Networked Locality

Social media and local politics in Hungary

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Preface

Social media has profoundly reshaped how we interact, communicate, and participate politically, transforming not just global but also local political landscapes. This book emerges from a recognition of a critical yet often overlooked dimension of digital political engagement: the local public sphere as it manifests through platforms like Facebook. Drawing upon extensive nationwide research in Hungary, this volume investigates how social media platforms operate as new spaces for local political interaction, community-building, and public discourse, and assesses their implications for democratic practices.

At its core, this work seeks to answer fundamental questions about the nature, scale, and impact of local political engagement online. How do local issues resonate within digital spaces? What roles do local political actors – especially mayors and municipal authorities – play in shaping online conversations? And crucially, does participation in these digital publics strengthen or fragment local communities?

Throughout the book, we employ Communication Infrastructure Theory as a guiding framework, emphasizing that local communities are sustained by shared narratives circulated by various storytelling agents operating at different scales. Our analysis spans micro-level interactions among individuals, meso-level storytelling agents such as community pages and political figures, and the broader context in which these dynamics unfold. Particular attention is paid to the role of political considerations, especially to how the interests of national political actors are reflected in and serve to energize local, social media-based publics.

This book invites scholars, policymakers, and engaged citizens alike to reconsider the implications of digital technologies for local politics and democracy. By offering detailed insights into Hungary's local social media landscape, it provides a broader understanding of the evolving role digital platforms play in shaping contemporary civic life, ultimately informing discussions about the future of community and political engagement in an increasingly digital world.

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Competing Interests

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Portions of this book were previously published in Media and Communication [Bene, M., & Dobos, G. (2023). In the Web of the Parties: Local Politicians on Facebook in Hungary. *Media and Communication*, 11(3), 141–152] and New Media & Society [Burai, K., Solti, Á., & Bene, M. [2024]. Feel Local, Post Local: An Ethnographic Investigation of a Social Media-Based Local Public. *New Media & Society*, 14614448241262988], and are republished in this book with the permission of Cognito Press and SAGE Publishing.

Ethics Approval

During the research, the authors adhered to established ethical standards throughout all phases of data collection, analysis, and publication. The studies presented in this book comply with the Ethical Research Policy of the HUN-REN Centre for Social Sciences and follow the principles outlined in the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity.
All research activities involving human participants were conducted in accordance with informed consent procedures, ensuring participants' anonymity, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time. No personally identifiable data was disclosed, and all data was handled in a secure and confidential manner.

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Chapter 1. Introduction: An Infrastructure-Based Politicized Approach to Local Social Media Public

Abstract

The introductory chapter outlines an infrastructure-based politicized approach to understanding local social media publics, emphasizing their role in contemporary local political dynamics. The chapter establishes the theoretical groundwork by highlighting key transformations brought by social media, such as increased citizen participation, the emergence of interconnected personal publics, and the blurred lines between private and public discourse. We propose an infrastructural framework drawing on Communication Infrastructure Theory, conceptualizing local digital publics as networks comprising micro-level (individual) and meso-level (institutional or organized group) storytelling agents. This approach allows for a nuanced analysis of how local narratives circulate, shape community identity, and potentially impact broader political attitudes. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the increasing nationalization and politicization of local politics, arguing that national political strategies play an energizing role within local social media spheres.
By contextualizing this theoretical framework within Hungary's local government structure and political environment, we justify the choice of Hungary as a case study based on its clearly delineated municipal governance, substantial variation among municipalities in terms of population and local political dynamics, and the prominent role of Facebook in local political communication.

1.1. Introduction

In November 2022, a news item likely appeared on the newsfeeds of numerous Facebook users in the small town of Jászberény, located in eastern Hungary: the government had decided to close the post office in Portelek, a tiny settlement situated 11 kilometers from the town's outskirts, along with 365 other rural post offices. At that time, we were conducting an ethnographic study in the settlement during the lead-up to the interim municipal election (Burai et al., 2024), allowing us to closely observe the outrage sparked among residents in local Facebook groups and pages in response to the decision. The closure sparked significant discourse among residents, with numerous comments emerging – most criticizing the government's decision, while some sought to defend it.
The public outcry quickly reached and prompted action from political actors preparing for the highly competitive election campaign. The incumbent mayor, supported by opposition parties and seeking re-election, took to Facebook to advocate for keeping the post office open, announcing that he had also written to the CEO of the Hungarian Postal Service regarding the matter. His post garnered substantial positive feedback and gained traction in local Facebook groups, which likely played a significant role in his subsequent decision to initiate a petition to save the post office. However, before the petition could even begin, the mayor's local political rival, the local member of parliament, posted two photos on his Facebook page from a ministerial meeting, accompanied by the caption: "The Portelek post office will be open from Monday", while also expressing support for the district's governing party representative.
As far as we know, Portelek's post office was the only one on the list of 366 closures that ultimately remained open at that time, sparking significant post-event debates within the town's Facebook sphere. Various anonymous Facebook pages, citizens in local groups, and even local politicians – at times engaging in personal disputes – offered their own interpretations of the situation. A recurring accusation was that both politicians had long been aware of the planned closure but had only taken action due to the public outrage on Facebook and the approaching

election. However, once they did intervene, they visibly competed with each other to claim credit for the outcome.

Ultimately, Portelek's post office became the sole survivor of that particular wave of post office closures – a fact that the mayor himself, in an interview with us, explicitly attributed to the role of Facebook. However, this success proved to be short-lived: after the opposition-backed mayor won the election in mid-January, by mid-February, the Hungarian Postal Service had proceeded with the closure of the Portelek post office.

Some elements of this brief story from the life of a small Hungarian town may seem familiar to many, as it encapsulates key experiences related to contemporary local communities. First, a significant portion of local political processes now unfolds on social media. Facebook has become a crucial arena for local public discourse, providing a platform for circulating community-related information, debating shared concerns, and, in some cases, mobilizing action around them. In Hungary, numerous local NIMBY ("Not In My Backyard") resistance and protest movements have emerged and organized around Facebook-driven outrage, with some of the most controversial recent cases related to battery factories. While these discussions often highlight deep divisions, they nonetheless focus participants' attention on local communities and their affairs, thereby playing a role in community formation and identity-building.

Second, these digital public spheres can exert considerable pressure on local political actors, who frequently monitor these debates and recognize that ignoring them entails significant political risks. Moreover, politicians themselves actively engage in shaping these public spaces, often participating in direct interactions with residents. Third, though this may be less perceptible in everyday life, the operation of these local public spheres carries national political significance. Dominating these platforms – particularly through holding key positions such as the mayoralty – can serve as a powerful mobilization resource for national political forces. In the present case, it is likely that an influential local figure was able to secure an exemption from a central government decision precisely because it served the governing party's interests in the battle for control over the town's leadership. This is further evidenced by the fact that once the opposition-backed mayor won the election, the post office was no longer protected from closure. Jászberény is the forty-third largest town in the country and holds no particular economic significance, suggesting that, from a national political perspective, the identity of its mayor should not be of major importance. However, we argue that the mayor serves as a crucial access point to the politically less engaged and less committed segments of the population. This role has always existed, but with the expansion of social media, mayors can now reach a substantial portion of residents continuously through their communication efforts. This, we propose, significantly elevates the importance of the position in the context of national politics.

Despite the growing significance of local social media spheres, our understanding of them remains remarkably limited. We know little about the scope of local political discourse, who within the community it reaches and how, what differences exist between municipalities, and how both political actors and citizens navigate these spaces. The scholarly literature is also largely blind to the fact that a portion of citizens' political experiences on social media is directly tied to local public affairs. Discussions of political engagement either address it in general terms – with an interpretive focus overwhelmingly on national politics – or explicitly center on national political dynamics (Larsson and Svensson, 2014). However, distinguishing between these levels is crucial, as local politics and local political experiences can differ significantly from national political experiences. Some argue, for instance, that local politics is more pragmatic, less ideologically driven, and more consensus-oriented (e.g. Barber, 2013; Oliver, 2012), while others contest this view (e.g. Anzia, 2021; Warshaw, 2019). Regardless of these debates, we lack knowledge about how much of the overall social media experience is shaped by local political engagement, what variations exist among citizens, and what implications these

experiences have for political behavior. For instance, a key question arises: do local political experiences influence only local attitudes, if at all, or – as the most immediate point of contact with politics – can they also shape broader political attitudes, including those related to national politics? In other words, did the temporary survival of the Portelek post office merely enhance the popularity of the mayor/the local Member of Parliament involved, or did it also impact public perceptions of the government?

This book seeks to answer such questions. As the result of a five-year research project, this study employs a nationwide, multi-method approach to explore the organization of local social media-based public spheres, the activity of local politicians, and the factors influencing these dynamics in Hungary. To our knowledge, this is the first large-scale, systematic study that examines local social media-based public discourse on a national level, extending beyond specific municipalities or actor types. In this introductory chapter, we outline the key elements of the study's theoretical framework.

1.2. Digital publics[1]

The concept of the public sphere is one of the most contested notions in the social sciences. Despite the diversity of approaches, scholars generally agree that the public sphere encompasses the communicative spaces used by political and societal actors to engage in discourse on shared concerns, playing a pivotal role in the formation and evolution of political and social communities (Arendt, 1958; Dahlgren, 2005). The concept has been examined from both normative and more descriptive perspectives. The normative approach – primarily influenced by Habermas, who introduced the term into mainstream social theory – views the public sphere as a crucial domain of democratic political action, where collective problems can be effectively addressed (Dewey, 1927). Its primary function, according to this tradition, is to foster a rational and universally accessible discourse among community members, exerting a constraining force on political elites' actions (Habermas, 1991). In contrast, more descriptive approaches emphasize the public sphere's arena-like nature, conceptualizing it as a communicative space where political and social information, opinions, and shared knowledge are generated, circulated, and contested thereby shaping political demands and public opinion (Dahlgren, 2005; Neidhardt, 1994). Despite conceptual and normative disagreements, there is broad consensus that, throughout the twentieth century, the public sphere was dominated by professional media, relegating citizens to the role of a passive audience, primarily consuming the mediatized interactions of political elites (Habermas, 2006).

However, with the rise of the Internet and, more specifically, social media, the public sphere can no longer be confined to the realm of professional media. Consequently, the turn of the millennium witnessed a surge of academic inquiry into the impact of the Internet on the public sphere. In its early stages, this debate was framed largely within the Habermasian normative tradition, with techno-optimistic (e.g., increased participation) and techno-pessimistic (e.g., fragmentation) perspectives clashing (see, Schäfer, 2015). These considerations also appeared in more descriptive approaches seeking to analyze transformations in the public sphere, though with a shift in focus from normative quality to structural characteristics. Accordingly, in recent years, a variety of interpretations have emerged concerning the social media-driven public sphere. Rather than offering a comprehensive theoretical framework (as an exception, see Bruns, 2023), most studies have emphasized specific aspects of these transformations (e.g. Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018; Chadwick, 2017; Z. Papacharissi, 2015). Nevertheless, some broader patterns can still be discerned in the scholarly discourse.

The most significant transformation in the public sphere undoubtedly pertains to citizen engagement, a central issue in early normative debates. While the mediatized public sphere

[1] A shorter and modified version of this subchapter, along with the first two paragraphs of the next one, was previously published in one of our earlier journal articles (Burai et al., 2024).

largely excluded citizen voices (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995), the digital public sphere has transformed citizens into active participants (Dahlgren, 2005). Compared to the Web 1.0 era, social media has further intensified this shift by rendering citizens' public communication strategically significant. On social media platforms, public political expressions by citizens serve as key drivers of content dissemination, reaching large audiences, including politically disengaged or less committed voters (Bene, 2022). As a result, political and media actors have a vested interest in considering citizens' public discourse on social media platforms (Kelm, 2020). In this context, Gerbaudo (2022) refers to the resurgence of a "plebeian public sphere," reminiscent of certain periods in pre-modernity, such as ancient Rome or the French Revolution (see, Habermas, 1991). Here, citizens act as a "digital crowd," emerging as a new collective subject in the public sphere, capable of influencing public discourse and political elites through mass communicative behavior.

Another fundamental transformation concerns the blurring of the public-private distinction. The concept of the public sphere traditionally rests on the assumption that private and public realms of social action can be distinctly separated, with the public sphere serving as the domain for collective concerns (Arendt, 1958). On social media, however, this distinction becomes largely obsolete: citizen communication is predominantly hybrid, occurring among personal acquaintances while simultaneously enjoying broad public visibility and contributing to the (plebeian) public sphere (Papacharissi, 2010). Furthermore, the very logic of social media revolves around the creation of "personal publics" (Schmidt, 2014), where individuals construct information networks based on personal connections and interests. These personal publics overlap to varying degrees, forming micro-publics and their dense networks (Bruns and Highfield, 2015). Consequently, in the realm of social media, the public sphere emerges as a network of interlinked personal publics (Bruns, 2023).

This shift also implies that the social media public sphere is highly fragmented and best understood as a dense network of lower-order publics (Bruns, 2023; Bruns and Highfield, 2015; Dahlgren, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002). These publics vary in structure, norms, scope, dynamics, and longevity, yet they provide communicative arenas for specific groups of actors and interactions (Bruns, 2023). Due to their overlaps, their boundaries remain fluid; they are continuously constituted and reconstituted through sequences of communicative activity. Accordingly, Lünenborg and Raetzsch (2017) introduce the notion of "performative publics," emphasizing that the public sphere is shaped and maintained through communicative performances and practices. In other words, any form of publicness in the digital space only materializes if certain actors generate it through communicative activities and interactions centered on a shared subject.

Finally, it is essential to acknowledge the role of technology. According to boyd (2010), the networked public can be understood as an imagined community constructed through digital technology, while the architecture of these networked spaces also influences the interactions and social dynamics taking place within them. These technological attributes shape the functioning of the public sphere through so-called affordances. Affordances refer to the possibilities enabled by technology, indicating that various technological solutions can be used in multiple ways; however, they are more conducive to certain uses than others (Ronzhyn et al., 2023). By defining these structures of possibility, affordances influence the operation of the public sphere (Bucher and Helmond, 2018). While technology does not determine usage, it can facilitate or constrain specific forms of interaction. Boyd (2010) argues that the affordances of social media have dismantled the ephemeral and contextually bound nature of individual utterances. Others emphasize affordances that promote the prominence of disinformation (Bimber and Gil de Zúñiga, 2020) or emotionally driven communication (Papacharissi, 2015) in digital publics. Thus, when evaluating these public spheres, it is crucial to consider the impact of technological architecture through affordances.

1.3. Local versus global in the context of social media

Naturally, local publics existed before the rise of social media, though they received considerably less attention than national or transnational public spheres (Fischer et al., 2021). Before the proliferation of social media, these local publics primarily manifested through professional media (Nielsen, 2015), which significantly limited opportunities for citizen engagement. However, one of the pressing issues today is the emergence of local "news deserts" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019) – regions where economic challenges, which have affected journalism as a whole, have taken a particularly severe toll on the local media sector. As a result, many areas now lack – or have only minimal access to – local information sources (Hayes and Lawless, 2021).

The decline or passivity of local publics has significant consequences in two key respects. First, the public sphere is one of the primary mechanisms for community formation and maintenance (see, Arendt, 1958). Local communities and identities largely develop and evolve through local publics, particularly when these spaces allow for a certain degree of citizen participation (Baines, 2012). Second, the absence of a functioning local public sphere undermines political accountability, as insufficient information about local political actors' activities prevents objective evaluation (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). However, several arguments support the idea that social media plays an increasingly important role in local publics, and the shrinking professional media landscape is also pushing local residents toward social media platforms (Mathews, 2022).

We have seen that digital publics are the results of performative activities, meaning that a local social media public only exists if its actors create and maintain it through regular communicative activities related to local public life. In the absence of this, we can only speak about the activities of individuals living in a physical "place," but not of a shared local "space" (Lefebvre, 1992). This possibility, however, seems to contradict the globalized discourse that characterizes the Internet and social media. The spatiality of the digital world is generally discussed in relation to the elimination of distance, often referred to as a "global village" (Castells, 2008), with discussions also emerging about the "end of geography" (see, Graham, 1998). It is indeed a historically unique situation that a huge part of the globe is concentrated on just a few communication platforms, where a single click can establish a connection between two people living anywhere on Earth. In 2024, Facebook has 3 billion users out of a global population of 8 billion, while TikTok and Instagram each have 2 billion users. This global connectivity is also a signature part of platform self-narratives. For example, Twitter describes itself as a "global town square", while Facebook's main mission is to "bring the world closer" (see, Kwon et al., 2021).

This discourse naturally raises concerns about the decline of local communities (Dotson, 2017; Putnam, 2001). It has long been recognized that the foundation of a community is a shared communicative space. As discussed above, a local community is also an imagined community, and imagining it collectively requires a shared communicative space (Anderson, 2016). Similar insights can be found in Alexis de Tocqueville (2002) and John Dewey (1927). If citizens' communicative activities are increasingly directed away from the local level, this leads to the erosion and decline of community identities (Lindell, 2016). However, it is important to remember that moral panic over the disappearance of communities resurfaces with every technological change (Hampton and Wellman, 2018). As Johnson and Halegoua (2017, p. 51) point out, "suburbanization, mobility, attached garages, highway construction, the anonymity of cities, the telephone, television, and even refrigerators" have all been blamed for "turning 'neighbors' into 'night-dwellers'" (McClenahan, 1929).

At the same time, in the case of social media, many argue that the elimination of distances is only one side of the story and does not necessarily lead to the decline of local frameworks. Hampton and colleagues (2011) emphasize that while many treat the distinction between

“online and global” versus “offline and local” as a dichotomy, information and communication technologies (ICTs) actually support both global and local connections, creating a form of glocalization. In other words, “ICTs afford social participation that is both unbounded from shared time and geography (‘global’ and not dependent on place) and tied to participation in foci of activity that are very ‘local’ (contextual and tied to place).” (Hampton et al., 2011, p. 1046)

In this regard, Kim and colleagues (2019) also highlight that social media can act as both a centrifugal and centripetal force in relation to local communities, as both push and pull effects can emerge. On the one hand, it can divert attention away from local presence by facilitating the maintenance of non-local relationships and interest-based connections (push effect). On the other hand, it can also foster deeper engagement in local public life (pull effect), as these platforms make intra-community communication easier (Gordon and e Silva, 2011). Thus, the affordances of online and especially social media do not merely enable disengagement from spatial contexts but also foster stronger interaction with them.

