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Ethnicity and Elections: Electoral Context Affects Parties' Use of Ethnic References

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Abstract

Links to specific ethnic groups constitute a defining feature of ethnic parties. Yet, whether and how references to ethnic identities appear in ethnic parties' political communication often remains unstudied despite the promise it carries. This paper investigates to what extent the electoral cycle and ethnic competition influence ethnic parties' usage of ethnic references on social media. Analyzing 1.3 million social media posts by 112 ethnic parties in 38 countries, we find that the number of ethnic references by a party increases as election day approaches. Moreover, a higher number of competing ethnic parties in elections is also associated with higher usage of ethnic references. This research contributes to our understanding of when and why parties address ethnicity on social media.

KEYWORDS

Comparative Politics, Ethnicity, Elections, Media

Zusammenfassung

Verbindungen zu spezifischen ethnischen Gruppen sind ein Bestimmungsmerkmal ethnischer Parteien. Doch die Forschung zu ethnischer Kommunikation fokussiert sich bislang auf den Vergleich einzelner Parteien in einigen wenigen Regionen. Dieser Artikel untersucht, inwieweit der Wahlzyklus und Parteienwettbewerb beeinflussen, wie häufig ethnische Parteien ethnische Referenzen in den sozialen Medien nutzen. Er wertet über 1,3 Millionen Social-Media-Posts von 112 ethnischen Parteien in 38 Ländern aus und stellt fest, dass die Anzahl der ethnischen Referenzen einer Partei zunimmt, je näher

Online website sources were last accessed on April 20th 2023.

eine Wahl rückt. Darüber hinaus ist eine höhere Anzahl konkurrierender ethnischer Parteien bei Wahlen mit einer höheren Verwendung ethnischer Referenzen verbunden. Dieser Artikel trägt zu unserem Verständnis bei, wann und warum Parteien ethnische Referenzen in sozialen Medien verwenden.

Résumé

Les liens avec des groupes ethniques spécifiques constituent la caractéristique principale des partis ethniques. Cependant, la question de savoir si et comment les références aux identités ethniques apparaissent dans la communication politique de ces partis reste inexplorée, malgré les promesses qu'elle comporte. Cet article étudie dans quelle mesure le cycle électoral et la concurrence ethnique influencent l'utilisation par les partis ethniques de références ethniques sur les médias sociaux. En analysant 1,3 million de posts sur les médias sociaux de 112 partis ethniques dans 38 pays, nous constatons que le nombre de références ethniques d'un parti augmente à l'approche du jour de l'élection. En outre, un plus grand nombre de partis ethniques en compétition lors des élections est. également associé à une plus grande utilisation des références ethniques. Cette étude nous permet de mieux comprendre quand et pourquoi les partis abordent la question de l'ethnicité sur les médias sociaux.

Riassunto

La caratteristica distintiva dei partiti etnici è di avere i legami con i relativi gruppi etnici. Tuttavia, se e come i riferimenti alle identità etniche compaiano nella comunicazione politica dei partiti etnici è una questione molto promettente ma poco studiata. Questo lavoro indaga in che misura il ciclo elettorale e la competizione etnica influenzino l'uso dei riferimenti etnici da parte dei partiti etnici sui social media. Analizzando 1,3 milioni di post sui social media di 112 partiti etnici in 38 Paesi, scopriamo che il numero di riferimenti etnici da parte di un partito aumenta con l'avvicinarsi del giorno delle elezioni. Inoltre, un numero maggiore di partiti etnici in competizione alle elezioni è anche associato a un uso più elevato di riferimenti etnici. Questa ricerca contribuisce alla comprensione di quando e perché i partiti fanno riferimento all'etnicità sui social media.

INTRODUCTION

Elections are among the most important events for (ethnic) parties in democratic states: they determine whether candidates win office and whether a party can pursue its policy goals (Strøm, 1990). To mobilize their constituencies around these vital points, ethnic parties' strategies consist of two main components: identity appeals and policy positions (Zuber, 2011).

While identity appeals describe which group a party appeals to, parties connected to the same group can differentiate themselves through varying policy positions. In this paper, we focus on the former by analyzing ethnic references made by ethnic parties on social media,[1] as ethnic parties are often assumed to rely on ethnic identity appeals in their election campaigns and political communication (Eifert et al., 2010; Gunther & Diamond, 2003; D. L. Horowitz, 2008; Vogt et al., 2021). To what extent ethnic parties rely on ethnic identity appeals is also influenced by demographic and institutional factors (e.g. Gadjanova, 2021a; D. L. Horowitz, 1985; Rabushka & Shepsle, 1972), which then shape the electoral arena and ethnic competition (Zuber, 2012).

Appeals to ethnic identities are impactful: They can affect ethnic identification as well as inter-ethnic relations (Eifert et al., 2010; Gunther & Diamond, 2003; Kendhammer, 2010). It is thus surprising that comparative cross-country research on communication by ethnic parties is scarce and, so far, almost exclusively focused on pre-election campaigning through manifestos, speeches, or rallies often without considering temporal dynamics beyond the election (Gadjanova, 2015, 2021a; Lieberman & Miller, 2021; Madrid, 2012). How ethnic parties communicate outside of election campaigns consequently remains largely unclear. Moreover, previous studies are often restricted to single countries or small-N comparisons within one region, which are difficult to generalize (Dávila Gordillo, 2021; Fox, 2023; Gadjanova, 2021a; Lieberman & Miller, 2021). This paper aims to fill this gap by analyzing social media posts by ethnic parties on Twitter and Facebook around the world. This enables us to provide a first glimpse into how these parties communicate in the digital realm and the effect electoral cycles and ethnic competition have on communication patterns.

This paper contributes to the literature by conducting a global comparison to investigate the extent to which the electoral context influences ethnic parties' use of ethnic references on social media over a more extended period of time. We thus aim to answer the following questions:

1. How do national elections influence ethnic reference usage by ethnic parties online?
2. How does electoral competition by other ethnic parties influence ethnic reference usage by ethnic parties online?

When investigating these questions, we rely on insights from case studies showing that ethnic identity appeals are not a constant feature of ethnic party communication, but rather that they are situational (Fox, 2023; Gadjanova, 2021a). It is thus necessary to study communication beyond single campaigns including a broad temporal range. More precisely, we expect electoral cycles and ethnic competition to influence the use of ethnic references. We first test whether ethnic parties more heavily rely on ethnic references during election times, as elections are the main event around which parties attempt to mobilize their constituencies. Moreover, we expect ethnic parties facing a higher number of other ethnic parties in an election to use more ethnic references than ethnic parties that face little competition in the ethnic arena.[2]

We conceive of ethnic references as multidimensional: parties can address ethnic groups by simply mentioning an ethnic denomination, but they also employ other signals such as words or phrases in an ethnic group's language or religious cues, which often clearly delineate ethnic affiliations. Including these dimensions in our analysis enables us to capture their ethnic communication more precisely. This provides us with insights into how ethnic parties appeal to

[1]We are aware that ethnic identity appeals do not preclude relevant policy positions (Gadjanova, 2013). Although policy positions have received more attention in the literature recently, they exceed the scope of this paper.

[2]These theoretical expectations should also hold for non-ethnic parties, since elections are focal events for all types of parties and recent research shows that ethnic party strategies are not as different from other parties (e.g. Gadjanova, 2021b; Zuber, 2012). Thus, we expect that parties more generally increase the use of identity appeals towards their target groups around elections and dependent on parties competing for the same group. Since our sample only consists of ethnic parties we cannot test this empirically.

ethnicity across various world regions. Employing our concept of ethnic references we analyze a global sample of text-based social media posts in English, Spanish, and French by ethnic parties on Twitter and Facebook, both during and outside of electoral campaigns.

