaign strategies at the national level in the Federal Republic of Germany. The insights gained could serve as an additional resource for the FDP to develop further analytical frameworks for future campaign planning and execution within a scientific context. Most importantly, the individual perspectives and experiences of FDP representatives, strategic decision-makers, and staff members gathered during the interviews will provide valuable lessons and insights into the FDP's campaign planning and execution during the 2021 federal elections.

- **Procedure and Framework of the Interview:**

- Duration: The interview will take approximately 40-60 minutes.
- Format: The one-on-one interviews can be conducted either in person (face-to-face) or online, depending on your preference.
- Interview Framework: Semi-structured questions will be used, meaning that the interview questions are designed to allow participants to share their individual experiences, perceptions, and insights with as much detail as they wish.
- Confidentiality and Anonymity: Unless explicitly agreed to by the interview participant, all data collected will be treated as strictly confidential and anonymised. The results are used solely for scientific purposes.
- Data Collection: The individual conversation will be conducted in German. For transcription into English, the interview will be recorded using a mobile phone and computer. These audio files will be used solely for data collection and will be deleted afterward.

If you have any further questions or comments regarding the content or the execution of the interview, please feel free to contact me at any time. I would greatly appreciate your feedback.

Kind regards,

Konstantin Toffert



Exposé Interview Master's Thesis "The planning and implementation of the FDP's political campaign in the 2021 federal parliamentary election"

Weiterführende Informationen und Rahmenbedingungen für den Interviewprozess:

- **Forschungsfrage:**

"What were the key strategies and implementation methods employed by the FDP in their 2021 federal parliamentary election campaign?"

" Welche Schlüsselstrategien und Umsetzungsmethoden wurden von der FDP in ihrem Bundestagswahlkampf 2021 eingesetzt?" [Übers. d. Verf.]

- **Forschungsziele:**

Das Ziel meiner Forschung ist es, die Schlüsselstrategien und deren Umsetzung in der Kampagnenplanung der FDP in den Bundestagswahlen 2021 zu identifizieren und zu analysieren. Meine Masterthesis soll dazu beitragen, ein tiefgreifendes Verständnis für moderne politische Kampagnen zu entwickeln, indem die Wahlkampfmethoden und Kommunikationskanäle am Beispiel der erfolgreichen Wahlkampfstrategie der FDP in den Bundestagswahlen 2021 detailliert beleuchtet werden. Im ersten Teil meiner Arbeit wurde der Status Quo der bestehenden wissenschaftlichen politischen Kampagnenforschung erarbeitet, welcher nun mithilfe von internen Ausführungen, individuellen Eindrücken und Erfahrungen/Wahrnehmungen von politischen Experten der Freien Demokraten auf Bundesebene erweitert und analysiert werden soll. Folgende Forschungsziele werden in meiner Arbeit konkretisiert:

- I. Darlegung eines Zeitplans für die einzelnen Planungs- und Implementationsphasen der FDP in den Bundestagswahlen 2021.
- II. Identifikation der Kernstrategien und Statements, die im Mittelpunkt der Wahlkampagne der FDP 2021 standen.
- III. Analyse der Kampagnenmethoden, die von der FDP im Umsetzungsprozess eingesetzt wurden, einschließlich ihrer Kommunikationskanäle.
- IV. Bewertung der Techniken, die die FDP zur Einbindung und Motivation ihrer Wählerbasis und Unterstützer verwendet hat.

- **Relevanz des Themas:**

Die Untersuchung der Wahlkampfstrategien der FDP trägt zum Verständnis moderner politischer Kommunikation und Wahlkampfmethoden in der politischen Kampagnenforschung bei. Sie bietet zudem wertvolle Einblicke in die strategischen Entscheidungen innerhalb der konkreten Planungs- und Implementationsphasen eines Wahlkampfes von einer für die Bundespolitik relevanten und etablierten Partei. Zudem ist das Thema aus wissenschaftlicher Sicht von Bedeutung, da in den interdisziplinären Forschungsfeldern der Politik-, Kommunikations- und Wirtschaftswissenschaften die politische Kampagnenforschung meist aus einer

quantitativen Perspektive analysiert wird. Dabei werden entweder aus einer Mikro-Ebene heraus einzelne Teilaspekte der Kampagne (z.B. Social Media Performance) bewertet, oder in breit gefächerten (inter-)nationalen Studien sämtliche Parteiprogramme miteinander verglichen. Eine qualitative Forschungsarbeit bezogen auf die individuellen Wahrnehmungen der am Kampagnenablauf beteiligten politischen Experten würde ebjenene theoretische Forschungslücke schließen.