Nevertheless, we have very limited empirical knowledge about the role of social media in local publics. More broadly, research on digital politics tends to be characterized by methodological nationalism, examining political phenomena primarily at the national level (Larsson and Svensson, 2014). While some studies focus on specific local actors, such as local politicians (e.g. Metag and Marcinkowski, 2012), parties (e.g. Datts, 2022), or media outlets (e.g. Skogerbø and Krumsvik, 2015), more holistic approaches that consider both citizen and non-citizen actors are scarce. When they do exist, they are typically limited to individual municipalities (Burai et al., 2024; Thorson et al., 2020), making their findings difficult to generalize. This book seeks to address this gap by systematically mapping the structure, functioning, and effects of local social media-based political publics on a national scale, using nationally representative samples.

1.4. An Infrastructural approach to local social media publics

In this exploration, we draw heavily on the conceptual framework and approach of Communication Infrastructure Theory (see, Kim and Ball-Rokeach, 2006). While this model does not explicitly use the term "public sphere", it offers an ecological perspective that appears well-suited to capturing different levels and dimensions of social media publics.

The theory’s foundation is the idea that communities are built on narratives – shared stories among community members about who they are, what is happening to them, what challenges they face, and what collective actions they should or could take (Anderson, 2016; W. R. Fisher, 1984). Since all forms of social cooperation beyond individual networks exist as "imagined communities", their existence depends on how members conceptualize them, and integration is sustained when a shared imagination connects individuals who may not know each other personally (Anderson, 2016). At the local level, it is the stories about the local community that enable residents of a particular area to imagine themselves as a community (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001).

These local narratives circulate through storytelling agents (Kim and Ball-Rokeach, 2006a), which operate on multiple levels. At the macro level, national-level agents, such as mainstream media, may address issues relevant to local communities, but they are less immediately connected to local life. More crucial are the meso-level storytelling agents – organizations and institutions that specifically communicate about local communities, such as local media outlets or civic organizations. At the micro level, everyday individuals act as storytelling agents, sharing local topics in conversations with their acquaintances, thereby further disseminating local narratives.

Thus, the local communication infrastructure consists of the network of storytelling agents operating across these levels. When residents are connected to this infrastructure, they gain

access to social, cultural, and political resources that enhance their sense of belonging and enable collective local action (Kim and Ball-Rokeach, 2006a). Empirical studies associated with Communication Infrastructure Theory primarily focus on this latter aspect, demonstrating that engagement with local storytelling agents increases collective efficacy, neighborhood belongingness, and local political participation (Choi et al., 2021; Kim and Ball-Rokeach, 2006b; Nah et al., 2016).

However, existing research does not systematically map the infrastructure itself, despite the fact that the Communication Infrastructure Theory model emphasizes that the formation of these storytelling infrastructures depends on the local context, leading to significant variations across different municipalities (Choi et al., 2021; Ognyanova and Jung, 2018). As a result, in some locations, citizens have greater access to the critical resources necessary for community-building – namely, shared local narratives – while in others, the communicative infrastructure required to generate these narratives is far more limited. Several contextual factors influence these differences, ranging from the economic conditions that sustain local media outlets, to the physical layout of a locality, which can either facilitate or hinder interpersonal interactions (see, Sennett, 1992), to the quality of local public services and employment opportunities, which either strengthen residents' attachment to their locality or, conversely, compel them to spend much of their time elsewhere (Kim and Ball-Rokeach, 2006a). Despite these factors, little systematic effort has been made to capture these infrastructures, as research inspired by the theory has largely focused on individual connections rather than broader infrastructural structures.

Social media has introduced new opportunity conditions for local communication infrastructures at both micro and macro levels. In recent years, the Communication Infrastructure Theory model has been applied to social media contexts, but these studies have been limited to examining how engagement with local social media storytelling agents affects individual attitudes – such as participation, belongingness, and efficacy (Kim et al., 2019; Nah et al., 2021). In this book, we extend this approach by using the conceptual framework of Communication Infrastructure Theory not only to analyze the effects of local social media engagement but also to better understand the structure and dynamics of local social media-based publics.

The conceptual framework offered by Communication Infrastructure Theory is particularly useful for capturing the complexity of social media publics. First, this approach reconciles personal publics, which emerge from citizens' interpersonal connections, with the arena-based perspective, which emphasizes publicly accessible spaces and the infrastructures that sustain them, by conceptually distinguishing between micro- and meso-level storytelling agents. By distinguishing between micro- and meso-level storytelling agents, this approach allows for a more comprehensive study of the local public sphere, moving beyond the examination of personal networks and experiences or the activities of specific local actors such as politicians or media outlets. Users' connections and the infrastructures that enable storytelling beyond personal acquaintances together constitute the local public sphere. Based on this, it is crucial to examine how individuals navigate their local public sphere, the extent to which they engage with meso-level storytelling agents, and how local narratives shape their communicative experiences and political engagement. However, equally important is the existence and effective functioning of meso-level infrastructures, as they ensure that these connections do not remain confined to personal networks but instead facilitate the emergence of a shared imagination of the community among individuals who do not know each other personally. As we will explore in the following sections, social media plays a key role in both aspects.

Second, the concept of meso-level storytelling agents is sufficiently broad to encompass the diversity of actors present on social media. A meso-level agent is not limited to local media but can also include political actors or any local-focused, publicly accessible Facebook page.

Third, this approach highlights the diversity of communication infrastructures and the role of contextual factors. Significant differences in communication infrastructures exist across municipalities, making it crucial to uncover the contextual elements underlying these variations. This is particularly important because these infrastructural factors have a positive impact on both individual engagement in community life and the broader cohesion of the community.

1.4.1. Micro-level storytelling: Locality in the social media experience

On social media, the fragmented public sphere that emerges from the overlapping personal micro-publics can foster the development of local publics, as these micro-publics often have a strong local dimension. People primarily connect with their own acquaintances on social networks (boyd, 2014). However, due to the ease of connection, these networks also extend to weak ties and superficial acquaintances – many of which are still local relationships, including neighbors, former classmates, and colleagues (Rainie and Wellman, 2014). A user's communication becomes visible to these connections, and they, in turn, are continuously exposed to the communications of their own network. As a result, local acquaintance-based relationships become institutionalized at a communicative level, even when they previously remained limited to occasional, superficial interactions in offline spaces. In this way, local communities are more interconnected and networked than ever before. According to Hampton and Wellman (2018), this phenomenon strengthens local communities by creating a sense of pervasive awareness due to the comprehensive and persistent nature of these networks. Since nearly all local personal acquaintances are part of an individual's ego network, these networks are extensive and, through the institutionalization of communication, also persistent. As a result, social media enables individuals to remain broadly aware of what is happening within their entire local acquaintance network and shared environment. This pervasive awareness fosters a sense of belonging to the community.

Although relatively few studies have examined the spatial distribution of social media connections, some empirical evidence confirms that physical proximity continues to play an important role in this domain. Takhteyev and colleagues' study of Twitter (2012) – a platform that is much more interest-based than Facebook, allowing for more unilateral, interest-driven followership – found that 39 percent of connections originate within a single metropolitan area, with a significant portion of other connections still involving relatively close acquaintances. Similarly, Pfetsch and colleagues (2021) studied Twitter interactions in two cities, focusing on specific interactions and topics. While local connections formed a minority – since most retweets, replies, and mentions referenced individuals outside the immediate locality – local interactions still played an important role. Facebook, which is widely recognized in the literature as the most localized social network (e.g. Thorson et al., 2020; Usher, 2023), has not been the subject of similar studies to our knowledge. However, given its emphasis on reciprocal connections, it can be assumed that local relationships play an even greater role there.

A well-networked local community can thus provide the necessary infrastructure for the dissemination of local stories through extensive personal networks. Micro-publics emerge precisely from these personal, overlapping and strongly localized networks (Bruns and Highfield, 2015). However, for these micro-publics to constitute a genuine local public sphere, two additional conditions must be met. First, local stories must circulate within these networks, as their dissemination constitutes the performative act of public sphere formation (see, Lünenborg and Raetzsch, 2017). Second, the local community extends beyond the network of people who know each other. As an imagined community, it also requires a shared reality and perception of the community among individuals who do not know one another personally. In both respects, meso-level storytelling agents play a crucial role.

1.4.2. Meso-level storytelling at the local level

Meso-level actors in the local public sphere facilitate a shared story experience among residents who do not personally know each other. These actors provide the local arena, which, in principle, is accessible to all social media user residents regardless of their interpersonal connections. Moreover, in this arena, visibility and influence are achieved through the production of local stories, meaning that a significant portion of local narratives is generated within the spaces created by meso-level storytelling agents. These stories then circulate further through interpersonal networks, extending their reach beyond the original arena.

However, the relationship between mezzo- and micro-level storytelling agents is not unidirectional. Meso-level agents also play a role in elevating and amplifying stories that originate in micro-level interactions but are deemed significant or relevant to the community. By incorporating these micro-level stories into the public arena beyond personal networks, meso-level storytelling agents increase their visibility and reach. In other words, the meso-level communication infrastructure serves a dual function: it both produces and highlights important local stories and connects community members who do not know each other personally through these shared narratives, thereby contributing to the formation of a shared reality.

Social media platforms offer a range of affordances that make it significantly easier than ever before to establish, operate, and engage with meso-level storytelling agents. These affordances vary across platforms, but in general, they enable both individuals and organizations to create pages focused on specific local content, which any user can follow unilaterally. Such pages can be created by local professional or hyperlocal media outlets, political actors, parties, organizations, or even highly engaged local individuals – sometimes with their identities concealed. Additionally, platforms like Facebook allow for the creation of groups centered on specific topics, including local issues. These groups, though often moderated, provide a space where any member can post or engage with content related to local concerns. These affordances have significantly expanded the possibilities for establishing meso-level storytelling agents, thereby fostering the development of a robust local communication infrastructure that was previously difficult to sustain.

1.4.3. Linking micro- and meso-level storytelling agents

Moreover, the affordances of social media enable a far more integrated structure between mezzo- and micro-level storytelling agents compared to previous forms of local communication – which is the most ideal scenario for a well-functioning local public sphere (Ognyanova and Jung, 2018). Individuals can not only freely connect to an unlimited number of meso-level storytelling agents but also channel their own micro-level activities into this meso-level infrastructure. Social media platforms allow users to publicly comment on content posted by meso-level agents, and they can even create their own posts within groups, thus actively shaping the discourse. Additionally, these activities are often visible to personal networks beyond the immediate group or page, making them accessible for engagement even by friends who do not directly follow the meso-level agent.

Furthermore, on these pages and groups, individuals can interact with community members they do not personally know, allowing micro-level storytelling to extend beyond personal networks. In this sense, social media functions similarly to other offline neighborhood institutions, much like a local coffee shop or bar (Gibbons, 2020), where interactions are less limited to familiar circles. Finally, private behind-the-scene connections with meso-level storytelling agents can be established effortlessly and at no cost in the form of private messages, making it easier to bring attention to stories circulating within personal publics and amplify them within the broader local public sphere.

1.4.4. Affordances or reality?

For these reasons, Hampton and Wellman (2018) argue that social media does not dismantle communities but rather plays a role in their formation – albeit in a different way than before. The main shift is that it grants greater space for individual agency and control compared to traditional communities, allowing individuals significantly more freedom in deciding with whom, in what ways, and on what topics they engage. Firmstone and Coleman (2015) also argue that in the digital local public sphere, the position of citizens in local politics is undergoing a transformation. Meso-level agents, and particularly political actors, incorporate publicly visible citizen feedback into their operations, making it an integral part of their decision-making processes. Additionally, citizens can play a more active role in maintaining the meso-level infrastructure via their engagement. This, in turn, fosters a political public sphere that is far more diverse in terms of both genres and styles of communication. Based on these observations, Hampton and colleagues (2011) conclude that "place is not lost as a result of the affordances of new technologies, but place-based networks are reinforced and made persistent." (p. 1046)
However, this conclusion remains premature, as there is still no extensive empirical knowledge about either micro- or meso-level communication infrastructures. Affordance does not equate to realization. The fact that social media platforms provide opportunities for operating local micro- and meso-level communication infrastructures does not necessarily mean that they function effectively. While it is known that local connections are significantly present within personal social media networks, it remains entirely unexplored to what extent users actually encounter local stories within these networks. There is also very little information available on meso-level storytelling agents: how they are distributed among different types of actors, how much citizens engage with them, and to what extent they shape individuals' personal information environments. Empirical evidence also suggests that local-level initiatives and pages often attract little interest from local populations, with residents neither following nor interacting with them, meaning that their mere existence does not necessarily translate into the ability to generate public engagement or influence local discourse (Bonsón et al., 2016; Johnson and Halegoua, 2017).
Furthermore, Communication Infrastructure Theory emphasizes that significant variations can exist between municipalities in terms of communication infrastructures, as the strength of these infrastructures depends on numerous contextual factors. For this reason, understanding how the local public sphere functions within social media is an empirical question that requires systematic investigation. This book seeks to address this gap by systematically examining the communication infrastructure that emerges in social media. It investigates both the demand and supply sides of this infrastructure, mapping how local dimensions feature in people's social media experiences and how actively they engage with local storytelling agents, while also analyzing how meso-level actors influence the formation of local publics. Throughout, particular attention is given to differences between municipalities and the contextual factors that explain these variations.

1.5. Politicization and nationalization of local politics

One of the central assumptions of this research is that national politics serves as a key driver in the emergence and operation of local social media public spheres, primarily through the activity of local politicians. National political actors consider access to voters through the local public sphere a crucial electoral resource, as they anticipate that local experiences will "spill over" into national-level political attitudes and behaviors (Ennser-Jedenastik and Hansen, 2013; Karlsen and Skogerbø, 2015). This pursuit, in turn, energizes the local social media publics. This

assumption is closely linked to the scholarly discourse on the politicization and nationalization of local politics (e.g. Anzia, 2021; Caramani, 2004; Hopkins, 2018). These two concepts are often used with overlapping meanings in the literature, without clear distinction. In this study, nationalization is understood primarily as the structuring of local political behavior (both elite and citizen behavior) based on national political alignments – for instance, the presence of national political actors at the local level or the explanation of citizens' local political behavior through national-level cleavages. Politicization, on the other hand, refers to the adoption of national political logics at the local level, such as the translation of national political conflicts into local contexts.

A major question in recent local politics research concerns the extent to which national politics, its actors, and its considerations influence and guide local political dynamics. In the American tradition, a strong notion persists that local politics constitutes an autonomous domain, free from national political considerations and structured solely by its own logic. This perspective is encapsulated in the famous claim that there is "no Republican way to pave a street and no Democratic way to lay a sewer" (Adrian, 1952, p. 766). According to this argument, local politics involves entirely different problems, issues, and opportunities that cannot be interpreted along the dimensions of national political cleavages (Oliver, 2012; Peterson, 1981). Moreover, this more ideologically flexible, consensus-oriented, and pragmatic approach to politics has often been normatively regarded as superior to the conflict-driven, ideology-centered nature of national politics (Barber, 2013). Consequently, in the American tradition, the study of local public life has not relied on broader political science categories and concepts but has existed as a separate field of inquiry (Anzia, 2021). However, this also meant that the argument for the autonomy of local politics from national politics was based more on theoretical reasoning than on stable empirical foundations (see, Sances, 2018; Warshaw, 2019).

In the context of increasing polarization in the 2010s (e.g. Finkel et al., 2020), scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the dynamics between national and local politics. Research findings have highlighted the growing nationalization (see, Hopkins, 2018) and politicization of local politics (for an overview, see, Anzia, 2021; Warshaw, 2019). Contrary to earlier conceptions, studies have demonstrated that voters' local political behavior is indeed influenced by ideological commitments extending beyond the local level (e.g. Hajnal and Trounstine, 2014; Holman and Lay, 2021; Lucas, 2022; Sances, 2018; Warshaw, 2019). Likewise, the behavior of local political actors is significantly shaped by their party affiliation (e.g. Burnett, 2019; De Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw, 2016; Einstein and Kogan, 2016; Lucas, 2023) and by the ideological orientation of their municipalities (Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2014). This suggests that while it may still be true that there is no distinctly Democratic or Republican way to pave a street, there are certainly Republican and Democratic perspectives on how many streets should be paved, who should build and maintain them, where they should be located, and who should pay for them (Copus et al., 2012). These are questions that can indeed be answered based on ideological convictions and party political affiliations.

In the European context, this debate emerged much earlier than in the United States. However, while the American discourse has primarily focused on the factors shaping voter and elite behavior, the European discussion has placed greater emphasis on the role of political parties. As early as 1966, Stein Rokkan (1966) argued that local politics was becoming increasingly "politicized" as a direct consequence of modernization. The industrialization that accompanied this process generated structural economic cleavages that, even at the local level, began to override specific local conflicts. This, in turn, elevated the significance of national parties representing these cleavages, enabling them to take control of local politics from traditional local notables. Similar arguments were put forward by Hjellum (1967) and Ashford (1975), who also predicted that industrialization would lead to the increasing dominance of national political forces in local politics.

Contemporary empirical findings support the claim that the nationalization of local party systems – meaning the presence of national parties at the local level – is in an advanced level in several European political systems, including Belgium (Dodeigne et al., 2021; Steyvers and Heyerick, 2017), Austria (Ennser-Jedenastik and Hansen, 2013), and Denmark (Kjaer and Elklit, 2010b) although this trend is not uniform across all cases and over time. Additionally, voter behavior has also increasingly nationalized (Caramani, 2004). The presence of national parties at the local level is accompanied by substantive politicization, as national political cleavages are transposed into local politics: local branches of the same national party tend to present similar programs across municipalities and often align their platforms with their national counterparts (Reuse, 2024; Van de Voorde et al., 2018).