We rely on a mixed-methods approach to collect and prepare our dataset combining theoretically rich, manual annotation of multilingual social media posts with machine learning techniques to cover large amounts of data. In contrast to existing research that largely relies on offline campaign material from single countries, we leverage parties' social media communication and retrieve ethnic parties' posts on Twitter and Facebook. To test the effect of electoral cycles on reference usage, we compare ethnic party communications over time; since social media accounts are one of the only media formats by ethnic parties consistently curated, we draw on them. Other communication forms such as websites or press releases are used much less frequently than social media posts. Thus, the latter are suited best for analyzing communication over time. By drawing on online sources, we additionally ensure a large, comparable sample for many parties and countries globally: Our sample covers 38 countries across five continents.

This paper makes several contributions. First, we provide novel insights into how ethnic parties communicate on social media across different regions and extended periods of time; we also research how elections, as dynamic events, and electoral competition influence this communication. Second, our methodological approach combines advantages from qualitative coding and machine learning. In doing so, we strike a balance between nuanced measurement and wide coverage. This stands in contrast to existing research on ethnic party communication that either hones in on fine-grained measurement in qualitative small-N studies, or uses coarser, simplistic measures such as simple counts of group names.

Our analyses show that ethnic parties attempt to mobilize along ethnic lines around election time: the number of ethnic references in their online communication increases as election day approaches. Elections thus seem to serve as focal points around which ethnic identification can culminate. Moreover, we find support that a higher number of ethnic parties competing for votes in an election increases the use of ethnic references on social media. Lastly, we provide evidence for an interaction between these two effects: The closer a post is published to an election, the greater the effect of electoral competition through other ethnic parties on the likelihood of it containing an ethnic reference.

Our study shows how electoral dynamics of ethnic politics play out online. Echoing findings from research on ethnic appeals during campaigning (e.g. Gadjanova, 2021b), we show how elections serve as a focal point for ethnic claim-making online. Similarly, competition between ethnic parties – especially ones linked to the same ethnic groups – leads to more online content revolving around ethnic identities. This speaks to previous studies on the nature of outbidding dynamics offline (Rabushka & Shepsle, 1972, p.82ff.).

LITERATURE AND THEORY

Publicly appealing to ethnic identities constitutes a core characteristic of several well-known ethnic party definitions (e.g. Chandra, 2011; Vogt et al., 2021) and is expected to play an important role in ethnic party communication. However, research specifically analyzing ethnic party communication is limited. In the following section, we provide an overview of existing studies, highlight the research gaps this paper aims to fill, and develop our theoretical expectations.

Ethnic Parties and Ethnic Appeals

We define ethnic parties as organizations that participate in elections, and that "represent the interests of specific ethnic groups, in opposition to other ethnic groups in the country,

(a) through explicit ethnic claims, (b) through recruitment along ethnic group lines, or (c) through electoral support along ethnic lines" (Vogt et al., 2021, p.1284). Ethnic recruitment is present if membership in the organization is based on ethnic identity, while ethnic electoral support describes whether voters overwhelmingly choose the party because of their own ethnic identity (ibid.).[3] The last criterion could prove problematic as it implies that a party may be classified as ethnic solely on the basis of voting behavior (electoral support), whether or not the party considers itself to be ethnically oriented. Such parties may have fewer incentives to make ethnic references and may therefore be unsuitable for testing our theoretical expectations. In our robustness checks, we exclude parties that are linked to ethnic groups according to this criterion alone.

Studying the usage of ethnic parties' political communication is pertinent because ethnic appeals increase the salience of ethnicity (Flesken, 2018a) and ethnic identification (Eifert et al., 2010; Gadjanova, 2013), which affect inter-ethnic relations (J. Horowitz, 2016) and the mobilization of individuals for elections (Kendhammer, 2010). However, research by authors such as Gadjanova (2021a) and Fox (2023) shows that parties and candidates also reach across individual ethnic groups, rather than appealing solely to their own core group. Moreover, ethnic parties often move beyond ethnicity, appealing to other societal groups or issuing less exclusive statements that target broader segments of society (Anria, 2013; Dávila Gordillo, 2021; Sanjaume-Calvet & Riera-Gil, 2022). The reasons for such behavior include demographic and institutional factors such as cross-cutting cleavages, an ethnic group being too small to win an election, sending signals for coalition-building, the ethnic composition of a specific district, or the nature of ethnic competition in elections (Fox, 2023; Gadjanova, 2017; J. Horowitz, 2016; Huber & Suryanarayan, 2016; Huszka, 2014; Posner, 2004; Zuber, 2012). Hence, ethnic parties will often strategically select the groups they want to appeal to from many possible choices.

The literature on ethnic parties and their identity appeals places special emphasis on the pivotal role of elections for party communication, coethnics' identification, and inter-ethnic relations (Flesken, 2018a; Gadjanova, 2021a; Klaus & Mitchell, 2015). For instance, Michelitch and Utych (2018) show that Ghanaian taxi drivers offered lower prices to co-partisans during elections compared to nonelection times in a survey experiment conducted with different ethnic groups. Similarly, a global analysis by Michelitch (2015) demonstrates how elections increase citizens' feelings of party identification. Yet, no study to date has offered a comparative perspective on whether such effects coincide with a corresponding increase in ethnic references of ethnic parties during campaign periods.

This comes as a surprise as individuals' ethnic identities strongly impact their electoral choices and are simultaneously influenced by parties' campaign communication. Flesken (2018a) analyzes an original panel study during the Romanian elections to measure in-group and national identification at different points, and shows that in-group identification increases during the election period. This matches the results by Eifert et al. (2010), who observe that the salience of ethnicity and ethnic identification increases before elections. Several other authors argue that ethnic parties employ identity appeals, specifically during election campaigns, to mobilize individuals to vote (Flesken, 2018a; Gadjanova, 2021a; J. Horowitz, 2016). Appeals can be particularly relevant and influential in countries with less developed media systems, where it is costly for voters to inform themselves. Here, ethnic identity appeals can serve as an inexpensive heuristic providing information on political candidates' agendas (Birnir, 2007; Conroy-Krutz, 2013; J. Horowitz, 2016).

[3]The first part of this definition – explicit ethnic claims – includes claims made on behalf of the party by the party. This overlaps with our definition of ethnic identity appeals. Consequently, some parties enter our sample because they by definition make ethnic appeals. We do not consider this to be problematic for our study because we are interested in the variation in the frequency of references between parties and not their presence or absence.

Social media platforms have become an important communication channel for (ethnic) parties in recent years, since several characteristics of digital platforms render them especially interesting: they have enabled fast, direct communication that can reach a large audience at little cost (Loyle & Bestvater, 2019; Zeitzoff, 2017). Numerous researchers have argued that this can facilitate mobilization (e.g. Diamond, 2010; Theocharis et al., 2022), especially surrounding peripheral ethnic groups (Warren, 2015). Social media sites can thus contribute to identity-building projects that combine organizational communication with individual self-expression around political issues (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

Although internal management of parties' social media communication differs greatly (Kalsnes, 2016; Klinger & Russmann, 2017), digital media channels still reflect organizations' strategic communication decisions. For instance, party leadership almost always exerts control over the general impetus of social media campaigns: Both Klinger and Russmann (2017) as well as Karlsen and Enjolras (2016) report cases where head officials outside the social media team are required to sign off on individual posts. Often, parties employ specialized actors to implement their online communication strategies (Dommett et al., 2021). In this vein, Cheeseman et al., (2020) detail the "WhatsApp politics" of Nigeria where intermediaries are paid to organize local WhatsApp groups during election campaigns.