- **Potenzielle Relevanz für die Interviewteilnehmer:**

Ihre Teilnahme an diesem Interview wird dazu beitragen, ein detailliertes und praxisnahes Bild der Wahlkampfstrategien auf nationaler Ebene in der Bundesrepublik zu zeichnen. Die Erkenntnisse könnten der FDP als zusätzliches Hilfsmittel dienen, mittels eines wissenschaftlichen Bezugsrahmens weitere Analyse Kriterien für zukünftige Wahlkampf- und Kampagnenplanungen zu erhalten. Ganz besonders tragen die in den Gesprächen gesammelten individuellen Perspektiven und Erfahrungen der FDP-Abgeordneten, strategischen Entscheidungsträger und Mitarbeiter zu der Kampagnenplanung und Ausführung dazu bei, wertvolle Erkenntnisse und Lehren aus der Kampagne der FDP in den Bundestagswahlen gewinnen zu können.

- **Ablauf und Rahmenbedingungen des Interviews:**

- Dauer: Das Interview wird ca. 40-60 Minuten in Anspruch nehmen.
- Form: Die Einzel-Interviews können nach Ihren Präferenzen persönlich vor Ort (face-to-face) oder online durchgeführt werden.
- Interviewrahmen: Es werden semi-strukturierte Fragen gestellt werden, d.h. die Interviewfragen sollen den Teilnehmern die Möglichkeit bieten, individuelle Erfahrungen, Wahrnehmungen und Erkenntnisse nach eigenem Ermessen und Ausführlichkeit schildern zu können.
- Vertraulichkeit und Anonymität: Falls nicht ausdrücklich vom Interviewteilnehmer zugestimmt, werden alle gesammelten Daten streng vertraulich behandelt und anonymisiert. Die Ergebnisse werden ausschließlich zu wissenschaftlichen Zwecken verwendet.
- Datenerhebung: Das individuelle Gespräch wird auf Deutsch durchgeführt. Für die Transkription ins Englische wird das Interview mit dem Mobiltelefon und Computer aufgezeichnet. Diese Audio-Dateien werden ausschließlich für die Datenerhebung verwendet und werden anschließend gelöscht.

Für weitere Fragen und Anmerkungen zu den Inhalten und der Durchführung des Interviews stehe ich Ihnen gerne jederzeit zur Verfügung und bin Ihnen über eine Rückmeldung sehr verbunden.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen
Konstantin Toffert

Appendix B: Interview Guide

1st Phase: Introduction

Introductory remarks and initial briefing	Hancock and Algozzine (2006), Daymon and Holloway (2011), Taylor et al. (2016), Yin (2014), Braun & Clarke (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduction to the researcher and study. - Review with the interviewee the purpose of the interview and the approx. timeframe planned. - Discuss with the participant how and when the interviewee may expect to receive results of the research. - Consent form, issues of anonymity and confidentiality and authorisation of recording and transcription are clarified.
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2nd Phase: Data Collection

Interview Topics or Items	Authors	Developed questions in the interview guide
Interviewee's Introduction and Role in the Campaign		<p>→ Please tell briefly about yourself and your role in the FDP and the election campaign. What was your specific position and responsibilities in the FDP's federal election campaign in 2021?</p>
The strategic process of political campaign planning	Simerson (2011), Zerfass et al. (2018), Van Ruhler (2018), Baines (2011), Burton and Shea (2010), Strömbäck and Kiouisis (2014)	<p>The FDP's election manifesto was adopted and published at the federal party conference on 14-16 May 2021:</p> <p>→ Can you describe how and whether your team was involved in the thematic design in the planning phase of the campaign? Where there any guidelines from the Federal Executive Board of the FDP given to you for your election campaign in your constituency?</p> <p>→ Which objectives/mission statement have/has been determined as the heart of the campaign? How was this message internally propagated?</p> <p>→ In your opinion, what were the main strategies and statements that characterised the FDP's 2021 election campaign?</p>