The local presence of national politics is driven by strategic considerations, as political actors seek to maximize their influence and electoral success by embedding national issues and party structures at the local level (Ennser-Jedenastik and Hansen, 2013; Kjær and Steyvers, 2018). Voters' most direct experience with politics occurs at the local level, and those who are well-embedded and perform effectively in local affairs can leverage this success nationally (Collignon and Sajuria, 2018; Ventura, 2021). The translation of national cleavages and debates into local politics can make these issues more tangible and engaging for voters, thereby enhancing their mobilizing potential (Karlsen and Skogerbø, 2015). In Germany, for example, populist and challenger parties were found to incorporate key national themes into their local programs (Gross and Jankowski, 2020). At the same time, the need to limit the local advantages that opponents might gain can also drive the adoption of national conflicts at the local level (see, Copus and Erlingsson, 2012; Ennser-Jedenastik and Hansen, 2013). Parties attempt to monopolize local political markets and marginalize their opponents by securing local positions and operating them efficiently (Ennser-Jedenastik and Hansen, 2013). The infiltration of national political strategies into local politics is further evidenced by the findings that parties intensify their local-level activity in municipalities where they performed poorly in previous national elections (Dodeigne and colleagues 2021). For these reasons, we expect that national politics plays a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of the local public sphere. A consensus-oriented, technical, and ideologically neutral public discourse is likely to be less effective in stimulating local public engagement than topics and actors driven by national political stakes – especially on social media, where numerous studies have provided evidence for this (Bene et al., 2022; Fine et al., 2024).

However, while the limited empirical research available demonstrates that European party systems are nationalizing and that American politics is increasingly shaped by national political divisions, this does not imply that the nationalization and politicization of local politics have reached a full-fledged state (Anzia, 2021). Local political characteristics continue to exist, and local actors (Aars and Ringkjob, 2005; Dodeigne et al., 2020; Steyvers and Heyerick, 2017) and issues remain significant in shaping political decisions among both voters and elites (Ferreira and Gyourko, 2009; Sofie Marien et al., 2015), even as national affiliations and actors are also present in the local arena. Moreover, there are substantial variations across municipalities regarding the extent to which national politics permeates them. The most significant factor influencing this variation is, unsurprisingly, municipality size (Dahl and Tufte, 1973; Kjaer and Elklit, 2010a; Newton, 1982). However, other factors such as regional differences (Ennser-Jedenastik and Hansen, 2013), economic conditions (Dodeigne et al., 2020), sociodemographic characteristics (Hjellum, 1967), the past performance of political actors (Dodeigne et al., 2021; Steyvers and Heyerick, 2017), and the organizational strength of the local branches of national political parties (Ennser-Jedenastik and Hansen, 2013) also play a role. Based on these considerations, we can assume that an active local public sphere is more likely to emerge in municipalities where politicization and nationalization are more advanced.

The national politics that energizes local politics likely permeates the public sphere largely through the mediation of local political actors. Local politicians are motivated in multiple ways to consider national political perspectives in their activities (Rosas and Lucardi, 2020). A significant portion of them benefit from the formal or informal support of national parties. Given that in low-information elections, such as local elections, national political sympathies play a substantial role (Holman and Lay, 2021), these considerations become crucial for reelection and position retention. While independent political actors are less affected by these dynamics, pork-barrel politics can also incentivize them to take national political factors into account (Ventura, 2021). For these reasons, we devote particular attention to the activities of local politicians, with two dedicated chapters focusing explicitly on their operations, especially in terms of how strongly they are shaped by national political considerations.
Additionally, we place significant emphasis on national political factors in the analysis of citizens' behavior. First, we examine local political social media experiences in comparison to national political experiences to determine the extent to which local politics constitutes an autonomous sphere within users' experiential horizon. Second, we assess the effects of local social media experiences not only at the level of local political attitudes and behavior but also at the national level. The underlying premise of the politicization of local politics is that experiences at this level "spill over" into the national political sphere. However, there is no available empirical evidence directly supporting this assumption. The only established finding is that national political actors tend to perform better in municipalities where co-partisan governments are in power, as highlighted by the concept of reverse coattails (Ames, 1994; Ventura, 2021). To bridge this gap, we examine whether these local experiences have any measurable effects on residents' overall political trust and national-level political participation.

1.6. Local politics and social media: The Hungarian context

1.6.1. Local government in Hungary

Hungary is a unitary state that transitioned to democracy during the 1989–1990 period, following four decades of Communist rule under the Soviet sphere of influence. During the Communist era (1949–1989), local governments in Hungary had minimal autonomy and primarily functioned as administrative extensions of the central state. The system was highly centralized, with local councils operating under the strict oversight of the ruling Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. These councils held little decision-making power, as key policies and directives were determined at the national level. Their role was largely limited to implementing centrally planned policies.
After the collapse of the Communist regime, Hungary introduced a highly decentralized system of local governance characterized by significant autonomy. The architects of the post-Communist political system viewed local governments as essential safeguards for democratic stability. Local governments were designed to serve as counterweights to central authority, reducing the risk of authoritarianism. The cornerstone of these reforms was the establishment of fully autonomous, elected local governments under the principle of "one settlement – one local government." This approach resulted in a highly fragmented structure of sub-national governance (Dobos, 2021a).
According to the European Union's Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) classification, Hungary comprises seven NUTS-2 level regional entities ('régió'). Despite efforts in the early 2000s to establish elected regional governments – mainly driven by Hungary's EU accession in 2004 – regions cannot be considered political entities. They primarily function as units for regional development and statistical reporting. At the NUTS-3 level, Hungary has counties ('vármegyék'), which represent an enduring administrative

tradition dating back to the first Hungarian king, Stephen I, in the 10th century. Currently, there are 19 counties and the capital city of Budapest, all classified as NUTS-3 units with elected political actors.

Below the NUTS levels, Hungary uses the Local Administrative Units (LAU) classification to represent smaller administrative divisions. Municipalities ('települések') are classified as LAU-2 units and are governed by elected local governments ('önkormányzatok'). Due to the "one settlement – one local government" principle, the terms municipality, settlement, and local government are often used interchangeably to describe self-governing local communities. Unlike many Western European countries – or even several Central and Eastern European states that underwent democratic transitions after the Communist era (Swianiewicz, 2013) – each local government in Hungary governs a single, geographically contiguous municipality. This has resulted in a highly fragmented local governance structure comprising 3,177 municipalities, including the districts of Budapest. These municipalities vary significantly in population size. The majority (91 percent) are small, serving populations of fewer than 5,000 residents, with an average population of just 3,017. At the other end of the spectrum, there are 61 municipalities and 23 capital districts with populations exceeding 20,000 residents. It is also worth noting that Hungarian society is relatively homogeneous, with only about 4 percent of the population belonging to ethnic minorities. The largest minority group is the Romani, comprising approximately 2 percent of the total population (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2022).

Although the Hungarian public administration structure differentiates between villages ("falu") and towns or cities ('város'), this classification is only loosely related to the population size of the municipalities. For instance, the largest village, Solymár, has 11,000 residents, while the smallest town, Pálháza, has a population of just 935. Furthermore, there is no significant difference in the competences of villages and cities, except for cities with county rights ('megyei jogú város'). The Local Government Act of 1990 introduced the concept of cities with county rights, granting cities with populations exceeding 50,000 the ability to assume responsibilities typically assigned to county governments. This included fulfilling roles in complex area development. Since 1990, 25 cities have been promoted to this mezzo-level category, with 18 of them also serving as county capitals.

In our research, Hungarian municipalities are classified along two distinct dimensions. In certain analyses (Chapters 3 and 4), municipalities are categorized according to population size. Specifically, we apply population thresholds at 1,000, 5,000, 10,000, and 20,000 inhabitants to establish five population categories.[2] In other sections of the analysis (Chapters 2, 5, and 6), we adopt an administrative classification that distinguishes between villages, towns, and cities with county rights.[3] For clarity, the former classification is referred to as "population categories," while the latter is termed "municipality types." The choice of classification method in each case is informed by the specific focus of the analysis and the constraints of data availability.

1.6.2. Vertical and horizontal power relations

In Hungary's sub-national governance system, the local level is clearly dominant. During the Communist era, counties played a significant role as instruments of central government control

[2] The distribution of Hungarian municipalities across the population size categories is as follows:
- Fewer than 1,000 residents: 46 percent;
- 1,000–4,999 residents: 38 percent;
- 5,000–9,999 residents: 6 percent;
- 10,000–19,999 residents: 5 percent;
- 20,000 or more residents: 5 percent.

[3] Although Hungarian terminology uses the term "city" to refer to both "regular" cities and those with county rights, for the sake of clarity, this book adopts the term "town" to denote the former municipality category.

within the highly centralized state structure. However, in 1990, as a response to this history, counties were intentionally weakened in the democratic political system. While some competences, such as maintaining hospitals, middle schools, or overseeing regional development, are more effectively managed on a larger scale, counties were not granted financial autonomy to operate as truly self-governing units. For example, they were not given the power to impose taxes. Following the comprehensive reforms introduced by the Orbán government between 2010 and 2014, most county-level competences were transferred to the central government. This shift reduced counties to administrative units responsible primarily for implementing regional development projects. Some argue that, as a result, self-governance at the mezzo level de facto ceased to exist (Vigvári, 2012). Given the limited relevance of counties in the current institutional framework, our analysis does not engage with this level of sub-national governance.

Conversely, local governments were established with a high degree of autonomy during Hungary's democratic transition, even by international standards (Dobos, 2021b). The Hungarian local government model was initially considered similar to the North and Middle European models in terms of the broad scope of competences and financial discretion granted to municipalities (Heinelt and Hlepas, 2006) although, the actual financial capacity of Hungarian local governments was limited from the outset (Vigvári, 2010). After Fidesz-KDNP, led by Viktor Orbán, won a landslide victory in 2010, many institutions of the Hungarian political system underwent centralization (Körösényi et al., 2020), and the local government system was no exception. Between 2010 and 2014, local autonomy was significantly reduced, with local governments losing several competences and much of their financial independence, placing them under stricter central government control (Dobos, 2016, 2021b). This level of centralization has been compared to the reforms implemented during the Thatcher era in the United Kingdom (Heinelt et al., 2018).

In light of these developments, one could claim that Hungarian local government remains a marginal part of the political system and is therefore not a suitable subject for research on exploring the local-level social media use. However, local governments remain a relevant sector, managing resources equivalent to approximately 6 percent of the national GDP (Vasvári, 2024). Moreover, as we will highlight below, they continue to play a significant role in shaping Hungarian politics.

Shifting focus from the vertical (national-local) power dynamics to the horizontal relationships within local governance, an intriguing dynamic emerges between the two primary elected political actors at the local level: the local council ('képviselő-testület') and the mayor ('polgármester'). Formally, there is no hierarchical relationship between these two entities. The local council serves as the primary decision-making body, while the mayor is responsible for executive functions, including the oversight and implementation of policies. In practice, however, tensions frequently arise between the council and the mayor, particularly when their political affiliations differ. On one hand, the mayor operates under the council's direction and oversight. On the other hand, the mayor is a member the council, presiding over its meetings, legally representing the local government, and directing the mayor's office ('polgármesteri hivatal'), the municipality's administrative body. Moreover, councils often delegate decision-making authority to the mayor, thereby expanding the executive's influence.

The power of mayors is rooted in their direct election, which provides them with strong legitimacy in the eyes of the local community. Beyond their executive responsibilities, mayors play a pivotal role in initiating policies and shaping the entire decision-making process (Várnagy and Dobos, 2011). Reforms introduced by the Fidesz government further enhanced mayoral authority in 2011, granting mayors increased control over both policy-making and policy implementation (Dobos, 2016). Thus, while municipalities experienced a decline in autonomy within the vertical power structure, a parallel shift occurred in horizontal power

relations, characterized by the growing dominance of mayors over local councils. Consequently, Hungary's municipal governance can be considered a textbook example of the "strong mayor" model of horizontal power sharing, where the directly elected mayor can wield substantial control over the council (Heinelt-Hlepas, 2006).
Nonetheless, councils retain mechanisms to constrain the mayor's power, particularly when the council majority is politically opposed to the mayor. In such situations, councils can curtail the mayor's decision-making authority, effectively reducing their role to a more administrative function. This dynamic has played out in several larger municipalities since the 2024 local elections. A particularly symbolic example occurred in October 2024 in Mosonmagyaróvár (a city of 34,000 residents), where the opposition-controlled council required the mayor to seek permission to purchase vacuum cleaners for a local kindergarten at a cost of about 160 EUR. Even in these scenarios, the mayor's role in initiating decisions remains a powerful tool. For instance, in the same month, the mayor of Győr – one of Hungary's largest and wealthiest cities – successfully forced a compromise on the municipal budget with a hostile local council by leveraging control over (and obstructing) the decision-making process.
In conclusion, the mayor is a central figure in local politics, wielding considerable influence over municipal governance. Therefore, while our research considers all elected local politicians (Chapter 4), we examine the roles and communication strategies of mayors in greater detail in Chapter 5.

1.6.3. The Janus-faced local politics

In their seminal work, Mellors and Pijnenburg (1989) identify two ideal-typical models of local politics: the community-based model and the party-based model. The community-based model is characterized by the primacy of personal relationships and the direct representation of local interests. Political actors in this model are typically motivated by a sense of public service rather than partisan ambition, and often maintain only weak or non-existent ties to national political parties. Leadership tends to emerge from within the local community – frequently among business leaders or other local notables – where politics is approached as a civic duty rather than a professional career. By contrast, the party-based model is defined by the central role of national political parties in structuring local political competition. Local issues are often framed through the lens of national political ideologies, and decision-making reflects broader partisan cleavages. For politicians operating within this model, local office often serves as a launching pad for careers in national politics.
Hungary's post-socialist transition incorporated elements of both models into the institutional design of its local government system. During the democratic transformation of 1989–1990, a central question emerged among political actors: should local governance reflect primarily local conditions and relationships, free from national party politics? Or should political parties be granted an explicit role at the local level, embedding local governance within the broader framework of national politics?
The eventual compromise produced a hybrid system that mirrors Mellors and Pijnenburg's dual models. In smaller municipalities, local governance was conceived as community-based, prioritizing the pragmatic management of public affairs through locally embedded actors. In contrast, larger municipalities were designed to accommodate party-based politics, providing space for national political parties to operate more visibly and competitively. This dual logic is institutionalized in Hungary's local electoral system. In municipalities with populations of 10,000 or fewer (a total of 3,011 local governments), council members are elected using a plurality block voting system, which tends to favor individual, locally known candidates. In municipalities exceeding 10,000 inhabitants (166 local governments), a mixed electoral system is employed, combining single-member districts with compensatory party lists. This design

incentivizes candidates to affiliate with formal political organizations, thereby strengthening the role of national parties at the local level.
Empirical evidence suggests that the system largely functions as intended (Dobos, 2022). In smaller municipalities, electoral outcomes are dominated by locally rooted candidates, including figures from the economic, cultural, or civil society spheres. National party-affiliated candidates rarely succeed in these settings. Conversely, in larger municipalities, independent candidates become increasingly rare as population size increases. The majority of elected officials in these locales are affiliated with national parties. Even among those listed as independents or aligned with local parties, many receive informal backing from national political actors. As a result, local political dynamics in larger municipalities frequently mirror national political divisions, with local governance serving as an extension of broader partisan competition.
National political parties often have strong incentives to maintain a presence in local politics. The local level can serve as a training ground for novice politicians and as a site for collective learning, experimentation, and the development of new political strategies (for an overview, see Geser, 1999). Although the power and autonomy of Hungarian local governments have been significantly curtailed since the reforms introduced by the Orbán government in the 2010s, local governance remains a strategically important arena for both the governing Fidesz-KDNP alliance and opposition parties.
This dynamic was particularly evident in the 2019 local elections and their aftermath. Following the collapse of the left-wing political bloc in 2006 and the sweeping victory of Fidesz in 2010, the Hungarian opposition faced a prolonged period of fragmentation and electoral failure. After three consecutive defeats in national elections and two unsuccessful local electoral cycles, the opposition's first relative success came in the 2019 local elections. In that contest, a broad coalition of ten ideologically diverse national parties managed to secure control over several major urban municipalities, marking a significant – if limited – breakthrough in their efforts to challenge the dominant position of Fidesz. This relative victory not only provided a morale boost to opposition parties but also delivered critical institutional resources and public visibility that could be leveraged in preparation for the subsequent national election. Such a strategic turn toward local-level success as a platform for national opposition is not unique to Hungary; similar patterns have been observed in other states experiencing an illiberal turn, such as Poland and Turkey (Aksztejn et al. 2024; Selçuk and Hekimci, 2020). In response to the opposition gains in 2019, the Orbán government adopted a range of measures that effectively curtailed the capacities of opposition-led local governments. Many of these austerity policies – justified as responses to the COVID-19 pandemic – disproportionately targeted municipalities controlled by opposition parties, thereby limiting their fiscal autonomy and administrative effectiveness (Kovarek and Dobos, 2023). Empirical studies have shown that since 2010, the central government has employed local governance as a tool to entrench its political dominance. Evidence of political bias has been documented in the allocation of discretionary state transfers and EU funds (Vasvári 2022), as well as in the central oversight of municipal borrowing (Vasvári and Pocsai 2025). These strategies reflect a broader political rationale: weakening opposition control at the local level reduces their potential to mount effective challenges nationally. This logic is underscored by the fact that, in the primaries of the 2022 national parliamentary elections organized by the joint opposition parties, two of the five candidates jel were sitting mayors (the mayor of Budapest and the mayor of a city with county rights, who ultimately won the opposition's primary) and the leader of the only other opposition party that succeeded in securing parliamentary mandates (the radical-right Mi Hazánk) also held a mayoral position.
In sum, while local politics in Hungary's smaller municipalities tend to remain largely detached from national party structures, focusing instead on community-specific issues, larger urban

municipalities have become critical battlegrounds in the broader contest between the governing and opposition parties. Local government, particularly in major cities, thus plays a central role in the strategic calculations of national political actors.

1.6.4. Sub-national media in Hungary

The transformation of Hungary's media system since the end of communism reflects broader trends across Central and Eastern Europe. While the transition to democracy reduced state control over the media, it did not eliminate it entirely (Gulyas, 2002). In the early 2010s, the withdrawal of Western multinational media companies from the region has coincided with the rise of domestic business elites as key media proprietors – these owners frequently leverage their outlets to advance business and political interests, compromising editorial independence (Štětka, 2012).

From 2010, the media freedom has declined significantly in Hungary, as the ruling Fidesz party has consolidated substantial influence over the media, particularly in rural areas, contributing to a clientelistic media system – this transformation includes the redistribution of public media assets to politically aligned private actors (Bajomi-Lázár, 2019). These developments have eroded media pluralism and press freedom in Hungary, mirroring concerns observed across the Central and Eastern European region (Konarska, 2022).