Generally, online content often revolves around social identities like ethnicity. For instance, Wojcieszak et al., (2021) report that Twitter users are more likely to share content that is posted by in-group elites. Similarly, Rathje et al., (2021) show that attacking political out-groups leads to a higher number of shares and retweets. Even though their research is constrained to the political landscape of the United States, Kelm (2020) also notes that politicians belonging to opposition parties in Germany find it necessary to engage in online attacks against rivals in order to stand out online. Such online dynamics revolving around salient social identities could give ethnic parties an advantage over other actors interested in more unifying, inclusive narratives (Warren, 2015).

We thus focus on the relationship between ethnic parties' strategic use of *ethnic* references on social media and the role of the electoral context. In doing so, we make three key contributions: First, we do not know whether findings from existing case studies can be generalized to different world regions. With a large sample covering all world regions and several languages we provide global evidence on key assumptions of the ethnic politics literature. Second, existing research is mostly based on campaign material such as speeches or manifestos, excluding ethnic parties' communication during nonelection times or directly after elections. Consequently, we know little about whether and how ethnic parties' interactions with followers and other audiences differ between nonelection and election times. This is important because ethnic parties do not only mobilize for elections, but also for other events such as protests which can occur at any time (Ishiyama, 2009). Third, by incorporating digital communication channels like Facebook or Twitter we study a medium that could prove especially effective for ethnic parties (Warren, 2015). However, digital media have so far received little attention in the study of ethnic parties' communication. As parties can use these platforms to reach followers quickly and inexpensively, we expect them to increasingly rely on social networking sites for mobilization and communication (Zeitzoff, 2017). We thus provide a systematic cross-country study of ethnic party communication during election and non-election times. Consequently, this paper provides comparative evidence on how the electoral context of a particular country affects parties' communication on social media.

Constant or Contextual? The Role of Electoral Cycles and Electoral Competition

We expect that ethnic references are situational because the electoral cycle and degree of competition provide different incentives. The use of ethnic references should be highest around

election day and when there is a large number of competing ethnic parties. Our argument should hold for states where elections are somewhat meaningful, where ethnic parties have to compete with others for voter support, and where an ethnic cleavage is salient. Because our case selection is based on the Ethnic Power Relations' (EPR) (Vogt et al., 2015) definition of *politically relevant* ethnic groups, the ethnic cleavage holds true in all our cases.

For ethnic parties, as for any other type of party, elections are essential as they determine who holds power and is able to implement policies (Flesken, 2018b; Strøm, 1990). To win office, parties must mobilize voters to cast their ballots for them. Here, ethnic references provide a suitable means of appealing to constituencies by signaling that the party purports to represent the interests of groups that possess those ethnic attributes (Gunther & Diamond, 2003; J. Horowitz, 2016). Moreover, references to ethnic dimensions can signal a willingness for coalition-building to other parties (Posner, 2004). While parties communicate with potential voters during nonelection times as well, voter mobilization and coalition formation are more relevant during election times (Michelitch & Utych, 2018).

Following these insights, we expect ethnic parties to increase the use of ethnic references around elections:

> **H1.** The closer a social media post is published to an election, the higher the likelihood that it contains an ethnic reference.

While proximity to elections is one factor that shapes ethnic parties' communication, another significant factor lies in the electoral pressure other parties exert. We argue that the number of ethnic parties running in an election affects ethnic references as parties face different incentives depending on competition dynamics in the ethnic arena (Rabushka & Shepsle, 1972; Zuber & Szöcsik, 2015). During elections, parties campaign for votes. If there is only one ethnic party competing in the electoral arena, there is little competition for their ethnic constituency. Thus, a single party does not need to appeal as actively to ethnic identities and voters.

This changes when another ethnic party representing the same ethnic group runs in the election since both ethnic parties compete for the same ethnic constituency. The literature on ethnic outbidding (Rabushka & Shepsle, 1972, p.82ff.) predicts both exclusive identity appeals and extreme policy positions in contexts of ethnic competition. Following these insights, we expect ethnic parties to rely more heavily on ethnic references the more competition they face, thereby signaling to their ethnic group that they represent their interests more adequately.

As Zuber (2012) discusses in her paper on ethnic arenas, there are different constellations of ethnic competition: Intra-ethnic competition describes a situation in which several ethnic parties compete for votes from the same ethnic groups. Inter-ethnic competition can occur, if ethnic parties try to reach constituencies beyond their own core group, thus competing with ethnic parties representing other ethnic groups. With regard to these constellations, we again expect an increase in ethnic references compared to elections with only one ethnic party competing. Research shows that ethnic parties often make cross-ethnic appeals when their constituency is too small to win and/or to signal a willingness for coalition building to other parties (Gadjanova, 2021a; Posner, 2004). In addition, the literature reveals that ethnic bloc voting rarely occurs (Reilly, 2021), so it often makes sense for ethnic parties to appeal to other ethnic constituencies as well. In other words, the different constellations lead to divergent strategic incentives for ethnic parties (e.g. to make more cross-ethnic appeals rather than only targeting their own ethnic group). Following the argument presented above, we expect the following with regard to ethnic references:

> **H2.** The higher the number of ethnic parties competing in a country, the higher the likelihood that a social media post contains an ethnic reference.

Finally, if it is true that the number of competing ethnic parties influences usage of ethnic references this effect should be more pronounced closer to elections. Our reasoning is that parties begin to actively vie for votes as time passes, and should do so more through ethnic references if more competition is present. We therefore theorize an interaction effect between electoral cycles and electoral competition:

> **H3.** The closer a post appears to an election, the greater the effect of electoral competition on the probability of ethnic references.

DATA

Before testing our hypotheses, we first describe the data. Afterwards we evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of social media data, as well as our data collection process.

Data Collection

Our research design requires data on ethnic parties, their social media presence, and the electoral context in which they operate. For party-level variables, we mainly rely on data from two sources: The EPR-O dataset providing information on politically relevant ethnic groups and organizations linked to them (Gremler, Vogt, & Weidmann, 2024; Vogt et al., 2021), as well as the related Ethnic Organizations Online (EO2) dataset listing social media accounts of ethnic organizations covered in EPR-O (Gremler & Weidmann, 2024). We also draw on the EPR-O definition of an "ethnic party", as described in the literature review. To obtain information about these organizations' use of online channels, we work with the list of social media accounts provided in the EO2 dataset.

Social media data is comparatively accessible and constitutes so-called "big data".[4] These two features prove especially advantageous in regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, where poor availability of party communication data for political actors would otherwise pose a problem. This data scarcity in many world regions might also partially explain the dearth of large-N research in the field.[5] Here, social media enables us to retrieve rich and comparable data across many cases as many organizations have adopted social media. Finally, the relative novelty of social networking sites, like Facebook and Twitter, motivates our investigation and at the same time gives rise to a note of caution: Social media platforms possess unique properties and affordances that could hamper the transferability of our results to other communication media. For instance, content can easily be deleted or modified ex post. Moreover, audiences may be more international (Jones & Mattiacci, 2019). Although we keep these limitations in mind, all forms of media come with specific audiences and idiosyncrasies; for instance, party manifestos reach very few voters directly, and they are specifically written prior to elections, omitting any potential compromises or changes ex post. With social media quickly becoming an integral part of parties' communication toolboxes, it is thus worthwhile to study parties' social media channels.

The EPR-O dataset lists organizations – ranging from political parties to guerrilla groups – connected to the nationally relevant ethnic groups present in the core EPR dataset (Vogt et al., 2015). EPR-O provides information on ethnic organizations in 90 countries, covering 1945–2019. Due to sequential coding in different projects, the countries in EPR-O were sampled from all possible countries contained in EPR in three stages, according to varying criteria. First, 40 countries

[4]All data was collected before Twitter imposed restrictions on Academic API usage.