<p>Political Campaigning</p>	<p>Farrell and Schmitt-Beck (2002), Baines (2011), Strömbäck and Kiouisis (2014), Burton and Shea (2010), Ormrod (2020), Tenscher et al. (2012)</p>	<p>→ Could you please describe the strategic approach (timeline and phases) of how you implemented the campaign? Can you identify for example a shift to intensified online campaigns as a turning point?</p> <p>→ How was the implementation of the election campaign structured in your team?</p> <p>→ Was there a clear distribution of roles in the campaigning process?</p> <p>→ Were external consultants brought in to support and supervise the process?</p>
<p>Political Communication: Channels and Methods</p>	<p>Blumler (2015; 2016), Borgebund (2019), Goncalves (2018), Jamieson and Kenski (2017), Strömbäck and Kiouisis (2020)</p>	<p>→ Which communication methods and channels were favoured in the execution of the campaign? (Online vs. Offline)</p> <p>→ Were different communication strategies used for traditional media and digital media?</p> <p>The terms ‘hypermedia’ and ‘digital campaigning’ characterise campaign strategies in the USA.</p> <p>→ Are you familiar with these terms? If so, can you explain which social media/ targeting strategies were used in the FDP campaign? Were personalised election advertisements deployed via your social media channels?"</p>
<p>Supporter and Voter Mobilisation</p>	<p>Sampugnaro and Montemagno (2021), Burton and Shea (2010), Ward et al. (2018)</p>	<p>→ How was the FDP's message adapted to different target groups?</p> <p>→ Which methods were used to motivate and mobilise the party's voter base and supporters to get involved themselves? Were there different mobilisation strategies for online and offline communication?</p> <p>→ Finally, which impact does direct voter contact (constituency appearances, door-to-door</p>

	campaigning, information points in the constituency) have on your campaign?
Final remarks/review of the campaign	<p>The FDP were among the winners of the federal elections with 11.5 percent, which ultimately led to their participation in the government.</p> <p>→ Reflecting on the 2021 election campaign, are there any aspects that you feel could have been improved in terms of internal communication or campaign planning and execution?</p>

Interview Guide (German Version)

1st Phase: Einführung

<p>Vorstellung des Forschers und Forschungsfrage</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Name/Studiengang/Titel der Masterarbeit und Forschungsfrage - Forschungszweck (Warum werden Interviews geführt?): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Emische Insiderperspektive o Vergleich theoretische Modelle mit tatsächlicher Kampagne - Wie wird noch den Interviews vorgegangen? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Thematische Analyse - Rahmenbedingungen (Dauer/Form/Interviewrahmen) - Vertraulichkeit und Anonymität: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Einverständniserklärung und Autorisierung zur digitalen Aufzeichnung des Interviews. Alle gesammelten Daten werden streng vertraulich behandelt und falls erwünscht, anonymisiert. Die Ergebnisse werden ausschließlich zu wissenschaftlichen Zwecken verwendet. - Datenerhebung: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Das individuelle Gespräch wird auf Deutsch durchgeführt. Für die Transkription ins Englische wird das Interview mit dem Mobiltelefon und Computer aufgezeichnet. Die Audiodateien werden ausschließlich für die Datenerhebung verwendet und anschließen gelöscht.
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2nd Phase: Datensammlung

Interview Themen	Developed questions in the interview guide
<p>Vorstellung des Interviewpartners und dessen Funktion/Rolle in der Kampagne</p>	<p>→ Bitte erzählen Sie kurz von sich und Ihrer Rolle in der FDP und im Wahlkampf. Was war Ihre konkrete Position und Aufgabe im Bundestagswahlkampf der FDP im Jahr 2021</p>
<p>Der strategische Prozess in der politischen Kampagnenplanung</p>	<p>Das Wahlprogramm der FDP wurde auf dem Bundesparteitag vom 14. bis 16. Mai 2021 verabschiedet und veröffentlicht:</p> <p>→ Können Sie beschreiben, wie und ob Ihr Team in der Planungsphase der Kampagne an der thematischen Gestaltung</p>