Local media markets in Hungary face significant challenges, including weak financial viability, political interference, and pervasive propaganda. Their inherently small scale limits profitability, a situation exacerbated by political manipulation, especially in contexts where local and national political interests align. Commercial outlets, such as county newspapers and local radio stations, are frequently owned by investors closely affiliated with Hungary's ruling Fidesz party, significantly affecting the diversity of media narratives. Municipal media, intended to serve public interests, have likewise operated largely as propaganda instruments during periods of Fidesz dominance (Oživení, 2023).

By the third term of the Orbán government (2018-2022), political control had significantly expanded into commercial media markets. The purchase of key regional media outlets by investors supportive of Fidesz has facilitated a pervasive dissemination of pro-government messaging. The establishment and influence of the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA) – a media conglomerate closely affiliated with the Orbán government, which owns regional daily news outlets in every county – exemplify the increasing consolidation of media ownership (Bódi et al., 2023). Regional media outlets increasingly became uniform by transmitting standardized pro-government messages, diverging from their role to report on local issues. This homogenization reduced the diversity and depth of local news coverage, with outlets focusing primarily on national political agendas and narratives favorable to the ruling party (Kovács et al., 2023).

1.6.5. Social media and politics in Hungary

Social media plays an especially significant role in Hungarian politics. In international comparison, Hungarian voters rely on social media to an outstanding degree for political information and orientation (Castro et al., 2022). Political actors also use these platforms intensively: until 2019, the opposition devoted greater attention to social media, but since the 2019 municipal elections, the governing parties have also significantly increased their presence (Bene and Farkas, 2022). The importance attributed to these platforms by political actors is underscored by the fact that Hungarian political figures are among the highest global spenders on social media advertising (Krushinski and Bene, 2022; Votta et al., 2024).

For a long time, Hungarian politics was largely confined to a single platform, with Facebook continuing to dominate political communication and engagement on social media. During the period under examination, this landscape began to shift with the rise of Instagram, although TikTok remained in a nascent stage in terms of political use even during the 2022 campaign (Bene and Farkas, 2022). However, prior to our research, no systematic study had been conducted on local-level social media usage.

1.6.6. Case justification

To summarize, we argue that Hungary presents a particularly suitable context for a comprehensive analysis of social media use in local politics. Several structural and political characteristics support this claim:

- While Hungary is relatively homogenous in terms of societal composition, its settlement structure varies considerably by population size.
- Each local community is governed by a distinct local government, making the municipality a clearly delineated unit of analysis.
- Local governments serve as the primary institutions of subnational governance, given the marginal role of county governments.
- Both ideal-typical models of local politics – community-based and party-based – are observable: smaller municipalities are dominated by independent and locally embedded actors, while larger municipalities tend to be characterized by the presence and dominance of national political parties.
- The mayor occupies a central and often dominant role in local political dynamics.
- Facebook serves as the predominant platform for political communication.

These features provide a compelling research environment: on the one hand, the institutional landscape is relatively clear and uniform; on the other, the political configurations offer significant variation, enabling nuanced analysis.

1.7. The structure of the book

Guided by the objectives outlined above, we conducted a nationwide study that relied on multiple nationally representative datasets and examined various aspects of the local social media public sphere. The research began in 2020 with the support of a research grant ("Networked locality: A multimethod approach to investigate the role of social media in local politics" – NKFI-OTKA FK-135189), and data collection took place between 2020 and 2022. Our data sources included a nationally representative face-to-face survey dataset, a Facebook data collection covering all Hungarian municipalities, an elite survey conducted with councillors, and a 5-wave longitudinal quantitative content analysis of Facebook communication from a nationally representative sample of mayors. Detailed descriptions of these databases and methodological aspects are provided in the relevant chapters. Chapter 2, along with the available empirical literature (e.g. Burai et al., 2024; Thorson et al., 2020; Usher, 2023), convincingly demonstrated that Facebook is the only social media platform of significant relevance for the local public sphere, which is why we concentrated our in-depth data collection efforts on this platform.

Part I (Chapter 2 and Chapter 3) undertakes a nationwide mapping of the social media-based local public sphere. Chapter 2 examines the demand side, while Chapter 3 focuses on the supply side. The demand side refers to the perspective of citizens, analyzed through our national representative survey. This chapter explores the role of local public affairs in people's social media experiences, the extent to which they engage with meso-level storytelling agents, how social media contributes to their awareness of local issues, and their attitudes toward local

content. A unique contribution of this chapter is its comparative approach, assessing these questions in relation to national-level political content and engagement. This allows us to understand where local politics stands in users' experiential horizons relative to national political experiences. Furthermore, we examine individual-level factors that explain variations in practices, experiences, and attitudes, helping to uncover the sources of inequalities in access to the local digital public sphere.

Chapter 3, focusing on the supply side, specifically examines the presence and reach of local meso-level storytelling agents on Facebook. To achieve this, we collected all available public affairs-related Facebook pages and groups in every Hungarian municipality. Based on this dataset, we map the communication infrastructures operating on Facebook, identifying the types of agents present and the size of their followings across different-sized municipalities. Additionally, we analyze inequalities in the expansion of local Facebook-based publics across municipalities, linking these disparities to settlement-level factors. In line with our theoretical considerations, we also explore the role of national political parties in shaping these local digital infrastructures.

Part II (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5) focuses on one of the key actors in maintaining social media-based local publics: local political actors. Chapter 4 analyzes the Facebook usage patterns of mayors and councillors, highlighting both individual and municipal-level factors that explain variations in their online engagement. Additionally, this chapter incorporates councillors' own perspectives on social media use, gathered through a national elite survey.

Chapter 5 shifts the focus specifically to mayors, examining their Facebook communication strategies through a five-wave longitudinal content analysis. This longitudinal approach allows us to uncover the temporally conditioned unique social media style of mayors, which can be temporarily influenced by national political considerations. We provide a detailed analysis of why local Facebook-based publics and their key actors – mayors – serve as crucial national mobilization resources.

In Part III (Chapter 6), we use national survey data to explore whether these meso-level political storytelling agents can influence the political engagement of their followers. While we identified certain conditions under which local political figures' activities contribute to strengthening their local political capital, we found no evidence of spillover effects on perceptions of national politics (e.g., political trust) or national-level mobilization. This suggests that local political experiences do not necessarily translate into engagement or trust at the national level.

Chapter 7 synthesizes our findings, discusses their implications, and, considering the limitations of our research, outlines directions for future studies. These future inquiries will be essential for constructing a more comprehensive and well-founded understanding of the role and functioning of social media-based local publics.

The literature reviews and theoretical insights relevant to each subtopic are detailed in the corresponding chapters. However, across all chapters, the analytical approach is informed by the two theoretical perspectives introduced in the introduction: the infrastructural approach to digital publics and the politicization/nationalization tendencies hypothesized as key drivers of local digital public spheres.

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PART I. PUBLICS

Chapter 2. The Demand Side: Citizens' Localized Social Media Use

Abstract

This chapter investigates the localized social media practices of citizens, focusing on how individuals utilize social media platforms to engage with local politics and community storytelling. Through a nationally representative survey conducted in Hungary, it examines citizens' connections to local political actors, their exposure to and attitudes toward local political content, and social media's overall role within their local information ecosystems. These patterns are interpreted in comparison with their national-level counterparts, thereby situating the extent of localized social media use within the broader context of political engagement on social media platforms.

Findings indicate that while citizens engage significantly with local political actors and storytelling agents via platforms like Facebook, Instagram usage for such purposes is minimal. Local Facebook groups emerge as critical hubs for political engagement, significantly influencing users' exposure to local political content. Additionally, attitudes toward local political content on social media are generally more positive compared to national political content.

The chapter identifies socio-demographic factors, political communication habits, motivations, personality traits, and platform usage patterns as key determinants shaping localized social media usage. It concludes that political engagement and general Facebook activity, rather than socio-demographic characteristics, primarily drive engagement. However, localized social media users constitute a highly heterogeneous group, and mayors as well as local groups prove highly effective in reaching politically uninterested and inactive users.

2.1. Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, social media platforms offer affordances for creating infrastructure to support local-level activities. However, it remains an empirical question whether local residents and actors actualize these affordances. Our knowledge of local-level social media experiences is particularly limited. Specifically, we lack understanding of the extent to which these infrastructures are established and utilized by individuals in municipalities and the role that local-level information exposure plays in their social media experiences.

To address this gap, this chapter will explore the demand side of this equation, while the next chapter will focus on the supply side. Here, we investigate citizens' local-level social media practices and experiences to determine the extent to which social media platforms facilitate connections to communities. As previously discussed, social media can exert both "push" and "pull" effects on local connectedness based on its affordances. However, the empirical realization of these effects, particularly concerning information exposure, remains unresolved. To this end, this chapter examines the extent to which people connect to local storytelling agents, are exposed to local political content, their attitudes toward these types of content, and the overall role of Facebook in their local information repertoire. To provide context, these findings are interpreted in comparison with their national-level counterparts. This approach allows us to make a unique contribution by highlighting the level of localized social media use within the broader experience of political social media engagement.

Additionally, we examine the factors that explain individual variations in local-level connectedness, exposure, attitudes and perceived role of Facebook in local information consumption. Given that local-level social media activity has been shown to be associated with

several individual- and community-level benefits – such as increased willingness to engage in local activities (Gibbons, 2020), reduced loneliness (Latikka et al., 2023), and enhanced social support (Robaeyst et al., 2022) – it is important to identify which groups are more likely to connect with their local social media infrastructure. We focus on the role of socio-demography, political communication habits, political motivations, personality traits, and social media usage patterns.

To achieve this, we will utilize data from a unique, nationally representative survey conducted in Hungary in November 2021, which included several items related to people's social media experiences. This approach allows us to map different types of local-level experiences in great detail and interpret them within the broader context of overall social media use and information consumption patterns.

2.2. Experiencing local politics on social media platforms

Few studies have addressed how social media shapes the local information environment, but those that have done so demonstrate that these platforms have significantly altered people's local news practices. Gulyás and colleagues (2019) argued that even the definition of what constitutes news has changed in the local context. Legacy news media has lost its monopoly on defining local news, as any personally relevant and interesting information or content that provokes community engagement is now often considered local news. McCollough, Crowell, and Napoli (2017) also suggested that interpersonal networks on social media are crucial channels for disseminating local information.

To bridge this gap, in this chapter, we examine localized social media usage from multiple perspectives. However, our approach to mapping local-level social media activity does not consider it an isolated phenomenon. Instead, in alignment with Edgerly and Xu's (2023) work on local-level information-seeking during the pandemic, we adopt the communication ecology framework, which posits that individuals are embedded within a broad information ecosystem with numerous opportunities to obtain locally relevant information. These information sources co-exist within a given community, and the role of social media in local communities can only be understood in relation to the overall communication ecology (Edgerly and Xu, 2023). We extend this approach to include the national-level communication ecology, as local communication coexists with national communication, particularly on social media platforms. Accordingly, we argue that capturing the role of local-level social media experiences requires interpreting them within the context of both the local communication ecosystem and national-level communication patterns. Thus, while our focus is on localized (Kwon et al., 2021) or community-oriented (Nah et al., 2021) social media use, we interpret these practices in comparison with national-level social media use and within the broader context of local and national information consumption.

In this spirit, and drawing on the Communication Infrastructure Theory presented in Chapter 1, we first map users' connections to local storytelling agents on Facebook and Instagram. We then explore users' exposure to and attitudes toward local content on these platforms. Finally, we assess the perceived role of social media in local information consumption within the broader local communication ecology. Each of these dimensions is analyzed in contrast with their national-level counterparts, aligning with our theoretical framework.

2.2.1. Connections to the local storytelling agents

Social media presents a more complex and fragmented information environment than offline media, posing challenges for local communities (Mathews, 2022). On these platforms, numerous local storytelling agents coexist and distribute locally relevant content and stories.

Local Facebook groups, in particular, have become an essential source of local information (Gulyas et al., 2019; Örnebring and Hellekant Rowe, 2022). Örnebring and Hellekant Rowe (2022) argue that these groups function as "third places" – understood as informal local spaces such as taverns, cafés, and hair salons that connect local people in an inclusive, community-oriented manner, thereby fostering an "organic sense of community". They serve as "local hotspots" and storytelling infrastructures (Meulenaere et al., 2020), where the daily rhythm of amateur and interactive information circulation (Örnebring and Hellekant Rowe, 2022) enhances community-level awareness of stories, issues, actors, events, and challenges (Meulenaere et al., 2020), helping people "imagine" the community (Anderson, 2016). These groups are also frequently used to recruit help or support, further increasing social cohesion (Robaeyst et al., 2022). Moreover, the integrative and awareness-raising role of Facebook groups operates at various levels within the community; many groups focus on specific neighborhoods or areas, facilitating micro- or meso-level community integration (Ballatore et al., 2024).

On social media platforms, local political actors can also create pages to reach residents directly or indirectly through the viral spread of their messages. Local government pages, as well as those of local politicians and parties, are important firsthand information sources about local issues and political processes (Eom et al., 2018; Triantafillidou et al., 2018). For instance, An and Mendiola-Smith (2020) demonstrated that in crisis situations, political actors' social media presence is particularly significant as an information resource for locals.

Facebook is also a key distribution platform for local legacy media (Gulyas et al., 2019; Toff and Mathews, 2024). In response to changing news consumption patterns, legacy media outlets have opened social media pages to reach their audiences and circulate content (e.g. Coleman et al., 2016). For example, Thorson and colleagues (2020) found that most Facebook posts about the local topics they investigated were made by local legacy media, indicating that these outlets remain prominent actors in the local political information infrastructure. However, it is not only legacy media that leverages the affordances of social media platforms. Hyperlocal media, which gained momentum on the Internet (Harte et al., 2018), is particularly favored by social media platforms (Nygren et al., 2018). These outlets are "geographically-based, community-oriented, original-newsreporting organizations indigenous to the web and intended to fill perceived gaps in coverage of an issue or region and to promote civic engagement" (Metzgar et al., 2011) (Metzgar et al., 2011: 774). Social media enables these low-resourced amateur outlets to establish a presence in the local public sphere.

However, our understanding of the extent to which people connect with these information resources – or, in the terminology of Communication Infrastructure Theory, with the local social media-based storytelling infrastructure – is limited. Interestingly, while the Communication Infrastructure Theory framework explicitly posits that connectedness to local communication infrastructure in the form of storytelling agents has beneficial individual- and community-level effects, few studies applying the theory to social media contexts have examined individual-level connectedness to different storytelling agents, focusing instead on a general local news exposure as an independent variable (e.g. Choi et al., 2021; Nah et al., 2021; Shao et al., 2022). We identified only one study offering descriptive insights in this regard: Meulenaere and colleagues (2023) found that 30.5 percent of residents in Ghent are members of local groups on Facebook or Hoplr (a Belgian neighborhood-focused social network). To address this gap, we will map the connection patterns to these agents and compare them to those associated with national-level actors (RQ2.1)

2.2.2. Exposure to and attitudes toward local political content on social media

Exposure to locally relevant content on social media is not solely determined by direct connections to local storytelling agents. Users may encounter local content even without actively seeking it, as incidental exposure is relatively common on these platforms (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2018). Furthermore, due to algorithmic filtering, simply following a page or being a member of a local group does not guarantee that their posts will reach the user (Thorson et al., 2021).

The actual level of exposure to local content is particularly significant when compared to national-level messages. As discussed in the previous section, there is an ongoing debate about whether social media "pushes" users away from or "pulls" them toward local content. The limited studies addressing this question have primarily focused on interaction patterns between users (e.g. Pfetsch et al., 2021; Takhteyev et al., 2012), but the extent to which users are exposed to local versus national content remains unexplored (RQ2.2).

In addition, when users encounter content, their attitudes toward it can significantly influence their level of engagement. If users dislike a particular type of content, they can easily skip it or scroll past it quickly (e.g. Barnidge, 2023; Bode et al., 2017). This aspect has also been largely overlooked in the literature, leaving an open question about whether users prefer local social media content and how these preferences differ between local and national content (RQ2.3).

2.2.3. Social media within the communication ecology

After mapping localized social media use, in alignment with our communication ecology framework, we will situate these platforms within the broader local public sphere by examining the news repertoires of our respondents. While the repertoire approach is relatively common in studies of national-level news consumption (e.g. Castro et al., 2022), it has rarely been applied at the local level, with the notable exception of Edgerly and Xu (2023), whose work, however, is limited to the Covid-19-related local information consumption rather than providing general insights into local news repertoires. Nevertheless, their findings highlight the importance of the communication ecology approach, as they found that legacy media remains a crucial information resource in crisis situations, a claim also supported by Wells and colleagues' (2021) observations.

To capture the importance of certain information resources within an individual's repertoire, we will focus on their individually perceived importance in overall information consumption. This approach is more informative than merely examining usage frequency, as consumption frequency is medium-specific. For instance, it is difficult to compare brief daily Facebook checks with a single in-depth reading of a local weekly newspaper. Another innovative aspect of our approach, in line with our theoretical framework, is the comparison between local- and national-level news repertoires to determine whether the role of social media platforms differs across these two levels (RQ2.4). It is plausible that individuals employ different strategies for informing themselves at the local level than at the national level.

2.2.4. Differences across municipality types

Finally, we assume that social media's role in local-level experiences varies across different types of municipalities. For instance, Shao and colleagues (2022) suggest that rural Americans are more passive on social media than their urban counterparts, a finding corroborated by Wells and colleagues (2021) in their study of local media consumption patterns. Moreover, we can expect – and will empirically confirm in Chapter 3 – that the availability of storytelling agents is more limited in rural municipalities compared to urban communities. Therefore, we will explore how the patterns discussed above differ across various types of municipalities (village, city, city with county rights, capital). (RQ2.5)

2.2.5. Explaining localized social media use

After reviewing general patterns of localized social media use, it is essential to examine the factors contributing to its individual-level variations. Evidence suggests that localized social media activity is associated with several democratic and quality-of-life benefits, including increased local involvement (Gibbons, 2020), enhanced local awareness (Meulenaere et al., 2020), improved perceived social support (Robaeyst et al., 2022), and reduced loneliness (Latikka et al., 2023). Consequently, Nah and colleagues (2016) posited that the digital divide could evolve into a democratic divide, underscoring the importance of identifying the driving forces behind this inequality.