[5]From our own research, we frequently observed that party manifestos did not exist, speeches were not recorded, media coverage was limited, or party websites were outdated.

FIGURE 1 Overview of country sample.

were drawn with a stratified strategy where 50 percent had experienced ethnic conflict and 50 percent had not. A further 40 countries were sampled randomly. Finally, a further 10 countries that use English as an official language were sampled randomly from the remaining countries. We believe that this sample is large enough to avoid biasing our results: EPR-O already contains more than 50 percent of all countries contained in EPR (90/174 in total). This does not imply that other selection biases do not play a role; below, we address such possible problems related to selecting specific groups and organizations from this sample.

For data on social media profiles, the EO2 dataset collects the presence of online channels (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Websites) for all organizations present in the EPR-O dataset after the year 2000. Facebook and Twitter are commonly viewed as the most important social media platforms for political communication (Barberá & Zeitzoff, 2018). From the list of Twitter and Facebook accounts provided by EO2, posts and tweets were consistently retrieved with open-source tools. For Twitter, we relied on the Academic Search API, receiving all tweets from a public profile. Facebook data was collected manually with support of open-source tools.[6] All data was collected between August 2019 and November 2022. For this study, we have annotated ethnic party communication on social media from all countries from the EPR-O sample that employ English, Spanish, or French as one of the main languages, which are displayed in Figure 1.[7] The selection is restricted by the language abilities of the authors. We are aware of the bias this decision entails, but decided against automatic translation from other languages as it often forfeits the nuance of the original post and many ethnic languages can be considered low-resource languages (Ngoc Le & Sadat, 2020). Despite steady progress in the area of machine learning and low-resource languages (e.g. Magueresse et al., 2020; Paul et al., 2013), the quality of automatic translation would vary between different languages and affect the detection of ethnic references.[8]

[6]In particular, our efforts were supported by https://github.com/kevinzg/facebook-scraperfacebook-scraper. For further information, contact the authors.

[7]The countries for which ethnic party communication is manually annotated are: Australia, Bangladesh, Belgium, Bolivia, Botswana, Burundi, Chad, Costa Rica, Cote D'Ivoire, Ecuador, Equatorial Guinea, Fiji, France, Guatemala, Guinea, Liberia, Malawi, Malaysia, Mauritania, Morocco, Namibia, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Papua-New-Guinea, Paraguay, Peru, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Sri Lanka, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda, United Kingdom, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

[8]While the coding of ethnic references in our scheme is often based on single words, the automated detection does take into account the context of words to evaluate whether a post contains an ethnic reference or not. As a consequence, our methodological approach would require the correct translation of not only single words but the whole post.

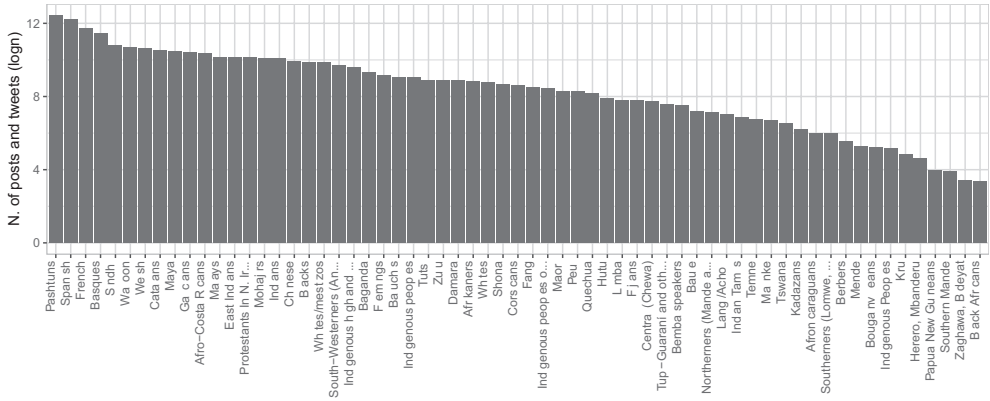

FIGURE 2 Post frequencies by EPR-group.

Thus, the countries in white in Figure 1 are not considered in our analysis because they are not included in the EPR-O dataset, do not fit the language restrictions, no ethnic party exists, or because there are not enough social media posts.

In total, our social media data comprises 1,337,775 posts (Facebook = 205,729, Twitter = 1,132,192) by 112 ethnic parties, in 38 countries, on five continents. The most recent post or tweet in our collection is from November 2022.

Figure 2 displays the ethnic groups under study and the combined number of posts (natural logarithm) by linked ethnic parties on both platforms. There are large differences in the total number of posts: South Africa's Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), which is linked to all non-White groups, total more than 60,000 tweets, while Chad's Patriotic Salvation Movement, linked to Muslim Sahel groups, only numbers 30. Moreover, the EO2 data shows that very few groups have parties that use either Twitter or Facebook exclusively – it is thus important to study both platforms in conjunction.

Coding Ethnic References

Our design requires an operationalization of ethnic references that is valid in and applicable to different world regions as we aim to compare communication globally. Existing research (as described in more detail in Appendix B) often navigates a trade-off between manual and automated text analysis: Manual annotation permits detailed measurement capturing country-specific details (Schreier, 2012), but is resource- and knowledge-intensive. Consequently, such analyses focus on one or, at most, a handful of countries. Automated text analysis can cover more content in a shorter time, but the analytical categories are often rather broad and simple. This project offers a middle ground: by combining manual coding with machine learning techniques, we can analyze a large amount of data within a more nuanced coding scheme. Additionally, by developing a universally applicable coding scheme, we can compare ethnic party communications across different regions.

Table 1 summarizes the coding scheme, which captures several catogories of ethnic references: *Multi-Ethnic Group Name*, *Single-Ethnic Group Name*, *Region/Country Group Name*, *Ethnic Language Use*, and *Religion*. This differentiation is based on a multistage process combining deductive category-building based on theoretical insights with inductive code development during trial rounds (Krippendorff, 2013; Schreier, 2012).[9] Theoretically, we rely on Chandra (2011),

[9]For further information about the development process see Appendix B.2.

TABLE 1 Coding of ethnic references.

Code	Description	Example
Multi-Ethnic Group Name	Using group name that includes multiple ethnic groups	"Luthuli: Today, it is mainly black people who remain landless, jobless, homeless, and abused. It is black people who suffer the consequences of your poor management of the economy." (EFF, 2020, Twitter, South Africa)
Single-Ethnic Group Name	Using group name by a single ethnic group	"Celebrating the Chewa heritage" (MCP, 2013, Facebook, Malawi)
Region/Country Group Name	Using ethnic group name that also describes a region or country	"Fiji's literacy status at 96 per cent #Progress #ForFijians #unity4FijiFirst" (FijiFirst, 2017, Twitter, Fiji)
Ethnic Language Use	Parts of post made in an ethnic language or talks about ethnic language	"Tena koutou whanau ma, if you're in the Wellington region come on over to Rahui Katene's campaign launch-6pm" (Maori Party, 2011, Twitter, New Zealand)
Religion	References to religion in general or to specific religions	"Our warmest wishes to SA's Jewish community as they celebrate Rosh Hashanah" (IFP, 2019, Twitter, South Africa)

Fox (2023), and Huber (2017) who argue that ethnic identities are based on the activation and possession of attributes such as "race, religion, sect, language, dialect, tribe, clan, caste, nationality, and physical differences" (Chandra, 2012, p.109). We adopt the definition by Fox (2023) of an "an ethnic appeal as an explicit or implicit message [..] invoking an ethnic dimension, category, or subcategory" (Fox, 2023, p.95). According to the scheme by Fox (2023), an ethnic dimension might be "religion", a category of that dimension could be "Christianity", and a subcategory could be "Protestant". His operationalization is based on the definition of "ethnic identities as a *subset of categories in which descent-based attributes are necessary for membership*" by Chandra (2012, p.9), who argues that all individual have attributes making them eligible to be part of what she refers to as "ethnic identity categories" (Chandra, 2012, p.51). What Fox labels dimensions and categories, Chandra refers to as attributes.