	<p>beteiligt war? (Gab es für Ihren Wahlkampf in Ihrem Wahlkreis irgendwelche Vorgaben vom Bundesvorstand der FDP?)</p> <p>→ Christian Lindner Listenplatz 1 Landesliste (Rheinisch-Bergischer Kreis)</p> <p>→ Welche Ziele/Missionstatement wurde(n) als Kern der Kampagne festgelegt? Wie wurde diese Botschaft intern kommuniziert?</p> <p>→ Was waren Ihrer Meinung nach die wichtigsten Strategien und Statements, die den Wahlkampf der FDP im Jahr 2021 geprägt haben?</p>
<p>Politische Kampagnen</p>	<p>→ Könnten Sie bitte den strategischen Ansatz (Zeitplan und Phasen) beschreiben, wie die Kampagne ausgeführt wurde? Sprich gab es unterschiedliche Phasen, in der neue Strategien/Methoden z.B. der Shift zu verstärkten Onlinekampagnen ausgeführt wurden?</p> <p>→ Wie wurde die Durchführung der Wahlkampagne in Ihrem Team strukturiert? Gab es eine klare Rollenverteilung im Wahlkampfstab?</p> <p>→ Wurden externe Berater zur Unterstützung und Betreuung des Prozesses hinzugezogen? (Stichwort Heimat Agentur)</p>
<p>Politische Kommunikation: Kanäle und Methoden</p>	<p>→ Welche Kommunikationsmethoden und -kanäle wurden bei der Durchführung der Kampagne verwendet? (Online vs. Offline – Worauf der Fokus)</p> <p>→ Wurden für die traditionellen Medien und die digitalen Medien unterschiedliche Kommunikationsstrategien verwendet?</p> <p>Die Begriffe 'Hypermedia' und 'Digital Campaigning' kennzeichnen die Wahlkampfstrategien in den USA:</p> <p>→ Sind Sie mit diesen Begriffen vertraut? Falls ja, könnten Sie erläutern, welche Social Media/Targeting-Strategien in der FDP-Kampagne eingesetzt wurden? Wurden über Ihre Social-Media-Kanäle personalisierte Wahlwerbung geschaltet?</p>

**Unterstützer und
Wähler-
Mobilisierung**

→ Wie wurde die Kernbotschaft des FDP-Wahlkampfes an die verschiedenen Zielgruppen angepasst?

→ Welche Methoden wurden eingesetzt, um die Wählerschaft und die Anhänger der Partei zu motivieren und zu mobilisieren, sich selbst zu engagieren? Gab es unterschiedliche Mobilisierungsstrategien in den Online/Offline-Kanälen?

→ Und schließlich: Welchen Einfluss hat nach wie vor der direkte Kontakt mit den Wählern (Auftritte im Wahlkreis, Tür-zu-Tür-Wahlkampf, Informationsstände im Wahlkreis) auf die Kampagnenplanung und Ausführung gehabt?

**Schlussbemerkungen/
Rückblick auf die
Kampagne**

Die FDP gehörte mit 11,5 Prozent zu den Gewinnern der Bundestagswahl, was schließlich zu ihrer Beteiligung an der Regierung führte:

→ Rückblickend auf den Wahlkampf 2021, gibt es irgendwelche Aspekte, die aus Ihrer Sicht in der internen Kommunikation oder bei der Wahlkampfplanung und -durchführung hätten verbessert werden können?

Appendix C: Coding Guide

Codebook

Theme	Subtheme Lvl. 1	Subtheme Lvl. 2	Code & Example Eng.	Coding Rule
Contextual and Strategic Positioning of the Interviewpartners			Position in the FDP Interview Konrad, p.17, box 3	<i>Code text passages that describe the participants position within the FDP during the 2021 election period</i>
			Field of Activity in the 2021 Federal Election Interview Rensus, p. 68, box 8	<i>Code text passages that depict specific tasks, roles and responsibilities undertaken by the interviewees in the election campaign of the FDP 2021</i>
Strategic Process of Campaign Planning			Campaign Design Interview Participant A, p. 93, box 60	<i>Code text passages that classify decisions in design (such as colouring & wording) and in creation of slogans</i>
			Development and adoption of the election programme Interview Grau, p. 46, box 22	<i>Code text passages that describe the processes and levels involved in the adoption of the election programme</i>
	Planning and Execution of the Campaign		Budget Interview Rensus, p. 70, box 20	<i>Code text passages that detail budget planning, financial management, and resource allocation within the campaign</i>
Internal Actors involved in Planning and Organisation			Volunteers Interview Von Elmbach, p. 115, box 47	<i>Code text passages that discuss the recruitment, organization, and engagement of volunteers throughout the campaign</i>