In this context, we focus on the antecedents of key variables related to localized social media use: (1) following local political actors on Facebook; (2) membership in local Facebook groups; (3) exposure to; and (4) preference for local Facebook content. This section is limited to Facebook, as our descriptive data indicate it is the only relevant social media platform for localized usage. However, consistent with our broader approach, we investigate the determinants of localized Facebook use compared to its national counterparts, aiming to discern whether distinct factors underlie national- and local-level experiences.

We examine five categories of factors that may be pertinent in explaining variations in localized social media use: (1) socio-demographic factors, (2) political communication habits, (3) political motivations, (4) personality traits, and (5) social media usage patterns. Our analysis specifically focuses on factors identified in the literature on political social media use, although their influence on localized social media activities remains unclear. Given the exploratory nature of this chapter and the limited empirical evidence available, we refrain from proposing specific hypotheses. Instead, we approach the investigation of the antecedents of localized social media use, in comparison with national-level activities, as an open research question (RQ2.6).

The current understanding of the antecedents of localized social media use remains highly limited. Moreover, the sparse existing research examines different types of information and communication technology (ICT) experiences using diverse research designs, making cross-study comparisons challenging. Socio-demographic factors have been the focus of most studies, yet findings are inconsistent due to varying empirical approaches. Age is frequently cited as a significant factor; however, while some argue that younger individuals are more engaged (Bobkowski et al., 2019; Edgerly and Xu, 2023; Nah et al., 2016) as they move away from traditional print media (Wadbring and Bergström, 2017), Meulenaere and colleagues (2023) found middle-aged individuals to be the most active in local groups, whereas Hayes and Lawless (2018) observed that local political interest is more common among older adults. The role of education is similarly ambiguous; some studies have found that higher education levels are associated with localized usage (Edgerly and Xu, 2023; Nah et al., 2016), while others have reported no significant correlation (Bobkowski et al., 2019; Meulenaere et al., 2023). Overall, we are far from definitively determining whether socio-demographic inequalities and differences contribute to a local-level digital divide.

Another relevant set of factors addressed in the literature pertains to political communication habits. Jung and LeNoble (2023), in their study in Fukushima, found a correlation between mainstream news consumption and localized social media use. Meanwhile, Ognyanova and colleagues (2013) demonstrated that individuals who frequently engage in informal face-to-face political discussions on local matters are more active in online localized behavior. From the perspective of the repertoire approach, a key question is whether existing political communication habits, such as news media consumption and political discussions, translate into

social media use, or whether social media platforms facilitate connections and discussions among those less engaged in other political communication spheres.

Beyond the factors sporadically explored in the literature on localized ICT use, it is crucial to consider additional antecedents to explain individual-level variations more precisely. Motivation plays a key role in online experiences, and it is well-established that political interest influences social media political activities (e.g. Barnidge, 2023; Fisher et al., 2019). However, in the context of localized social media use, it is important to distinguish between national-level and local-level political interests, as they may drive different behaviors. While it is reasonable to assume that local-level interest predominantly drives localized social media use, national-level interest may also contribute to increased exposure to local political content, given that algorithms may not differentiate between local and national political content when targeting users classified as politically interested (cf. Thorson et al., 2021). Additionally, internal political efficacy may be another relevant motivational factor (Oser et al., 2022). Since ordinary citizens may find it easier to have an impact at the local level, this may be more strongly associated with local-level activities and experiences than with their national-level counterparts.

Personality traits can also play a significant role. While the influence of personality on political social media use has gained increasing attention (e.g. Boulianne and Koc-Michalska, 2022), it has not been extensively explored in the context of localized social media activities. Political discussions often involve conflict, leading individuals sensitive to conflict to avoid these activities and content (Vraga et al., 2015). However, it remains unclear how this personality trait functions at the local level. On one hand, local politics may be less conflictual than national politics, given its lower ideological and partisan tensions (Oliver, 2012). On the other hand, the local public sphere is more personal, as participants are more likely to know each other, potentially intensifying the impact of conflicts in this context (Burai et al., 2024). Another relevant personality factor is opinion leadership status, which is frequently found to be an antecedent of political activities on social media platforms (e.g. Dubois et al., 2014; Karlsen, 2015). Given that this status is typically connected to local network position and reputation, it is reasonable to assume that opinion leadership is more significant in local-level political activity than in its national-level counterpart.

Finally, it is highly likely that general patterns of Facebook use shape individuals' political activities and experiences, with minimal variation between the two levels. We address three aspects in this regard. First, the frequency of news feed checking is naturally important in determining the level of exposure. Second, the overall activity level may influence individuals' willingness to engage in certain political activities. Third, political activity level specifically on these platforms is likely to shape certain political actions, experiences, and attitudes.

2.3. Methods

We address our research question using a nationally representative dataset collected through face-to-face survey interviews. The survey was conducted by Závecz Research Market and Social Research Institute in November 2021 (between November 8 and 20) using face-to-face interviews. The data collection involved a two-stage, proportionally stratified random sampling of 1,000 individuals. The sample is representative of the adult population (aged 18 and over) in Hungary with respect to gender, age groups, educational attainment, and municipality type. Sampling biases were corrected using weighting procedures.[4]

In this study, we focus on four sets of dependent variables outlined in the theoretical section: connections to storytelling agents, exposure to political content, attitudes toward this content, and the role of social media platforms in political information repertoires. These variables will

[4] The smallest weight is 0.55, the largest weight is 1.66, the mean is 1, and the standard deviation is 0.27.

first be analyzed descriptively (RQ2.1-RQ2.5), followed by an extended analysis examining the factors associated with these variables (RQ2.6). These factors include socio-demography, political communication habits, political motivations, personality traits, and social media usage patterns.

In our descriptive analysis, we examine findings both for the total population and for users who at least occasionally use the specific platform. While some questions follow a multi-platform approach, including Instagram and YouTube, the majority focus specifically on Facebook. This is based on preliminary contextual knowledge and existing literature, which suggest that Facebook is the only platform significantly relevant in the local political context. This expectation is confirmed by the multi-platform findings.

Furthermore, in the multivariable analyses, as both the dependent variables and some independent variables pertain to Facebook-specific experiences, the model samples are limited to respondents who use Facebook at least occasionally (N = 730).

The operationalization of the main variables is detailed in their respective sections. However, for the multivariable analysis, we consistently apply the same set of independent variables to explain the dependent variables. Therefore, we will briefly introduce these predictor variables here, with their theoretical significance and expectations discussed in the theoretical section.

Regarding socio-demographic factors, we included age (measured in years, M = 42.8, SD = 14.8)[5], education captured in three categories (46.8 percent maximum elementary [reference category]; 35.4 percent secondary; 14.8 percent university degree), gender (46 percent male [reference] and 54 percent female), and domicile (18.8 percent Budapest [reference]; 18.1 percent city; 35.1 percent town; 28.1 percent village). In the case of the two categorical variables, alternative models were run using different reference categories to enable comparisons between categories. While we refer to these findings in the description, the tables present only the models with the original reference categories. Income was also measured, but due to the large number of missing responses, its inclusion would greatly reduce the sample size.

To capture political communication habits, we included the frequency at which respondents are exposed to news from different resources, measured on a 7-point frequency scale ranging from "never" to "several times a day," treated as a continuous variable. We included general news consumption frequency from newspapers (M = 2.6, SD = 2.0), TV or radio (M = 5.7, SD = 1.5), and online news sites (M = 4.5, SD = 2.1). We also measured the frequency of informal political discussions by taking the mean value of discussions with family members, friends, co-workers, or other acquaintances, using the same 7-point scale (M = 3.2, SD = 1.4).

For political motivation, we measured national-level and local-level political interest on a 4-point scale ranging from “not at all interested” to “very interested” (for national M = 2.3, SD = 0.9; for local M = 2.4, SD = 0.9). To assess internal political efficacy, we asked respondents to what extent they feel they have the personal abilities to act meaningfully in politics, measured on a 5-point scale from “not at all” to “completely” (M = 2.0, SD = 1.0). These items were included in the models as numeric variables.

As for personality traits, we focused on conflict avoidance and opinion leadership. Conflict avoidance was measured with three items adopted from Goldstein (1999), where respondents indicated on a 5-point agreement scale the extent to which they agree with statements such as “I hate arguments,” “I rarely have arguments with friends,” and “I avoid conflicts”. The conflict avoidance scale was calculated as the mean value of these three items (Cronbach-alpha = 0.75; M = 3.7, SD = 0.8). Opinion leadership was measured using five items[6] based on Gnambs and

[5] Mean and standard deviation values are calculated within the model population, which includes respondents who use Facebook at least occasionally.

[6] (1) “Many of my friends and acquaintances base their decisions on my opinion.”; (2) “My friends and acquaintances often discuss subjects that I brought up.” (3) “I usually succeed if I want to convince someone about

Batinic (2011), also on a 5-point agreement scale, and the mean value of the five items was used (Cronbach-alpha = 0.88; M = 3.1, SD = 0.8).
Finally, we included variables related to Facebook usage patterns. Using the 7-point frequency scale, we measured how often respondents check their news feed (M = 5.0, SD = 1.8). A general Facebook activity scale was created by averaging the frequency of activities such as posting posts or stories, liking, commenting on, or sharing posts from other users or pages (M = 3.4, SD = 1.4). Similarly, we created a political Facebook activity scale by averaging the frequency of activities such as posting, sharing, liking, and commenting on political content, or discussing politics in Facebook groups or private chats (M = 2.2, SD = 1.6).

2.4. Findings

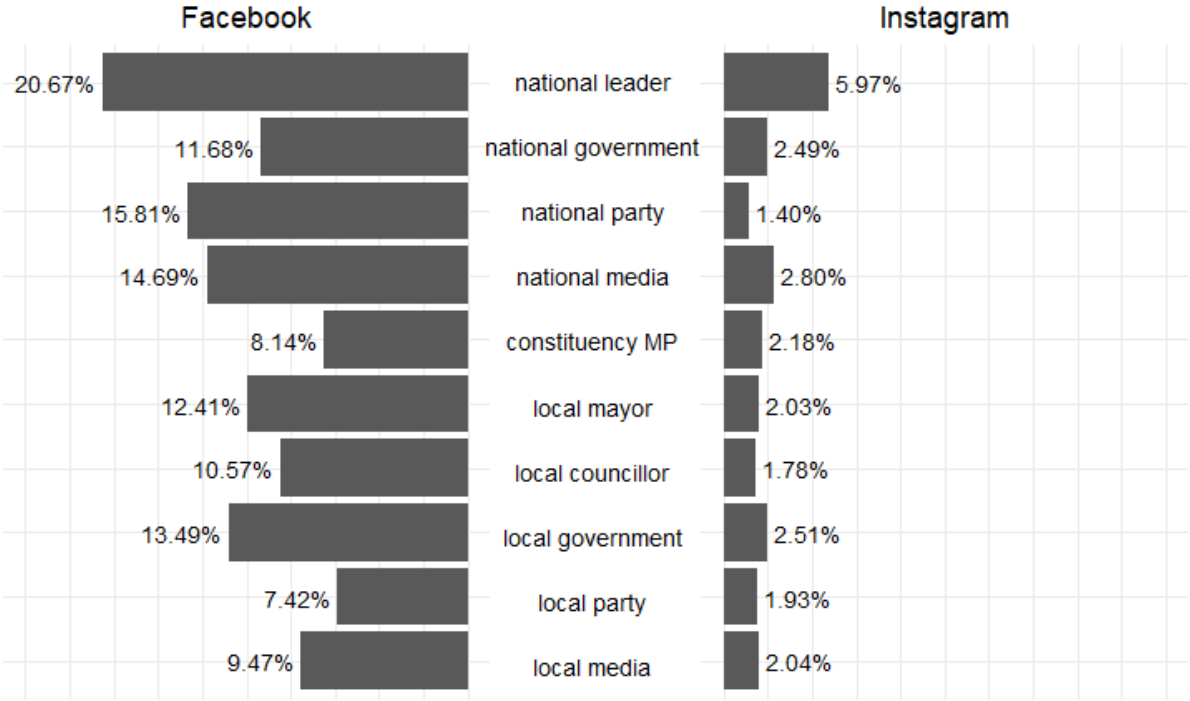
2.4.1. Connections to local storytelling agents

Descriptives: Following activity

To explore the connection patterns to local storytelling agents (RQ2.1), we first analyzed respondents' following activity. Specifically, we asked whether they follow a predefined list of actors on Facebook and Instagram. At the national level, we included eight political leaders who have achieved significant reach on Facebook and broadly represent the diversity of the Hungarian party system. From the governing party, the Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, and the social media-savvy Foreign Minister, Péter Szijjártó, were featured. On the opposition side, the list included the leaders of the Democratic Coalition (Ferenc Gyurcsány) and Jobbik (Péter Jakab), the Mayor of Budapest, Gergely Karácsony, and the two main competitors in the prime ministerial candidate primary: the winner and joint opposition candidate for PM, Péter Márki-Zay, and Klára Dobrev, supported by the Democratic Coalition. As the president of the radical-right party Mi Hazánk is banned from Meta platforms, the party is represented by its deputy leader, Dóra Dúró.
While this list cannot encompass all leading national political figures, we categorized these actors under the broad label of "national political leaders." This approach may misclassify respondents who follow other national political leaders while not following any of the leaders included in our list, potentially leading to an underestimation of the share of followers in this category. However, given that the selected figures are among the most prominent and widely followed in the Hungarian political landscape, it is unlikely that many respondents follow other leaders while ignoring those on our list.
In addition to individual leaders, we asked respondents whether they follow other national-level entities, such as the government page, any national party, national media outlets, or their local Members of the Parliament (MPs). At the local level, respondents indicated whether they follow their mayor, local councilor, the local government's page, any local party, or local media outlets. The descriptive findings are presented in Figure 2.1. The figure illustrates the proportions relative to the total population; however, the analysis also addresses the proportions within the platform user base.

something." (4) "It is easy for me to influence other people." (5) "I am often the one among my friends and acquaintances who approves important decisions."

Figure 2.1. The proportion of the population that follows the listed actors on Facebook (left side) and Instagram (right side)



Based on our survey, 19.6 percent of the total population and 28 percent of Facebook users follow some type of local Facebook page included in our research. Meanwhile, 25.4 percent of the population and 36 percent of Facebook users follow national political pages. Among political leaders listed in our survey, 21 percent of the population and 29 percent of Facebook users are followers. For political parties, these figures are 16 percent and 22 percent, respectively, while national media pages are followed by 15 percent of the population and 21 percent of Facebook users. The central government page has a lower follower rate, with 12 percent of the population and 17 percent of Facebook users.

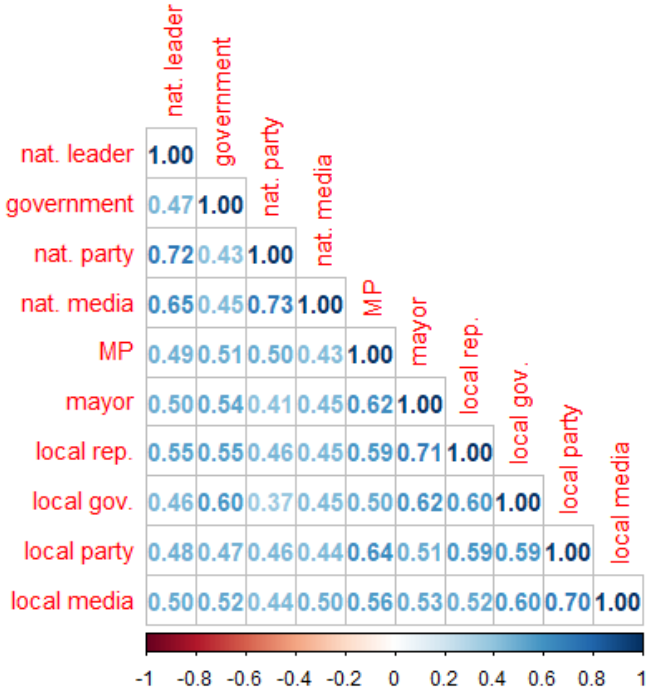
At the local level, local government pages attract the most followers, with 13.5 percent of the total population and 18 percent of Facebook users engaging with these pages – surpassing the follower rate of the central government page. Among local political actors, mayors have the highest follower rates (12 percent of the population and 18 percent of Facebook users), closely followed by local councilors (11 percent and 15 percent, respectively). Citizens appear to engage with these local actors more frequently than their constituency's elected MP (8 percent of the population and 12 percent of Facebook users) or the local branches of national parties (7 percent and 11 percent). Local media pages also show notable engagement, with 9 percent of the population and 13 percent of Facebook users following them.

In summary, our findings reveal that while national political leaders, parties, and media outlets are slightly more commonly followed, a significant portion of the population engages with local political actors on Facebook. Notably, locally rooted figures, such as mayors and local councilors, attract more followers than local branches of national parties or constituency MPs.

Instagram does not serve as a significant platform for either national or local political engagement. Only 7 percent of respondents follow any (examined) national political pages, with the highest proportion (6 percent) following political leaders, while just 4 percent follow local political pages. Among Instagram users, only 17 percent follow national political pages, and just 10 percent follow local political pages. This indicates that even those active on the platform show relatively low engagement with political actors.

An analysis of the co-occurrence of political following activities on Facebook reveals a substantial and significant correlation between all categories (Figure 2.2). However, stronger correlations are observed within the groups of local and national pages. For instance, individuals who follow a national political page are more likely to follow another national political page (with the central government page being the only exception), while those who follow a local political actor are similarly inclined to follow other local pages. At the same time, a fairly strong correlation exists between national and local follower activity. The smallest correlation coefficient (0.37) is observed between national party pages and local government pages, indicating that Facebook users who follow politics on social media often engage with both national and local political actors.

Figure 2.2. Correlation between following different types of actors on Facebook



Overall, the correlation between any kind of local and national follower activity is strong and significant (0.65). In another question, respondents were asked whether they follow any politicians, media pages, or parties on Facebook. Among those who follow political figures, 48 percent follow their mayor, 40 percent follow their MP, and 44 percent follow local councilors. Among followers of media pages, 40 percent engage with local outlets, and of those who follow national parties, 37 percent also follow local party pages. This indicates that individuals who follow political pages often engage with local politics as well.

