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### Digital campaign competence

*The role of citizens in data-driven election campaigns*

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### Publication date

2024

[Link to publication](#)

### Citation for published version (APA):

Minihold, S. (2024). *Digital campaign competence: The role of citizens in data-driven election campaigns*. [Thesis, externally prepared, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Universität Wien].

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

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*„While it is clear that political parties have a continuing appetite for more data, it is equally clear that citizens have a right to exert some control over their personal information“ (Dommett et al., 2024, p. 70).*

Data-driven election campaigns promise political parties electoral success by finding the right voters for the right message, yet, what citizens think about this data-driven influence is of less concern to them. Scholarly research has predominantly focused on the promises of data-driven campaigns (hereafter DDC) for political parties, and its potential threats to democracy, such as voter manipulation (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018). Political parties often use technological infrastructures through online platforms such as Meta's Facebook for their campaign communication with voters (see Newman et al., 2023; Roemmele & Gibson, 2020; Van Drunen & Noroozian, 2023). What has largely been absent from discussions around DDC is the perspective of citizens. Thus, in this dissertation, I specifically investigate 1) what citizens know about data-driven political advertising as a specific manifestation of DDC, 2) how citizens' understanding interacts with evaluations of DDC, and 3) how citizens' understanding, evaluations, and skills can be improved. These three questions will be discussed in this multi-method, multi-country, article-based dissertation.

Gaining insights from citizens is especially important in 2024, "the year of elections," where a historic number of voters from at least 64 countries (49 % of the world population) will cast their votes at national elections (Ewe, 2023). Many of these will take place partly online, bringing new challenges for online platforms (Bazail-Eimil, 2024). Recent EU regulations focus on enhancing transparency during online political campaigns to aid citizens in understanding how they are targeted with political advertisements (Van Drunen & Noroozian, 2023). However, a recent example shows how the tech company, Meta, tries to circumvent existing EU privacy laws. Meta introduced a "pay or okay" approach for their ads business model in the EU, implying that citizens are given a choice between consenting to the tracking of their data or paying a monthly fee for an ad-free subscription (Lomas, 2024). In a letter to the EU, an alliance comprising multiple NGOs and digital rights groups criticizes this approach, arguing that it fails to offer a genuine choice for citizens, as few will be willing to pay for the luxury of online privacy. A cost-of-living crisis (*Cost of Living*, 2023), coupled with citizens' ignorance of how companies extract value from data might contribute to this phenomenon. This example demonstrates two things: First, it highlights the importance of citizens' data for big tech companies and their advertising business model, from which political parties also derive benefits. Secondly, despite citizens being offered the choice to consent or not, the determination of which information about them is collected and shared is decided for them, not by them. While citizens

may not consider the use of their data when they log into platforms like Facebook or Instagram and give their "okay," this serves as just one example of how citizens' decisions impact the extent to which political parties can engage in DDC. Hence, it is more vital than ever to gain insight into citizens' level of understanding regarding DDC, their perceptions toward it, and whether they have the requisite skills to navigate a data-driven political landscape. Ultimately, these insights also serve as indicators of the health of democracy because they reveal citizens' competences in navigating (often overstated; Dommett et al., 2024) corrosive effects like fragmented political discourses.

To answer these questions, this dissertation follows the following structure: Chapter 2 presents a theoretical framework describing a transformed political landscape and underscores the necessity for citizens' digital campaign competence, thereby outlining the gaps in the literature addressed by this dissertation. Chapter 3 delves into the methodological considerations of the empirical studies conducted in this dissertation. Specifically, it examines the advantages and challenges associated with both multiple-wave, panel survey studies (as detailed in Chapters 5 and 6) and intervention experiments (outlined in Chapter 7). Each study within this dissertation is based on a distinct country context. Thus, in Chapter 3, I furthermore discuss the political systems in the Netherlands (Chapter five), Germany (Chapter six), and Austria (Chapter seven), the use of data-driven campaigning techniques as well as overall literacy levels per country. Finally, I present the open science principles for each study in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 presents an overview of the three studies this dissertation is based. These studies are complementary (see Table 1). The first research article in Chapter 5 centers around *citizens' understanding of data-driven campaigns* (RQ1). This study employs a panel survey approach within the context of a Dutch election campaign. The second research article (Chapter 6) explores the *interaction between citizens' understanding and evaluation of data-driven political advertising* (RQ2). Similarly, this study employs a panel survey methodology, set within the context of a German election campaign. The third research article in Chapter 7 investigates *strategies influencing citizens' understanding, evaluation, and skills* (RQ3), or digital campaign competence. This research article relies on an intervention experiment conducted in an Austrian setting. Finally, Chapter 8, delves into the results and implications of the findings, particularly regarding normative implications, individual-centered competences, and researching DDC in a European context.

**Table 1.** Overview of Dissertation

<b>Chapter</b>	<b>Approach</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Journal</b>
<b>#5 Understanding</b>	Panel Survey in the Netherlands	Exploring Digital Campaign Competence: The Role of Knowledge in Data-Driven Election Campaigns	submitted	Information, Technology & Politics
<b>#6 Understanding and Evaluation</b>	Panel Survey in Germany	Understanding Digital Campaign Competence: Conceptualizing Data-Driven Political Advertising Literacy	accepted	Mass Communication & Society
<b>#7 Understanding, Evaluation, Skills</b>	Intervention Experiment in Austria	Game Over? Using Innovative Interventions to Increase Digital Campaign Competence	submitted	Social Media & Society