One of the most obvious ways to address an ethnic group is by naming it in online posts. In some countries, ethnic group names are also used to address the whole nation, or specific regions within a country (e.g. Fijians in Fiji, or Catalans in Spain). Hence, it can often be unclear whether the post appeals to the ethnic group specifically, or all citizens of the country/region. For such cases, we introduced another code: *Region/Country Group Name*. This speaks to research showing that territorial and ethnic cleavages may overlap, but not deterministically so (Sanjaume-Calvet & Riera-Gil, 2022).[10] The *Ethnic Language Use* code is assigned if an ethnic language is used in the post or if a party talks about an ethnic language. Since some of the codes were not assigned very often, we combined the codes *Multi-Ethnic Group Name* and *Single-Ethnic Group Name* into one *Ethnic Group Name* category. Finally, some attributes can refer to identity groups other than ethnic ones across different regions and context. One such case are references to religious identities: Since we attempt to make a global comparison, we have thus decided against including the *Religion* code in all model specifications.[11]

[10]We prefer this configuration—excluding *Religion* but including *Region/Country Group Name*—as anecdotal evidence suggests that the latter constitutes an important part of mobilizing co-ethnic communities.

[11]The trial coding revealed that some categories, such as somatic features, tribe, or clan, were rarely referred to, which is why we subsumed them under the *Ethnicity (Resid.)* code. Ultimately, the code could not be included in the analysis because its occurrence was too scarce, and the content too disparate, to result in satisfactory accuracy of classifiers.

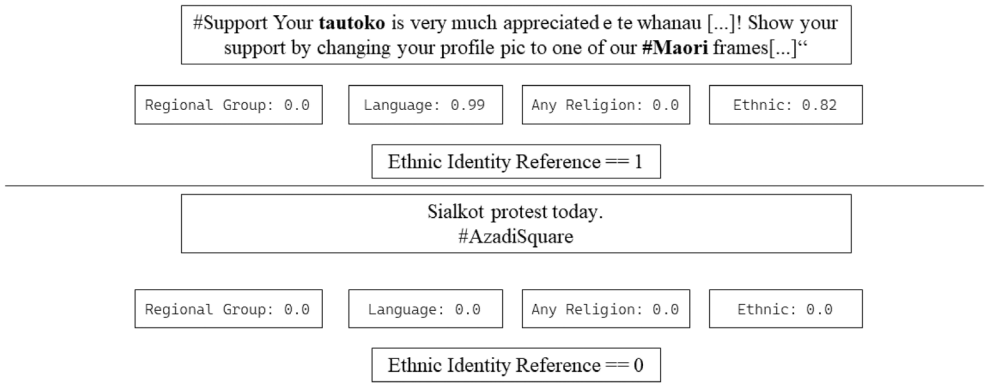

FIGURE 3 Two examples of model predictions.

One drawback of our analysis is that we do not measure whether the party's ethnic reference is specific to its own ethnic group or to another ethnic group. This information would enable a much more fine-grained analysis, but the coding and automation process would have exceeded the scope of this paper as explained in more detail in Appendix B.

In the first step of the data preparation, we manually annotate a random sample of our dataset based on our original coding scheme developed to measure ethnic references (Appendix B provides more details on sampling and inter-coder reliability). Overall, 9,694 posts and tweets in 38 countries were hand coded and then used to train machine learning models. These models then predicted ethnic references on more than 1.3 million social media posts.

In order to apply our coding scheme to the whole corpus of tweets and posts, we train a machine learning model on our hand-coded sample. We employ a transfer learning approach, relying on a pre-trained Transformer model (Vaswani et al., 2017): `MDeberta` with the Python library `transformers`. Appendix B describes the methodological procedure in more detail.

After being trained on all annotated data, machine learning models were used to predict ethnic references in all English, French, and Spanish posts of organizations in our sample. Post language was predicted by Google's `cld3`. Our dependent variable takes a value of 1 if our models predict references to religion, use of another language, or group names. Note that prediction only takes place for parties and organizations that have received manual coding – we do not use our models to identify ethnic references in countries and organizations not contained in the training data. Consider the example in Figure 3: Here, the first post has a predicted label of language (99 percent, “tautoko”) and an *Ethnic Group Name* (82 percent, “Maori”). In our analysis, such a post would thus contain an ethnic reference. The second example is a tweet by the Pakistan Justice Movement (PTI). It does not contain a linguistic or religious reference, nor does it mention regional, national, or ethnic group names. Instead, it is probably intended as a call to action mentioning two place names: Sialkot and Azadi Square. Here, our classifiers do not predict any ethnic reference.

If prediction scores for one of our labels of interest crossed 80 percent, a label was assigned; if the prediction score for a label was below 80 percent, no label was assigned. For each label, we manually checked 150 predicted posts as a plausibility check. Predictions generally matched our understanding of the codes. Moreover, Appendix R provides evidence that our classifier's predictions are not biased by important covariates later used in the analysis.

Potential Biases: Language, Party Bans, Majority Parties, and Deletion

This section addresses some potential biases of the research design and the means we used for minimizing those biases. As with almost all variables, the construction of our dependent variable contains several sources of measurement error. The previous section has already dealt with potential biases with machine prediction. This section, in turn, addresses possible challenges stemming from biased coding of the manually annotated data, party bans, parties linked to majority groups, and deletion of content.

Due to the language abilities of the researchers, we were only able to code posts in three languages. As can be seen in Figure 1, this leads to a regional bias, with Asia in particular being underrepresented. Moreover, former colonial states often oppressed ethnic groups, and our coded languages could be viewed as the language of former oppressors: whether an ethnic party uses English, French, or Spanish, or a local ethnic language in social media posts could have a political dimension as well. The question remains whether ethnic parties use more ethnic references when communicating in their ethnic language, compared to posts in English, Spanish, and French. In addition, parties could utilize different languages to address different audiences (e.g. English to talk to the international community, and the ethnic language to address the ethnic constituency). It could be that parties use more ethnic cues when addressing specific audiences.

To assess the extent of this bias, we identified an ethnic party in our sample that had a high share of posts in the respective ethnic language, as well as two parties with high numbers of *Ethnic Language Use* codes in our coded sample (meaning that within their English, French, or Spanish posts, they used many words or sentences in an ethnic language). These were CD&V (Belgium), Mana Movement (New Zealand), and BPF (Botswana). For the Belgian CD&V party, we identified 86 posts written entirely in Dutch. We translated these posts into English and then applied our coding scheme. All in all, only three ethnic references were made: two *Religion* references and one *Region/Country Group Name*. Thus, 3.5 percent of posts contained an ethnic reference. This number barely differs from the 3.6 percent CD&V posts in French that contained an ethnic reference (except *Ethnic Language Use*). For the Mana Movement and the BPF, we translated the individual words/sentences written in Maori and Sotho, respectively, into English to detect how many ethnic references might be overlooked by ignoring languages other than French, English, or Spanish. When translating the Maori words and sentences, we detected that 15 percent of the Maori language content was an ethnic references, while the remaining 85 percent was not related to our coding scheme. For the BPF, three percent of the Sotho words were ethnic references. We selected the Mana Movement and BPF because these were the parties with the highest occurrences of *Ethnic Language Use* codes and we find that they make ethnic references in their ethnic languages. Since other parties used ethnic languages less frequently within their posts, it can be assumed that for those parties we miss out on fewer ethnic references. Nevertheless, the analysis revealed that neglecting words/sentences in an ethnic language does overlook ethnic references and we underestimate the use of ethnic references in posts by focusing on English, French and Spanish.