However, a large share of the population does not follow either national or local political sites or actors. Among respondents, 84 percent – and 77 percent of Facebook users – reported that they do not follow politicians or political parties. Similarly, 85 percent of respondents and 79 percent of Facebook users stated that they do not follow media pages. (As shown in Figure 2.1, this proportion decreases when specific pages are queried.) Thus, the primary barrier to following local actors appears to be a general lack of engagement with political content, a trait exhibited by the majority of Facebook users.

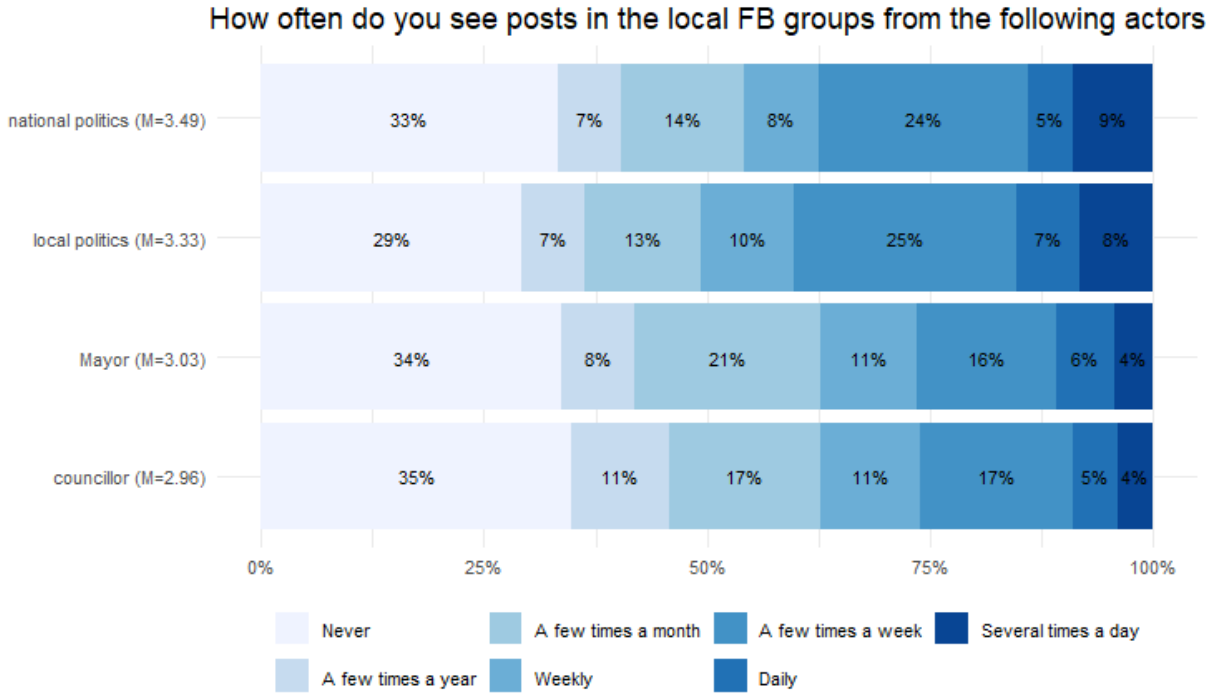
Differences based on municipality type can be observed to some extent, with Chi-squared test results indicating significant variation in each follower activity ($p < .05$). However, paired z-tests reveal that only followers from Budapest show statistically significant differences. Residents of Budapest follow all types of local political actors more frequently than those in

other municipalities, except for official local government pages, which are more actively followed in cities. In Budapest, 27 percent of users follow both mayors and local councilors, 30 percent follow local government pages, and 28 percent follow local media. MPs and local party pages are followed by 24 percent and 27 percent of users, respectively. One possible explanation for the higher follower rates in the capital is the broader range of available local Facebook pages (see, Chapter 3).

Descriptives: Facebook group

Our findings suggest that groups function as focal hubs for local Facebook activity. We directly asked respondents who use Facebook at least occasionally whether they are members of any local Facebook groups or groups focusing on national politics (valid responses were limited to "yes" or "no"). Subsequently, we asked local group members how often they are exposed to the following in these groups, using a 7-point frequency scale ranging from "never" to "several times a day": (1) local political content, (2) national political content, (3) posts from mayors, and (4) posts from any councilors.
Our findings (Figure 2.3) show that 27.5 percent of respondents reported being members of a local Facebook group. Among those who use Facebook at least occasionally, this figure rises to 39 percent. Membership in Facebook groups appears to be predominantly a local activity, as only 6 percent of respondents and 9 percent of Facebook users belong to groups focused on national political issues.

Figure 2.3. Exposure to political content in local Facebook groups (share among local group members)



Political issues are present to a certain extent in local Facebook groups (Figure 2.3). Only one-third of group members reported not encountering national politics or posts from mayors or councilors in these groups, and just 29 percent indicated that local politics were entirely absent. Half of the group members are exposed to local political content on a weekly basis, representing 14 percent of all respondents. Additionally, 37 percent of group members (equivalent to 10 percent of all respondents) reported seeing posts from mayors and councilors weekly. This

suggests that the number of group members reached weekly by local political actors is roughly equivalent to the number of followers these actors have. When monthly exposure is considered, local politics reach 63 percent of group users, and posts from mayors reach 58 percent.
Interestingly, 43 percent of those exposed to weekly local political content in groups do not follow any local pages, and this figure rises to 49 percent for those exposed monthly. Among those reached weekly by mayoral posts in groups, 55 percent do not follow the mayor directly, while for councilors, this proportion is 62 percent. Thus, while only 12 percent of the total population directly follows mayors, an additional 6 percent can be reached weekly through groups. Similarly, although 28 percent of the population follows a local political page directly, local political content reaches an additional 6 percent via groups. This underscores that local Facebook groups are key hubs for local political engagement and information dissemination.
There are no significant differences in local Facebook group membership across municipality types ($p > .05$), as the proportion of group members remains consistent. Political exposure in groups also shows minimal variation. In Budapest, exposure to local politics (mean: 4.11 on a 7-point frequency scale) and mayoral posts (mean: 3.50) are slightly higher ($p < .05$) than in villages (mean: 3.14 and 2.67, respectively). Similarly, group members in Budapest are more frequently exposed to posts from councilors (mean: 3.38) compared to those in cities (mean: 2.52) ($p < .05$).

Multivariate analysis: Connection to storytelling agents

Lastly, we aim to uncover the antecedents of these connection patterns. First, we examine the factors associated with connections to local storytelling agents. As an initial step, we analyze the determinants of following any locally relevant Facebook page, including those of local MPs, mayors, councilors, local government pages, or local party and media outlets. Next, we focus specifically on mayors as key actors within the local social media sphere. Adding a comparative element, we also investigate the determinants of following national political leaders to identify differences in the factors influencing the following of national versus local-level political leaders. Finally, we examine the determinants of local Facebook group membership, as our descriptive analysis highlighted that these groups serve as critical hubs of the local public sphere. Since our dependent variables are binary in this case, we employed logistic regression models for the analysis. Table 2.1 presents the odds ratios, where values greater than "1" indicate a positive correlation (i.e., an increase in the predictor variable is associated with higher odds of the outcome occurring), and values less than "1" indicate a negative correlation (i.e., an increase in the predictor variable is associated with lower odds of the outcome occurring).

Table 2.1. Logistic regression models explaining connections to local storytelling agents and national political leaders

	Any local page	**Mayors' page**	**Any national leaders' page**	**Local group membership**
Predictors	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*
(Intercept)	0.01 ***	0.00 ***	0.02 ***	0.14 **
	(0.01)	(0.00)	(0.02)	(0.10)
Age	1.01	1.01	1.00	1.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Education: secondary	1.06	1.10	0.68	0.93
	(0.25)	(0.30)	(0.18)	(0.19)

Education: higher	0.59 (0.19)	0.63 (0.23)	0.41 * (0.15)	0.76 (0.20)
Gender: female	0.95 (0.20)	0.68 (0.16)	0.73 (0.16)	1.16 (0.21)
Domicile: city	0.39 ** (0.13)	0.32 ** (0.13)	0.30 ** (0.12)	1.14 (0.33)
Domicile: town	0.37 ** (0.11)	0.49 * (0.16)	0.35 ** (0.12)	1.41 (0.37)
Domicile: village	0.54 (0.18)	0.58 (0.21)	0.77 (0.27)	1.05 (0.29)
News consump.: newspapers	1.15 ** (0.06)	1.10 (0.06)	1.04 (0.06)	0.97 (0.05)
News consump.: TV/radio	1.12 (0.09)	1.16 (0.12)	1.05 (0.09)	0.88 * (0.05)
News consump.: news sites	1.07 (0.06)	1.04 (0.07)	1.21 ** (0.08)	1.21 *** (0.06)
Political talk	1.20 * (0.11)	1.16 (0.13)	1.31 ** (0.13)	0.88 (0.07)
Political interest: national	1.02 (0.21)	1.03 (0.24)	1.89 ** (0.43)	0.84 (0.16)
Political interest: local	1.34 (0.26)	1.55 * (0.35)	0.94 (0.21)	1.45 * (0.25)
Internal political efficacy	1.01 (0.12)	1.01 (0.14)	1.25 (0.17)	1.21 (0.13)
Conflict avoidance	1.00 (0.12)	1.15 (0.16)	0.92 (0.12)	0.84 (0.09)
Opinion leadership	1.12 (0.15)	1.17 (0.18)	0.97 (0.14)	0.99 (0.12)
FB news feed	0.91 (0.06)	0.92 (0.08)	0.80 ** (0.06)	1.09 (0.06)
FB activity	1.26 * (0.14)	1.45 ** (0.19)	1.19 (0.15)	1.53 *** (0.14)
FB political activity	1.26 * (0.11)	1.13 (0.11)	1.50 *** (0.15)	0.80 ** (0.07)
Observations	676	676	676	673
R^2 Tjur	0.215	0.190	0.338	0.104

** p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001*

Regarding connections to local storytelling agents (Table 2.1), socio-demographic factors do not seem particularly significant: no differences were observed based on age, education, or gender, meaning that there are no inequalities in this respect. Similarly, socio-demographic

factors play little role in following national leaders, with an interesting exception – those with higher education are less likely to follow political leaders compared to those with the lowest levels of education. The type of municipality, however, does matter: users in Budapest are more active in all forms of following activity than those living in towns or cities. For group membership, however, there are no significant differences by municipality type, consistent with the descriptive results.

Political communication habits play some role in following local pages and group membership but are irrelevant for following mayors. Newspaper readers are more active in following local political pages. Meanwhile, users who are more active readers of news sites tend to follow national politicians and are more likely to join local groups. Those who engage in political conversations more frequently are more likely to follow both national leaders and local pages. While theoretical explanations for these differences are not straightforward, the absence of negative correlations (except between group membership and TV/radio consumption) indicates that users do not follow political actors to replace traditional media consumption. Generally, both local and national-level following are more typical among those with active political communication habits, although this does not apply to following mayors, who are followed regardless of these habits.

Interest in politics shows contrasting patterns: following national leaders is strongly associated with interest in national politics, meaning that those who are politically interested are more likely to follow political leaders. However, national political interest does not affect local following activities. Mayors' pages or local groups attract users with higher local political interest, but national political interest is irrelevant. Political efficacy does not play a role in any of the dependent variables. The two personality traits we examined – conflict avoidance and opinion leadership – also show no significant effect on following activities, which are independent of these traits.

Different dimensions of Facebook activity play varying roles in following and group membership. National leaders and local pages are more likely to be followed by politically active Facebook users. However, following mayors and joining local groups are unrelated to political activity levels; instead, general Facebook activity (e.g., posting or interacting with content) is the key factor. Interestingly, local groups are more likely to attract those who are politically less active on Facebook. This suggests that local Facebook activity is less politically oriented compared to national politics. Mayors and local groups have the potential to reach users who are relatively politically passive. Surprisingly, leaders are more likely to be followed by those who check their news feed less frequently, but this factor does not affect local activities.

Overall, the factors we examined explain following and group membership activities only to a limited extent, indicating a highly heterogeneous user base. However, the pseudo-R^2 values show that the follower base of national political leaders is more clearly defined by these factors than that of local actors. Following national leaders is more typical among news consumers, politically interested users, and more active individuals, while these factors are less relevant at the local level. For instance, following mayors – a parallel to national leaders – is not influenced by any political factors but is affected by Facebook activity and municipality type. This supports our assumption that mayors reach a much more heterogeneous audience than national political actors. Since respondents were also asked whether they voted for their current mayor in the previous election, we tested an alternative model to see if voting for the mayor influenced following activity. Even this variable was not significant (only marginally, $p = 0.082$), confirming the integrative appeal of mayors that transcends political sympathies.

For local group membership, a few political factors, such as local political interest and news portal consumption, are relevant, but Facebook political activity negatively affects it. Overall, the model's explanatory power is lowest here, reflecting the heterogeneity of group

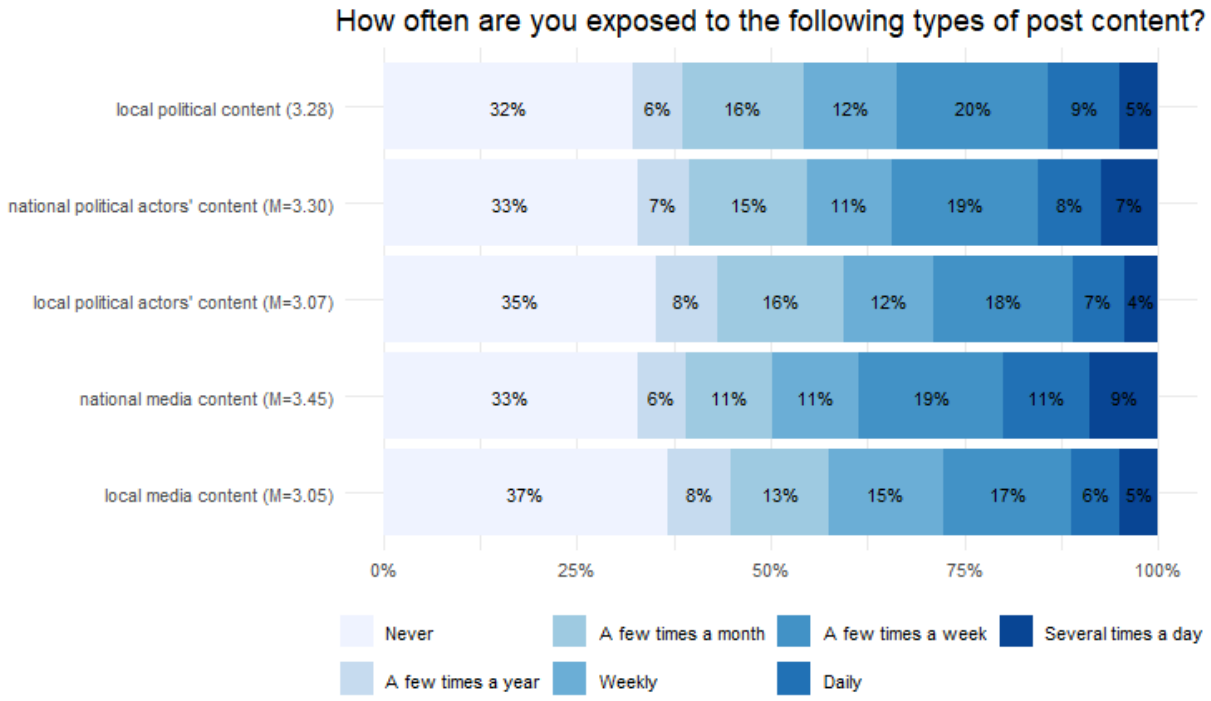
membership. Following local pages appears to be somewhat more influenced by political activity, but political interest alone is not significant in this context either.

2.4.2. Exposure to local and national political content on Facebook

Descriptives: Exposure patterns

Regarding content exposure (RQ2.2), we asked respondents who use Facebook at least occasionally how often they encounter different types of content on their Facebook news feed, using a 7-point frequency scale ranging from "never" to "several times a day." Specifically, we inquired about their exposure to local political content in general, as well as posts from national political actors, local political actors, national media outlets, and local media outlets (Figure 2.4).

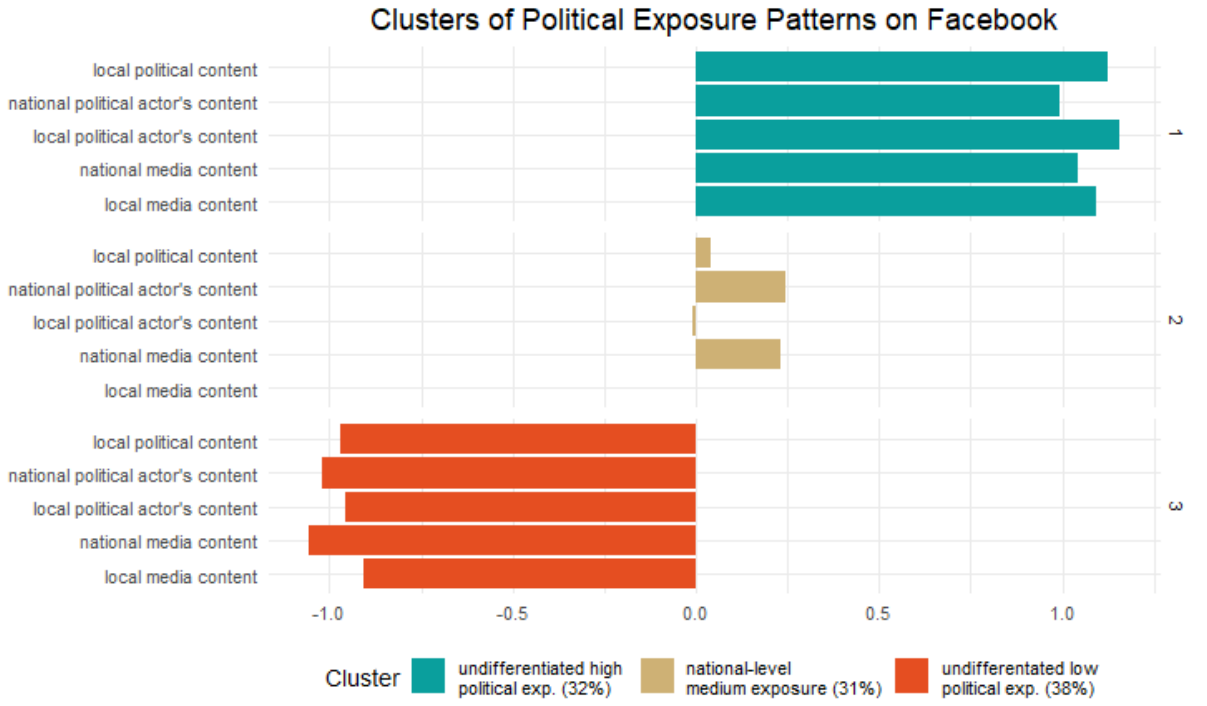
Figure 2.4. Exposure to local and national political content in Facebook news feed (share among Facebook users)



Our findings show that those who use Facebook at least occasionally are relatively frequently exposed to local political content. Two-thirds of users (47 percent of all respondents) encounter local political information with some regularity. On a weekly basis, 46 percent of users (32 percent of all respondents, roughly one-third of the population) come across local content.
Despite the fact that national political actors are followed by a larger proportion of users, respondents see only slightly more content from national politicians than from local ones. While 45 percent of users see content from national politicians at least weekly, and 67 percent at least occasionally, 41 percent see content from local politicians weekly, and 65 percent at least occasionally.
A similar trend is observed in media consumption. Although people see content from national media outlets slightly more frequently, the overall picture is relatively balanced. Users encounter local media content at nearly the same rate as national media content. While 50 percent of users see content from national media outlets weekly, 43 percent encounter local media content in their news feed with the same frequency.