			Inner-Party Campaigning Teams Interview Participant B, p. 133, box 15	<i>Code text passages that describe the formation, strategies, and operations of the campaign's internal teams</i>
			External Actors Interview Grau, p. 44, box 10	<i>Code text passages that highlight interactions and influences of external stakeholders on the campaign</i>
		Campaigning Phases	First Phase Interview Von Elmbach, p. 113, box 41	<i>Code text passages that detail the initial strategies and activities used at the outset of the campaign</i>
	Second Phase Interview Participant B, p. 132, box 9		<i>Code text passages that describe the evolving strategies and major activities during the middle phase of the campaign</i>	
	Third Phase Interview Grau, p. 50, box 52		<i>Code text passages that focus on the final measures and strategies in the run-up to election day</i>	
	Strategic Milestones		Christian Lindner's Summer Rally Interview Konrad, p. 20, box 23	<i>Code text passages that refer to the party leader's election tour ahead of the 2021 elections</i>
			(Extraordinary) FDP federal party conference Interview Grau, p. 53, box 74	<i>Code text passages that address all federal party conferences of the FDP as central milestones of the campaign</i>

			<p>Online/Offline Campaign Structure</p> <p>Interview Participant B, p. 131, box 9</p>	<p><i>Code text passages that deal with the connection between online and offline campaigns in terms of activation and time phases</i></p>
			<p>Agitator/Kick-off</p> <p>Interview Rénatus, p. 72, box 38</p>	<p><i>Code text passages that show and emphasise the characteristics of an agitator in the campaign as the initiation of a next phase</i></p>
			<p>Position on Covid-19 Policy</p> <p>Interview Participant A, p. 87, box 7</p>	<p><i>Code text passages that consider the FDP's position towards the federal government's Covid-19 policy at the time as a turning point in the election campaign</i></p>
			<p>"Second vote" Campaigning Strategy</p> <p>Interview Participant B, p. 136, box 25</p>	<p><i>Code text passages that discuss the strategies aimed at encouraging voters to give their second vote to the FDP</i></p>
<p>Identification of the Core Strategy and Message of the Campaign</p>	<p>Core topics of the election campaign</p>		<p>Performance</p> <p>Interview Rénatus, p. 74, box 53</p>	<p><i>Code text passages that discuss the principle of individual performance as a cornerstone of liberal social and economic policy</i></p>
			<p>Digitalisation/Modernisation</p> <p>Interview Grau, p. 52, box 70</p>	<p><i>Code text passages that mention digitalisation and modernisation as core topics within the election campaign.</i></p>
			<p>Mobility and Infrastructure</p>	<p><i>Code text passages in which the liberal core topic of</i></p>

		Interview Participant B, p. 135, box 23	<i>innovation in mobility and infrastructure is addressed.</i>
		Education	<i>Code text passages that mention education as a campaign topic of the 2021 federal election campaign</i>
		Interview Von Elmbach, p. 111, box 27	
		Liberal Values	<i>Code text passages that emphasise the liberal values and principles promoted during the campaign</i>
	Interview Rénatus, p. 68, box 10		
	Economy and Finance	<i>Code text passages that emphasise the relevance of the economy and finance as a core issue at federal level in the FDP's campaign</i>	
	Interview Participant B, p. 135, box 23		
		Personification Strategy Christian Lindner	<i>Code text passages that highlight how Christian Lindner's image and persona were utilized as central elements of the campaign strategy</i>
		Interview Konrad, p. 20, box 23	
		Corona Pandemic as an Election Issue	<i>Code text passages that discuss the campaign's approach and responses to the Corona pandemic as a significant electoral issue</i>
Interview Participant A, p. 87, box 13			
Political Communication: Channels and Methods	Online Communication Strategies	Content Plan	<i>Code text passages that detail strategies and plans for content distribution across digital platforms</i>
		Interview Konrad, p. 19, box 17	
	Press Relations/	<i>Code text passages that discuss interactions with</i>	