Another potential bias stems from ethnic party bans that exist in several African countries (Moroff, 2010). At the beginning of the 1990s, some African countries introduced party regulation laws, often targeting ethnic parties. This concerns 11 countries in our sample. While the specific policies and implementations differ between countries, these laws could affect the number of ethnic parties and how openly they make ethnic claims (ibid.). However, it is unclear how effective such bans are since, according to the EPR-O data, ethnic parties operate in all 11 countries. Nevertheless, a bias could exist. If such restrictions are present in a country, ethnic parties may refrain from making extensive ethnic references to avoid being banned, which could explain the low level of references in our

analysis of those countries. Since, to the best of our knowledge, no global database of ethnic party bans exists, we cannot control for this variable in our regression. However, using the data on Africa from Moroff (2010), we descriptively compare countries in Sub-Saharan Africa with and without party bans. As the results (displayed in the next section) show, the discrepancy between countries with and without ethnic party ban is not significant enough to warrant the exclusion of these countries.

Moreover, our sample contains parties representing both majority and minority ethnic groups. With regard to communication, it is important to keep this difference in mind because majority ethnic parties may face different communication incentives. Since majority ethnic parties represent the biggest ethnic group in a country, it may be unnecessary for them to make ethnic references as everyone already knows whom they represent. Alternatively, they may use the *Region/Country Group Name* reference more often since the majority group is often similar to the country name (e.g. Spanish people in Spain). In our analysis, we control for ethnic group size and present some descriptive statistics on the extent to which ethnic parties in power differ in their reference usage from ethnic parties not in power.

Finally, deletion of online content is an issue that pertains to almost all online media. In our case, it is most likely to affect extreme content that contains ethnic references. Such content could generate controversy or even violate terms of service of sites and thus be deleted before our data collection. However, we believe that such patterns would bias our estimates downwards: If content containing ethnic references is more likely to be deleted than other content and if such posts are in turn more likely to appear close to elections, then we would systematically *underestimate* the number of posts/tweets with ethnic references in our analyses.

ANALYSIS

In this section, we present the results of our analysis. We begin by presenting descriptive statistics before discussing the findings for each hypothesis in detail.

Descriptive Results

Table 2 displays the mean of the average reference frequency per ethnic party in the predicted data.[12] Note that while frequencies for some ethnic references are relatively low, ranging from 2.1 percent (*Any Ethnic Group Name*) to 18.27 percent (*Any Ethnic Reference*), these numbers are still substantial as our sample contains more than 1.3 million observations. Even for a relatively rare code like references to religion (3.6 percent), this translates to more than 30,000 predicted instances.

Interestingly, references to group names (*Ethnic Group Name*) by ethnic parties are the exception not the rule: only 2.1 percent of posts (or 4.8 percent combined with *Region/Country Group Name*) contain any mention of them. Note, however, that these numbers do not differentiate between groups a party may want to appeal to and groups it might want to differentiate itself from. Here, we assume that both serve to delineate party positions with regard to ethnic group identities. The high occurrence of the *Ethnic Language Use* code is noticeable and can be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that it is quite common to use ethnic language words in everyday life in some countries (such as "Llajta" in Bolivia or "Aotearoa" in New Zealand), even among non-ethnic parties or individuals. Such ethnic language use does not exert the same effect on ethnic identification as it might in other contexts (Dávila Gordillo, 2021).

[12]We use the mean of the averages per party rather than the total mean to avoid skewing our means toward organizations that post at high frequencies: Appendix F displays the mean population level of annotation frequencies.

TABLE 2 Frequencies of predicted labels by machine learning models.

Predicted Label	Percentage of All Posts
Any Ethnic Reference	18.27
Any Ethnic Reference (No Region/Country)	15.98
Any Ethnic Group Name	2.10
Region/Country Group Name	2.72
Uses Different Language	11.33
General Religious Reference	3.64

On the one hand, these numbers indicate that the majority of ethnic parties posts come without explicit ethnic references. Alternatively, parties could appeal to other social identity groups (e.g. young people or certain social classes), or even refrain from mentioning specific identities at all. On the other hand, it could also be that they do not need to signal their ethnic belonging because it is already obvious from the party's name (Flesken, 2018a, p.1170), election material in past elections, or candidate's ethnicity (Conroy-Krutz, 2013). Moreover, even a relatively low number of ethnic references might be sufficient to signal ethnic alignment to potential supporters.

Generally, we observe large discrepancies between parties: Our classifiers predict that for New Zealand's Maori Party (Te Paati Maori), close to 26 percent of all posts contain ethnic references, while less than one percent do so for the Malawi Congress Party (MCP). These differences also reflect the broad coverage we were able to achieve with our data collection approach. Our sample includes countries ranging from autocracies to full democracies per V-Dem's electoral democracy index. Geographically, the sample combines countries from all relevant regions of the world thereby also shedding light on typically less studied areas in comparative politics (Wilson & Knutsen, 2022).[13]

With its coverage, the dataset itself could be an important resource to further analyze communication by ethnic parties worldwide. We provide further descriptive statistics in the Appendix G: First, we check whether reference frequency is affected by a party's power status. Indeed, parties linked to incumbent groups are less likely to use ethnic references (s.a. Gadjanova, 2021b; Gremler & Weidmann, 2024). Second, during manual coding, we observed that incumbent ethnic parties such as AFF in Australia often engaged in populist, nationalist rhetoric in which majority identities do play an important role: Consider for instance, the following abhorrent quote: *"1945-whites rated 25% of world's popn; 2001 it was down to 10%. Abortion […]; the pill are breeding out the Anglo races"* (AFF, 2014, Twitter). Despite these semantic differences, majority and minority parties referenced ethnicity at similar rates (12 and 14 percent). Third, we investigate platform differences (Appendix I), finding that ethnic references occur more often on Facebook than on Twitter (15 and 13 percent). Finally, we analyzed countries in Sub-Saharan Africa with and without a national ethnic party ban with data from Moroff (2010). As these bans are usually not enforced, we only find a two percent decrease of ethnic references by parties in countries where such laws exist (Appendix J).

Electoral Cycles and References

We now turn to our first hypothesis testing whether election timelines influence the frequency of ethnic references. Here, Figure 4 provides visual evidence that parties increasingly turn

[13]This excludes North America where EPR-O does not record ethnic parties.