When it comes to exposure to local politics, differences between municipality types are minimal. While the ANOVA test is significant ($F = 2.73$; $p < .05$), post-hoc tests do not indicate significant differences between municipality types at the 5 percent confidence level. However, in terms of exposure to local politicians, significant differences are evident (Welch test, $p < .01$). Residents of Budapest ($M = 3.37$) and cities ($M = 3.43$) encounter content from local politicians more frequently than those living in villages ($M = 2.79$).
Exposure to local media is also more common in larger municipalities(Welch test, $p < .001$). It is more frequent in Budapest ($M = 3.36$) and cities ($M = 3.53$) compared to villages ($M = 2.69$). Additionally, exposure in cities is significantly higher compared to towns ($M = 2.92$).
Using the five variables measuring exposure, we also attempted to identify exposure clusters, and a K-means cluster analysis with three groups appeared to be the most effective approach. The three clusters explain 74 percent of the total variance, and the overall classification accuracy is 97 percent based on linear discriminant analysis. Figure 2.5 displays the cluster centroids for each variable, where 0 represents the mean value within the total population. In other words, positive values indicate that the respective information source is more prominent in a particular cluster compared to the total population, while negative values suggest it is less prominent.

Figure 2.5. K-means cluster analysis of political exposure patterns on Facebook (three clusters)



The first cluster is characterized by frequent exposure to both national and local content, with local content even slightly more prevalent than national content based on the cluster centroids. This pattern applies to nearly one-third (32 percent) of Facebook users. In contrast, the third cluster represents the opposite pattern, characterized by consistently low exposure to political content. Members of this group, which makes up 38 percent of respondents, encounter both national and local content rarely.
There is only one group where a distinction between local and national content can be observed: the second cluster, which encounters national politicians' and media outlets' content slightly more often than average but does not see local content more frequently. This group, which also accounts for nearly one-third (31 percent) of respondents, demonstrates a predominantly national-level political exposure, though even this exposure is not particularly frequent.

Notably, no cluster was identified with predominantly local-level exposure, even when attempting to define more clusters; for instance, a six-cluster solution did not yield a group primarily exposed to local content.
To summarize, these findings indicate a strong overlap between local and national political exposure. Those who are significantly exposed to political content see both local and national content in similar proportions, while those who are not exposed to local politics also rarely encounter national politics. There is no meaningful separation between the two types of exposure; political content on Facebook encompasses both national and local politics simultaneously. This also means that voters who are not reached by national politics on the platform are unlikely to be engaged through local politics either.

Multivariate analysis: Exposure patterns

Our descriptive analysis clearly demonstrated that patterns of exposure to political content differ from following patterns. Following does not automatically result in exposure, and non-followers can also encounter local political and media actors' content through groups or their friends' activities. Therefore, our second multivariate analysis (Table 2.2) examines the factors influencing the frequency with which Facebook users are exposed to different types of content. At the local level, we focused on exposure to (1) local political content in general, and more specifically on posts from (2) local politicians and (3) local media outlets. For comparability, we also included the frequency of exposure to (4) national politicians' content and (5) national media outlets' content. Since all dependent variables are measured on the seven-point frequency scale introduced in the descriptive section, we treated these variables as numeric and applied linear regression models to the data. Positive values indicate a positive relationship, while negative values represent negative associations.

Table 2.2. Linear regression models explaining political content exposure on Facebook

	Local political content	**Local politicians**	**Local media**	**National leaders**	**National media**
Predictors	*Estimates*	*Estimates*	*Estimates*	*Estimates*	*Estimates*
(Intercept)	-1.04 *	-0.94	-1.11 *	-1.12 *	-1.44 **
	(0.51)	(0.50)	(0.50)	(0.52)	(0.54)
Age	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.01
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Education: secondary	0.06	0.16	0.16	0.07	0.12
	(0.15)	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.15)	(0.15)
Education: higher	-0.09	0.02	-0.06	0.18	0.09
	(0.19)	(0.19)	(0.18)	(0.19)	(0.20)
Gender: female	-0.03	0.04	-0.09	-0.13	-0.09
	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.13)
Domicile: city	0.07	0.15	0.10	0.17	0.05
	(0.21)	(0.21)	(0.20)	(0.22)	(0.22)
Domicile: town	-0.30	-0.31	-0.51 **	-0.25	-0.27
	(0.19)	(0.19)	(0.19)	(0.20)	(0.20)
Domicile: village	-0.15	-0.24	-0.49 *	0.18	0.29
	(0.21)	(0.20)	(0.20)	(0.21)	(0.21)

News consump.: newspapers	0.09 ** (0.03)	0.08 * (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.03)	0.02 (0.04)
News consump.: TV/radio	0.02 (0.05)	0.08 (0.04)	0.10 * (0.05)	0.15 ** (0.05)	0.08 (0.05)
News consump.: news sites	0.10 ** (0.03)	0.10 ** (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	0.15 *** (0.04)	0.17 *** (0.04)
Political talk	0.34 *** (0.06)	0.27 *** (0.06)	0.37 *** (0.06)	0.18 ** (0.06)	0.32 *** (0.06)
Political interest: national	-0.07 (0.13)	-0.04 (0.13)	-0.00 (0.13)	0.30 * (0.14)	0.25 (0.14)
Political interest: local	0.28 * (0.12)	0.12 (0.12)	0.17 (0.12)	-0.07 (0.13)	-0.03 (0.13)
Internal political efficacy	-0.02 (0.08)	0.02 (0.08)	-0.00 (0.08)	0.03 (0.08)	-0.01 (0.08)
Conflict avoidance	0.12 (0.07)	0.04 (0.07)	0.12 (0.07)	0.21 ** (0.08)	0.20 * (0.08)
Opinion leadership	-0.07 (0.09)	-0.06 (0.08)	-0.09 (0.08)	-0.28 ** (0.09)	-0.20 * (0.09)
FB news feed	0.09 * (0.04)	0.12 ** (0.04)	0.14 *** (0.04)	0.15 *** (0.04)	0.10 * (0.04)
FB activity	0.17 * (0.07)	0.13 (0.07)	0.19 ** (0.06)	0.01 (0.07)	0.13 (0.07)
FB political activity	0.23 *** (0.06)	0.29 *** (0.06)	0.22 *** (0.06)	0.44 *** (0.06)	0.36 *** (0.06)
Observations	665	662	652	661	661
R^2 / R^2 adjusted	0.345 / 0.326	0.350 / 0.331	0.370 / 0.351	0.358 / 0.339	0.392 / 0.374

** p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001*

The results show that socio-demographic factors are almost entirely irrelevant when it comes to exposure to political content. The levels of exposure to both national and local political content are nearly identical across different socio-demographic groups. The only differences appear based on municipality type: in towns, exposure to national and local politicians is less frequent than in cities and villages, while national media exposure is lower compared to cities, and local political content exposure is lower compared to villages. Additionally, exposure to local media is more common in the capital and cities than in smaller municipalities.

In contrast, political communication habits play a much more significant role. Users who engage in political discussions more frequently are exposed to all types of national and local political content more often. Another key factor is the frequency of consuming news from online portals, which promotes exposure to all types of national and local content except for local media. Additionally, obtaining information from TV and radio increases exposure to national politicians and local media, while newspaper readership strengthens exposure to local politicians and general local political content. Overall, the findings indicate that political

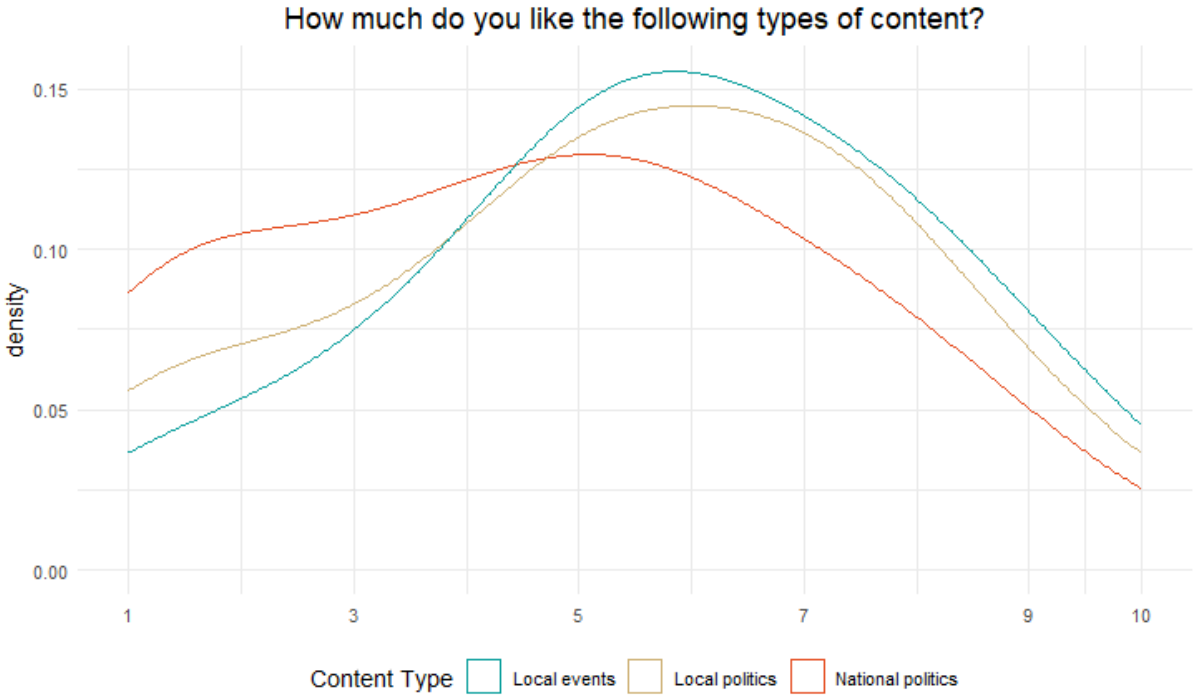
content, both national and local, primarily reaches users who are already politically informed and engaged through other sources.
We observe again that exposure to national politicians' content is positively correlated with political interest, whereas exposure to local politicians is not – local politicians reach users regardless of their political interest levels. At the same time, exposure to both national and local media content remains unaffected by political interest. However, the frequency of exposure to local political posts does show a positive correlation with local political interest. Notably, political efficacy does not play any role in explaining exposure.
Personality traits are only significant for exposure to national political content: respondents who are conflict-avoidant or exhibit less opinion leadership are more likely to see national political and media content. This result is somewhat surprising, as the opposite was expected in both cases. However, these personality factors do not influence exposure at the local level – local content reaches individuals regardless of these traits.
Facebook activity levels are, unsurprisingly, important predictors of exposure. The time spent browsing the news feed strongly determines exposure to all types of content. Political activity on Facebook also matters: users are most likely to encounter political content if they engage in political activities on the platform, demonstrating that the algorithm is responsive to preferences revealed through user activities. Additionally, exposure to local media and local political content depends on general Facebook activity, not just political activity.
Overall, the factors explaining exposure to national and local political content are largely similar: individuals who are already political information consumers, frequently engage in political discussions, use Facebook more actively, and participate in political activities on the platform are the most likely to encounter both types of content. This is likely because Facebook's algorithm can identify users who are more politically inclined and expose them to both local and national political content, making little distinction between the two within the realm of "political interest." Social media also mitigates the socio-demographic inequalities observed in other sources of information (Aalberg et al., 2013), as no significant exposure differences were found across the dimensions we examined at either the local or national level.

2.4.3. Attitudes towards local politics

Descriptives: Attitudes

We were also interested in users' attitudes toward local and national political content (RQ2.3). Specifically, we asked to what extent Facebook users like posts about (1) local events, (2) local politics, and (3) national politics. Respondents answered these questions on a 10-point scale, where 1 indicated "strongly dislike" and 10 indicated "strongly like" for the particular type of Facebook content (Figure 2.6).

Figure 2.6. Density plots of users' content preferences



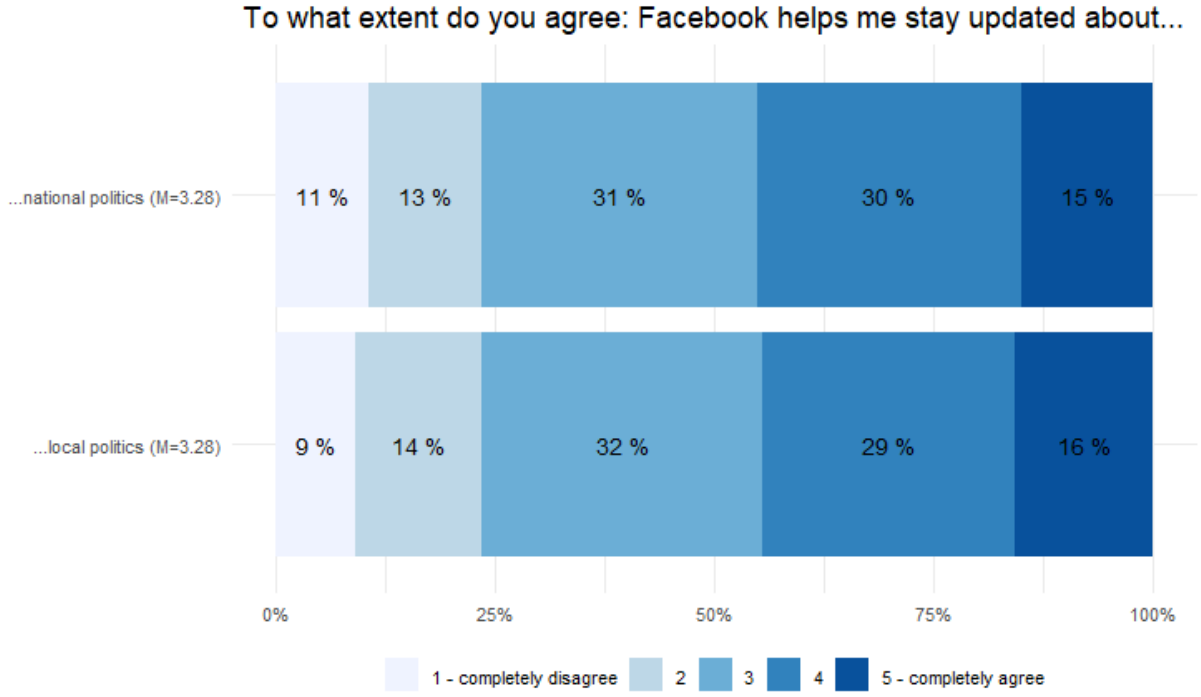
It seems that Facebook users clearly prefer local political content over national political posts. While the average score for national politics is 4.67, it is 5.41 for local politics and 5.79 for local events. At the local level, the term "political" does not seem to be a deterrent, as content about local events and local politics is rated similarly. When it comes to national politics, slightly more than one-third of Facebook users strongly dislike it (35 percent gave a score of 3 or lower), and only 16 percent like it (a score of 7 or higher). In contrast, fewer respondents reject local politics (23 percent) or local events (17 percent) on Facebook. Additionally, 21 percent of respondents like local politics, while 25 percent enjoy posts about local events.

Nevertheless, there is a strong correlation between preferences for local and national politics. The correlation between liking national politics and local politics is 0.7 ($p < .001$), while the correlation between liking national politics and local events is 0.57 ($p < .001$). This provides further evidence that local and national politics are strongly intertwined on Facebook: individuals either generally like political content or do not, largely regardless of whether it pertains to local or national topics.

Variance analysis also revealed that the evaluation of content does not differ across municipality types ($p > 0.05$ for all comparisons). This indicates that the perception of local and national politics is not influenced by the type of municipality in which individuals live.

We also investigated users' perceptions of Facebook's practical usefulness in keeping them informed about local and national political issues. Respondents rated, on a 5-point scale, the extent to which they feel Facebook helps them stay updated on national politics and local politics, respectively.

Figure 2.7. Facebook's perceived role in keeping users informed about local and national political issues



As seen in Figure 2.7, there is no significant difference in the perception of Facebook's usefulness for staying informed about national and local politics ($p > 0.5$, paired t-test). Similar proportions are observed for the two variables: 15 percent of users fully agree with the statement regarding national politics, and 16 percent for local politics. Additionally, 30 percent and 29 percent of users, respectively, rated it a 4 on the scale, meaning that 45 percent of users believe Facebook helps them stay informed about both local and national political issues. Only 24 percent of users disagree with this statement for national politics, and 23 percent for local politics.

Again, the two variables are strongly correlated ($r = 0.66$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that those who find Facebook useful for staying informed about local politics also tend to find it important for national politics.