			Online Interviews	<i>the press and the conduct of interviews over online platforms</i>
			Interview Participant A, p. 90, box 38	
		Social Media Platforms	LinkedIn	<i>Code text passages that detail the campaign's use of LinkedIn for professional networking and voter communication</i>
			Interview Konrad, p. 21, box 37	
			YouTube	<i>Code text passages that discuss how YouTube was used for broadcasting campaign videos and messages</i>
			Interview Participant B, p. 132, box 11	
			Twitter/X	<i>Code text passages that highlight interactions and messaging on Twitter/X to engage with the electorate and disseminate information</i>
			Interview Konrad, p. 21, box 33	
			Instagram	<i>Code text passages that describe the campaign's use of Instagram for visual storytelling and voter engagement</i>
			Interview Grau, p. 48, box 40	
			Facebook	<i>Code text passages that discuss the use of Facebook for community building, advertising, and engaging discussions</i>
			Interview Participant A, p. 90, box 38	
			Personalisation of Core Issues	<i>Code text passages that describe how campaign messages are tailored to address specific issues</i>

		Interview Von Elmbach, p. 117, box 57	<i>relevant to targeted audiences</i>
		Targeting Measures Interview Renuis, p. 71, box 28	<i>Code text passages that outline the methods used to target specific groups within the electorate through online communications</i>
Offline Communication Strategies		(Partially) Personalised Mailings Interview Grau, p. 47, box 30	<i>Code text passages that discuss the strategy and implementation of mailings that are partially tailored to the recipient's interests or demographics</i>
		Television Appearances/ Talk shows/TV Commercials Interview Konrad, p. 26, box 65	<i>Code text passages that identify campaign appearances as a communication strategy on television, including talk shows and commercials</i>
		Door-to-door Campaigning Interview Participant B, p. 134, box 19	<i>Code text passages that outline the importance of campaigners engaging directly with voters at their homes</i>
		Information Points/Hubs Interview Renuis, p. 73, box 42	<i>Code text passages that detail the setup and use of physical locations for distributing campaign information and engaging with the public</i>
		Election Events	<i>Code text passages that discuss the planning and impact of public</i>

			Interview Konrad, p. 26, box 61	<i>campaign events aimed at gathering support and disseminating campaign messages</i>
			Posters/ Billboards Interview Von Elmbach, p. 113, box 43	<i>Code text passages that explore the use of posters and billboards as part of the campaign's offline advertising strategy, including details about their design, placement, and their role in competing with other parties</i>
Mobilisation Strategies of the FDP in the Federal Elections			General Mobilisation Strategies Interview Participant A, p. 93, box 62	<i>Code text passages that outline the overarching strategies used to mobilise support across various platforms and activities</i>
			Online Mobilisation Strategies Interview Grau, p. 49, box 44	<i>Code text passages that detail the specific strategies used to engage and mobilise supporters through online channels</i>
	Offline Mobilisation Strategies		Postal Advertising/ Flyers Interview Grau, p. 47, box 30	<i>Code text passages that discuss the use of postal advertising and flyers in the campaign, including their design, distribution strategy, and target audience</i>
			Direct Contact to the Electorate/ Dialogue	<i>Code text passages that describe instances of direct interaction between the campaign and</i>

			Interview Participant B, p. 131, box 9	<i>voters, highlighting dialogue and engagement tactics</i>
			Election Events with Main Candidate	<i>Code text passages that detail campaign events featuring the main candidate, focusing on their role and the impact of these events on voter engagement</i>
			Interview Von Elmbach, p. 116, box 53	
			Door-to-door Campaigning	<i>Code text passages that discuss the strategies and experiences of campaigners engaging directly with voters at their homes</i>
			Interview Participant B, pp. 134-135, box 21	
			Information Points/Hubs	<i>Code text passages that detail the setup and use of physical locations for distributing campaign information and engaging with the public</i>
			Interview Grau, p. 49, box 44	
Campaign Review: Reflections and Insights			Findings and Future Predictions	<i>Code text passages that summarize key findings from the campaign, encompassing participants' perceptions and evaluations of its successes and shortcomings. Including discussions that anticipate future trends or strategies, elaborating on insights derived from the campaign's outcomes.</i>
			Interview Participant A, pp. 92-93, box 60	

Appendix D: Interview Transcripts (File 2)