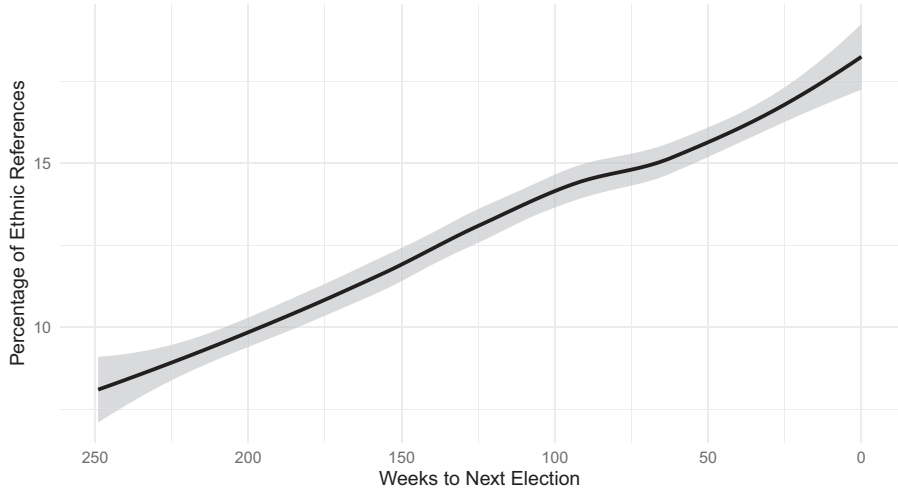

FIGURE 4 Percentage of ethnic references by organization and weeks to next election (GAM).

to content referencing ethnic categories as elections draw closer: It presents a bivariate generalized additive model (GAM) of the percentage of weekly posts with an ethnic reference (no *Religion* codes) of all organizations in our data. From the day of an election to nearly five years before the next election, we observe a substantial increase. The percentage of posts with an ethnic reference is estimated at around nine percent at five years (250 weeks) removed from the next election, increasing to around 15 percent on election day.

Table 3 provides additional support for this pattern. It presents several logistic multilevel models testing Hypothesis H1 (Electoral Proximity). The dependent variable in Table 3 is whether a post or tweet contains any ethnic reference (0/1), excluding religious appeals. We use multilevel models to be able to include variables at all three levels of our analysis (posts, parties, countries). Observations are thus nested within two levels: The party and the country.

For the independent variable, we present several configurations. Model 1 takes the natural logarithm of the number of days to the next election.[14] Model 2 takes the number of days to the *closest* election – future and past. The natural logarithm of this variable in Model 3 shrinks larger day values, because whether an election takes place in two years versus three years should not matter very much for party communication, as both events lie in the distant future. We also prefer this specification because it follows our logic of elections as opportunities for parties to appeal to ethnicity, even after election day, and not only during pre-election campaigning. Sending ethnic signals and mobilizing supporters can continue after elections as parties enter into coalition negotiations, stage post-election protests and rallies, and clarify stances on important issues. This understanding also moves beyond studies that only consider campaigning prior to elections. Finally, Model 4 introduces a specification that records whether an election takes place within four weeks of publication of the post (1) or not (0). For all models, we exclude observations where the number of days to the closest election is greater than 1,000 – if an election does not occur within six years of a post, this implies extremely irregular election cycles.[15] We introduce several control variables that could potentially confound the relationship between our independent and dependent variable: the platform where the post was published (own data), the average population of all linked groups (logarithm, EPR), whether the organization is multiethnic (EPR-O), the

[14]Divided by 100 for ease of interpretation.

[15]Note that this measure includes both the most recent and future elections. For models that use time to next election as the independent variable, we impose no restrictions.

TABLE 3 Multilevel models: Ethnic references and proximity to elections

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Days to next election / 100	−0.03***			
	(0.00)			
Days to closest election / 100		−0.01***		
		(0.00)		
Days to closest elec (log.)			−0.01***	
			(0.00)	
Election window: 4 weeks				0.20***
				(0.01)
FB (0)/TW (1)	−0.74***	−0.79***	−0.77***	−0.77***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Mean pop. linked groups (log)	0.14	0.18***	0.18***	0.18
	(0.11)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.11)
Multiethnic Org	−0.16	−0.34	−0.31	−0.32
	(0.45)	(0.73)	(0.47)	(0.42)
Mean nightlights (pc log)	5.16	4.66***	4.73***	4.73
	(3.75)	(0.10)	(0.11)	(3.45)
Any linked group in power	−0.69*	−0.68***	−0.66***	−0.66*
	(0.31)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.29)
AIC	642356.48	809876.89	867263.49	866781.61
Log Likelihood	−321169.24	−404929.44	−433622.75	−433381.81
Num. obs.	951698	1189243	1252729	1252729
Num. groups: Organization	95	97	98	98
Num. groups: Country	34	33	34	34
Var: Organization (Intercept)	0.89	0.89	0.89	0.89
Var: Country (Intercept)	1.15	0.93	0.89	0.89

***$p<0.001$; **$p<0.01$; *$p<0.05$; ·$p < 0.1$.

average nightlights per capita in linked groups' territory (logarithm, EPR) and whether any linked group is currently coded as in power (EPR).

The models in Table 3 provide strong support for our hypothesis that parties use a greater number of references to ethnicity closer to elections. For Models 1, 2, and 3 that count the number of days to the next or closest election, we observe a negative effect: As a post is published farther away from election day, this is associated with a decrease in probability of ethnic references. Conversely, if it is created within four weeks of it, this increases the likelihood of ethnic references.

This relationship holds across several alternative specifications. In Appendix K we present results for regressions without parties classified as ethnic by EPR-O solely because of electoral support. This ethnic party measure involves a high level of uncertainty as it is often difficult to ascertain whether voting patterns reflect demographic and regional patterns or whether they relate to ethnic grievances. These models also support H1, displaying even stronger significant effects than Table 3.

We supplement these analyses with multilevel models that take aggregate measures of organizations' posting behavior in a particular week as the dependent variable, presented in Appendix L. Here, we count the weekly number of predicted ethnic references as well as a

measure of the proportion of these references for each organization. The latter configuration allows us to gauge whether organizations only post more frequently around election time, or whether they also increase the share of ethnic references in their communications. These additional models also support our conclusions: The closer an election is, the higher the share *and* frequency of ethnic references.

Electoral Competition and Ethnic References

Table 4 presents our results testing our expectation that ethnic competition in the electoral arena leads to parties using more ethnic references (H2). All models are logistic multilevel models with posts and tweets nested within organizations and countries. The dependent variables are specified as before. To measure ethnic electoral competition, we count the number of parties in the EPR-O dataset in a given year in a particular country. We present three specifications of this variable: In Models 1 and 2 we include all ethnic parties, in Model 3 only parties *within* the same ethnic group (intra-ethnic), in Model 4 all parties *except those linked to the same group* (inter-ethnic).

To illustrate our measures, consider the Fiji First Party from Fiji in the year 2017. EPR-O codes four parties for that year, giving the total number of ethnic parties. Three of those parties (including the Fiji First Party) are linked to Indo-Fijians. Thus, the number of parties connected to the same group is three. One party (SODELPA) is linked to ethnic Fijians, thus the number of ethnic parties outside of the own group is one.

As before, we introduce several control variables that could potentially confound the relationship between the number of ethnic parties and ethnic reference usage. To give an example, and as already shown in the descriptive analysis, ethnic parties communicate differently depending on whether they are in power or not (Gremler & Weidmann, 2024). At the same time, whether ethnic parties control state resources could influence whether other parties begin to pursue ethnic agendas to capture votes of other ethnic groups.

As our research design does not allow us to differentiate between ethnic references that address coethnics and messages that reference other ethnic groups, we cannot test the different effects of competition in detail. Despite this limitation, our analysis contributes to the research on ethnic party competition: It is one of the first to analyze the effects of competitors on ethnic reference use. All models in Table 4 support our hypothesis. Regardless of our specification of ethnic competition, the effects are positive and significant. Model 1 shows a positive, significant association between the number of ethnic parties in the electoral arena and the likelihood of a tweet/post containing a reference to ethnicity. In Model 2 we introduce the electoral system of the next election as an independent variable, as it could influence the number of parties and their ethnic reference use (Lublin, 2017). Again, the coefficient is positive and significant. Similarly, higher number of parties claiming to represent the same group (Model 3) as well as other groups (Model 4) predict a higher likelihood of ethnic references. In Appendix M, we also add the electoral system to Models 3 and 4. Again, the coefficients are positive and significant. Moreover, we repeat these analyses without parties linked only via the ethnic electoral support criterion in Appendix N. The results replicate the findings from Table 4 with one exception: The coefficient for inter-ethnic competition loses significance.

As before, we also test our hypothesis with multilevel models that take the aggregate number of predicted ethnic references in a particular week per organization as the dependent variable. These specifications are presented in Appendix O. These models provide more ambivalent results. While the share *and* total frequency of posts with ethnic references within a week by an organization increases for our variables measuring the number of all ethnic parties as well as ethnic parties within the same group, this is not the case for parties representing *other* ethnic groups. Here, contrary to our expectations, a higher number of other ethnic parties

TABLE 4 Multilevel models: Number of EPR-O parties and frequency of ethnic references.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
N ethnic parties (EPR-O)	0.22***	0.18***		
	(0.00)	(0.00)		
N ethnic parties per group (EPR-O)			0.25***	
			(0.01)	
N ethnic parties outside of group (EPR-O)				0.11***
				(0.03)
FB (0)/TW (1)	−0.77***	−0.90***	−0.76***	−0.77***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Mean pop. linked groups (log)	0.00	−0.01	0.07	0.18***
	(0.11)	(0.14)	(0.10)	(0.01)
Multiethnic org	−0.05	−0.36	−0.42	−0.32
	(0.43)	(0.72)	(0.40)	(0.42)
Nightlights pc log	1.18	1.60	5.45	4.64***
	(3.73)	(3.60)	(3.17)	(0.03)
Any linked group in power	−0.31	−0.29	−0.36	−0.65***
	(0.30)	(0.46)	(0.28)	(0.03)
Majoritarian (0)/Poportional (1)		0.57		
		(0.52)		
AIC	863607.15	628455.90	866886.81	867342.36
Log Likelihood	−431794.58	−314217.95	−433434.41	−433662.18
Num. obs.	1252729	793294	1252729	1252729
Num. groups: Organization	98	57	98	98
Num. groups: Country	34	18	34	34
Var: Organization (Intercept)	0.81	0.90	0.80	0.90
Var: Country (Intercept)	1.26	0.64	0.71	0.83

***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05; $^{\cdot}p < 0.1$.

predicts a lower percentage of references. Against the backdrop of our previous analyses, this could imply that other ethnic parties do not necessarily induce an "ethnification" of the electoral arena. Rather, group-specific outbidding dynamics with intra-ethnic competition seem to drive parties' ethnic claim-making.

Electoral Competition, Timing, and References

For our hypothesis on the interaction of election proximity and the number of ethnic parties (H3), our analysis provides support for our expectations. To test this, Figure 5 displays predictions from a multilevel model interacting the natural logarithm of days to the next election and number of parties. Again, the dependent variable is whether a post or tweet contains an ethnic reference.

Across several models, we find strong evidence that the higher the number of ethnic parties, the greater the effect of electoral proximity. Figure 5 shows an increasing effect of the number of parties on the proportion of posts with an ethnic reference the closer a post appears to an upcoming election. In Appendix Q we provide further evidence for this, finding the same

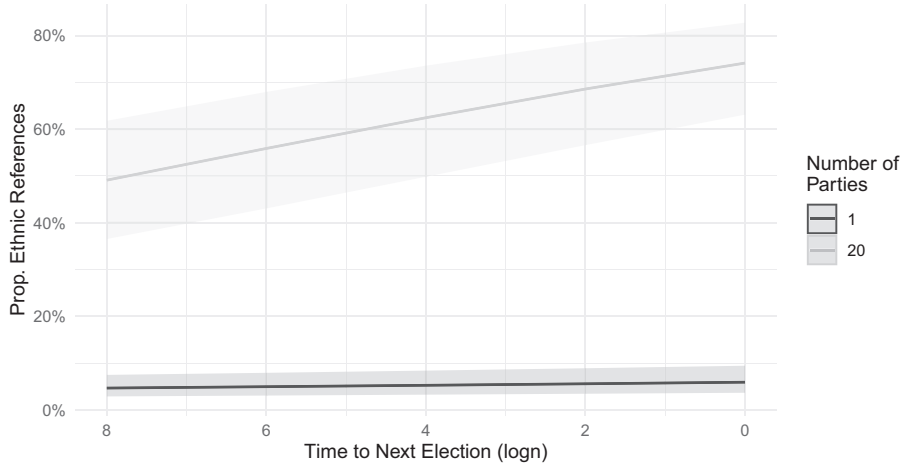

FIGURE 5 Marginal effects plot: Predictions generated from Model 1 in Table 16 in Appendix P. The graph displays the association of days to next election (logn) and the number of parties on the proportion of ethnic references. All other variables are held at their mean or mode when generating predictions.

association for intra-ethnic party competition. However, for ethnic parties outside of the own group, this difference is less pronounced as confidence intervals for the marginal effect plots overlap. This mirrors the results from our previous analysis where the effect of intra-ethnic competition proved stronger than the one of inter-ethnic competition.

CONCLUSION

While many works have examined and explained ethnic parties' political communications, this knowledge is often limited to specific campaign periods (s.a. Castanho Silva et al., 2023) and offline media. Few works have comparatively analyzed how electoral cycles and ethnic competition affect parties' use of ethnic references before, during, and after elections on social media. As more and more voters take to digital platforms to inform themselves about politics (Newman et al., 2021), it becomes essential to understand the logics that drive the creation of political content online. In this vein, our study is the first to systematically analyze the communication of ethnic parties on Twitter and Facebook.

We find that ethnic references by ethnic parties are multidimensional, ranging from mentioning ethnic group names to more nuanced pointers to religious or linguistic features. The closer in time a post appears to an election, the more likely it is to contain an ethnic reference. These results fit with much of the research on ethnic parties' campaigning strategies and communication (Eifert et al., 2010; Gadjanova, 2021a). Moreover, we find that a greater number of other ethnic parties – whether they claim to represent the same ethnic group or not – is associated with a higher likelihood of ethnic references. Competition in the ethnic arena thus leads parties to double down on mobilizing voters based on their ethnic identities.

These findings illustrate how electoral dynamics surrounding ethnicity play out online. Indeed, many of the mechanisms of ethnic campaigning and outbidding continue on platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Our approach offers the opportunity to study further questions with a comparative focus. For instance, future studies could examine *which* groups are targeted. Additionally, whether and how ethnic references impact coethnics' identification on- and offline remains an open question. Moreover, this study's focus on

parties ignores that politics in many countries has become more candidate-centered, particularly during election times. Consequently, candidates' communication might rely more heavily on ethnic references than official party messages do (Kendall-Taylor et al., 2017).[16]

Overall, our results fit with case studies that question the centrality of ethnic references, while supporting assumptions of ethnic party literature regarding the importance of elections and electoral competition. After all, only a fifth of party's online communication contained ethnic references, group names were only mentioned in about four percent of all posts. Instead, we noted that parties also frequently appeal to other societal groups, such as social classes or gender groups.

Finally, we do not capture ethnic references made through pictures, videos, emojis, or sound. Our coding scheme is conservative in that we err on the side of caution, avoiding speculative interpretations, to ensure reliability and cross-country comparability. Yet, social media is often multimodal and symbolic appeals (e.g. flags or traditional dress) made through images and/or audio are an important tool for party mobilization (Madrid, 2012, p.55). Future studies could incorporate these characteristics in order to arrive at a more encompassing view of ethnic parties' online communication.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in at https://cloud.uni-konstanz.de/index.php/s/3RTSwTKa7wW2L79. Due to data use policies only IDs of posts and tweets are shared.

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[16]Another limitation is that we treat ethnic parties as unitary actors. However, it is unlikely that all ethnic parties have a single communication strategy, consistently reproduced across social media channels.

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