Similarly to content preferences, the role of Facebook in keeping users informed about local politics does not vary across municipality types (ANOVA, $p > 0.05$). However, there are notable differences in the perception of its role in national politics (ANOVA, $p < 0.001$). Specifically, residents of the capital city regard Facebook as significantly more important for staying informed about national politics compared to all other municipality types (Tukey test, $p < 0.05$).

Multivariate analysis: Attitudes

In this section, we analyze the factors influencing whether users prefer content about national or local politics (Table 2.3). As discussed in the descriptive section, respondents rated their preference for local and national political content on Facebook using a ten-point scale. Linear regression models were applied to the data, with positive values indicating a positive correlation and negative values representing a negative correlation.

Table 2.3. Linear regression models explaining preference for local and national political content

	local political content	**national political content**
Predictors	*Estimates*	*Estimates*
(Intercept)	-0.40 (0.63)	-0.63 (0.64)
Age	0.01 * (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Education: secondary	-0.10 (0.18)	-0.29 (0.18)
Education: higher	0.07 (0.24)	-0.16 (0.24)
Gender: female	-0.19 (0.16)	-0.02 (0.16)
Domicile: city	0.42 (0.27)	-0.18 (0.27)
Domicile: town	0.16 (0.24)	-0.52 * (0.25)
Domicile: village	0.30 (0.26)	-0.07 (0.26)
News consump.: newspapers	-0.04 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.04)
News consump.: TV/radio	0.13 * (0.06)	0.22 *** (0.06)
News consump.: news sites	0.11 * (0.04)	0.12 ** (0.04)
Political talk	0.15 * (0.07)	-0.01 (0.07)
Political interest: national	-0.00 (0.16)	0.52 ** (0.17)
Political interest: local	1.05 *** (0.15)	0.36 * (0.16)
Internal political efficacy	-0.10 (0.10)	-0.04 (0.10)
Conflict avoidance	-0.02 (0.09)	-0.10 (0.09)
Opinion leadership	0.19 (0.11)	0.25 * (0.11)
FB news feed	-0.05 (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)

FB activity	0.06 (0.08)	-0.14 (0.09)
FB political activity	0.38 *** (0.07)	0.60 *** (0.08)
Observations	672	676
R^2 / R^2 adjusted	0.367 / 0.349	0.370 / 0.352

** p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001*

As before, socio-demographic factors play a minimal role in shaping preferences, although older individuals tend to favor local content slightly more. For national content, no such generational differences are observed. Additionally, residents of Budapest and villages tend to prefer national content more than those living in towns.

Political communication habits, however, remain significant. Those who consume more news from TV, radio, and online news portals are more likely to enjoy both local and national political content, while individuals who engage in political conversations are particularly open to local content.

Interest levels also play a role in shaping preferences. People with an interest in local politics are more likely to enjoy local content, whereas national political interest does not influence their preferences for local content. However, those interested in either national or local politics are more likely to favor national political content. This indicates that while individuals with a local political interest are open to national content regardless of their level of national interest, the reverse does not hold true. Those with a national political interest do not necessarily prefer local content unless it is paired with a local-level interest. This suggests that local political interest can serve as a gateway to engaging with national political content. Political efficacy, however, did not emerge as a relevant factor in this context.

Personality traits show some relevance. Opinion leaders tend to favor national content more strongly, with only a marginally significant association with local content. This suggests that while opinion leaders do not necessarily encounter more political content on Facebook, they are more open to such content when they do.

Unsurprisingly, individuals who are more politically active on Facebook tend to enjoy both types of content. However, general Facebook activity does not appear to be a relevant factor in shaping these preferences.

In summary, preferences for local and national political content are both linked to media consumption, political interest, and Facebook political activity. However, local content preferences are unaffected by national political interest and instead depend on age and activity in political conversations. Conversely, national content preferences show a stronger association with broad political interest, irrespective of the level.

2.4.4. The role of social media platforms in local and national information repertoires

Descriptives: The role of platforms in information consumption

To understand the role of social media platforms in overall information consumption (RQ2.4), respondents were asked to evaluate various information sources based on their perceived importance in local and national political contexts. They rated the local- and national-level informational value of the following sources on a 5-point scale, ranging from "no role at all" to "a very significant role": (1) friends and family, (2) (local) TV and radio, (3) (local) news websites, (4) (local) newspapers, (5) Facebook, (6) Instagram, and (7) YouTube. In Figures 2.8

(local) and 9 (national), these sources are arranged in descending order of perceived importance, from the most important to the least important.

Figure 2.8. The role of different information sources in local political information consumption

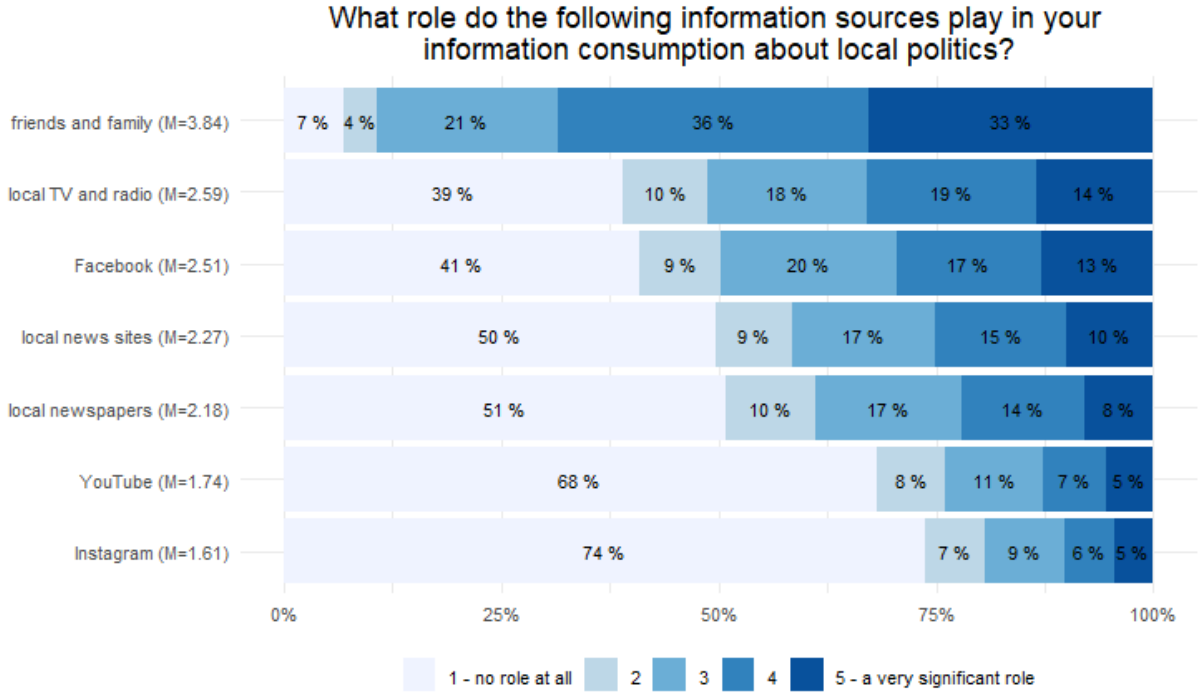
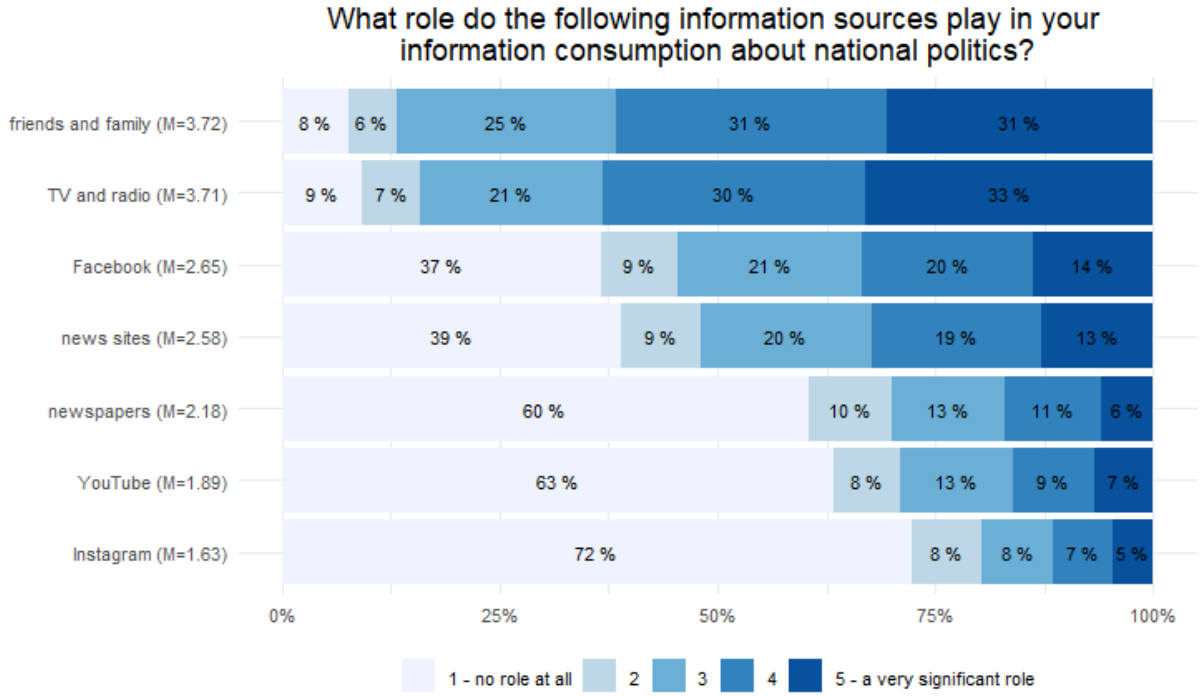


Figure 2.9. The role of different information sources in national political information consumption



In local political information-seeking, informal sources are the most important: more than two-thirds of respondents emphasized their significance. This is not unique to local information-seeking; informal sources are similarly important at the national level (mean = 3.84). However,

at the national level, informal sources are closely followed by the role of television. Based on the mean values, local TV/radio and Facebook are the next most important sources for local information. The same ranking applies to national-level information, but with a key difference: TV/radio is substantially more important than Facebook at the national level (TV/radio mean = 3.71, Facebook mean = 2.65), whereas, locally, the difference between the two is not statistically significant (TV/radio mean = 2.59, Facebook mean = 2.18, $p > 0.05$).

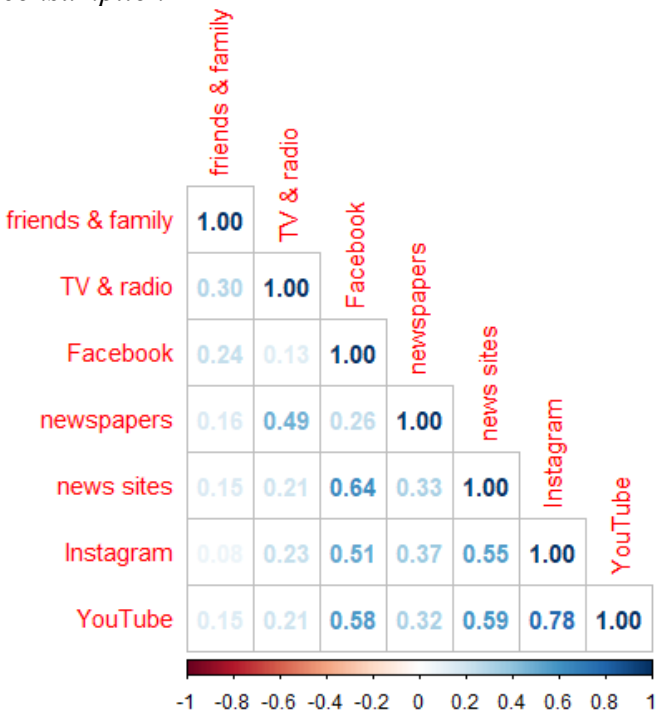
This observation indicates that although Facebook plays a slightly but statistically significant smaller role in local compared to national political information ($p < 0.001$), its relative importance among other sources is greater at the local level, despite its absolute importance being higher nationally. Approximately one-third of respondents consider Facebook very important for local political information (4-5 ratings: 30 percent), while for 50 percent of respondents, it has little or no importance (1-2 ratings). At the national level, Facebook is important for 34 percent and unimportant for 46 percent. Local newspapers and printed media play an even smaller role, with half of respondents assigning them no importance at all (1 rating). Other social media platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram, are even less significant for local information-seeking, a trend that remains consistent for national-level political information as well.

There are no remarkable differences in the importance of local information sources across municipality types. However, variance analysis ($p < 0.01$) and post-hoc tests reveal that Facebook plays a significantly smaller role in villages (mean = 2.51) than in cities (mean = 2.57, $p < 0.05$) and Budapest (mean = 2.82, $p < 0.001$).

Furthermore, the importance of local information sources reveals some surprising patterns: in Budapest, personal relationships (mean = 4.19) are more important for information-seeking ($p < 0.001$) than in cities (mean = 3.74), towns (mean = 3.75), and villages (mean = 3.78). Additionally, newspapers are less important in villages (mean = 1.97) than in towns (mean = 2.34). Local news websites are more important in larger municipalities (Budapest mean = 2.7; cities mean = 2.6; towns mean = 2.2; villages mean = 1.87, $p < 0.001$). Lastly, Instagram (mean = 1.74) and YouTube (mean = 2.10) are more important in Budapest than in villages (Instagram mean = 1.47, YouTube mean = 1.51; $p < 0.05$). YouTube is also more important in towns (mean = 1.78) than in villages (mean = 1.51; $p < 0.05$).

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the local-level information repertoire, we examined how these information sources are interconnected through correlations. Although all forms of local information-seeking show positive and significant correlations, meaning that the greater importance attributed to one information source is associated with greater importance attributed to another, the strength of these connections varies considerably (Figure 2.10).

Figure 2.10. Correlation between the perceived role of different information sources in local political information consumption

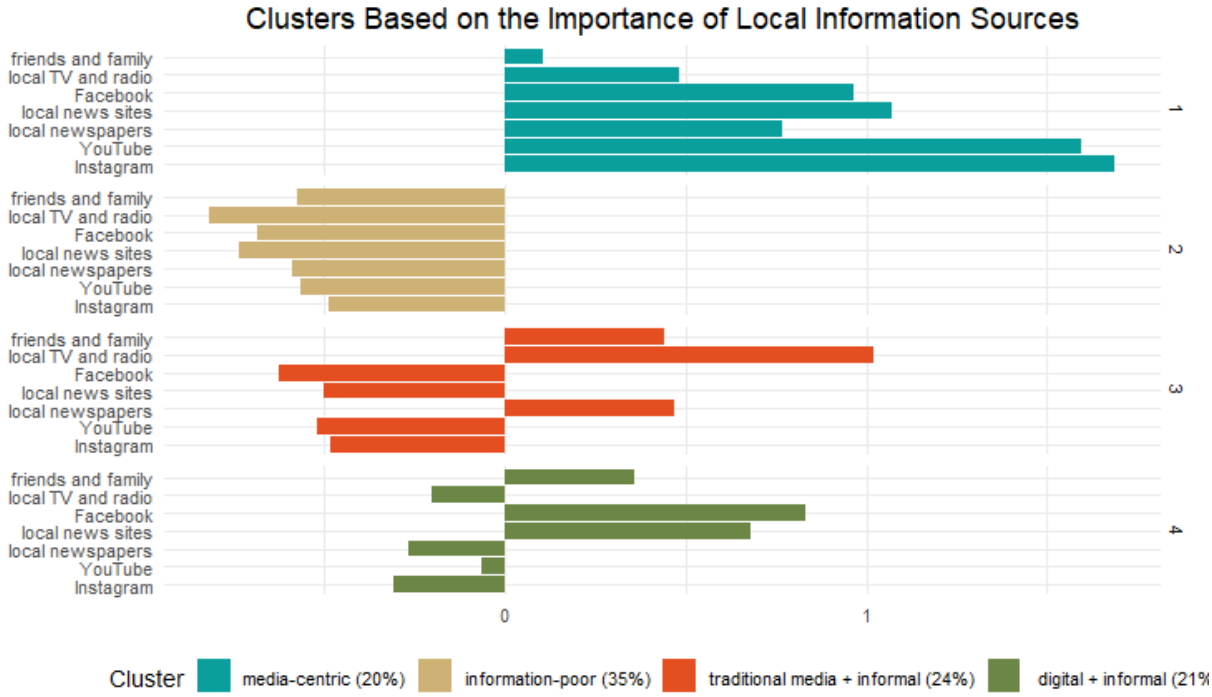


The importance of information from acquaintances is moderately correlated only with the positive perception of TV, while its connection with all other sources is weak. There is a strong interconnection in the evaluation of offline news media resources: those who consider TV and radio important are also likely to value newspapers. However, these individuals tend to attribute less importance to online sources. Similarly, online sources are strongly interconnected. For example, those who see Facebook as an important tool for information are also likely to value news sites and, to a lesser extent, Instagram and YouTube, which themselves are strongly interrelated.

To summarize, these correlations clearly reveal three main patterns of information consumption: informal, traditional, and online. To determine whether these patterns truly represent distinct information repertoires, we conducted a K-means cluster analysis on the information resources. The analysis revealed that dividing the sample into four clusters provided the best fit. The four clusters explain 52 percent of the total variance, and based on linear discriminant analysis, the classification's average accuracy is 95 percent.

Figure 2.11 displays the cluster centroids for each variable, where 0 represents the grand mean value of the respective variable. Positive values indicate that the respective information resource holds greater importance within a particular cluster compared to the total population, while negative values indicate its lesser importance.

Figure 2.11. K-means cluster analysis of local information repertoires (four clusters)



The largest cluster is the "information-poor" cluster, consisting of respondents who do not attribute significant importance to any of the listed information sources for local political information-seeking. This group, comprising slightly more than one-third of respondents (35 percent), appears to have little to no engagement with local politics. A fifth of the respondents (20 percent) belong to a "media-centric" cluster characterized by a reliance on digital tools as their primary sources of information, complemented by traditional media. However, informal information-seeking is less common in this group. Nearly a quarter of respondents (24 percent) combine informal information-seeking with traditional media consumption, while digital sources play little to no role in their information-gathering process. The fourth cluster, representing just over one-fifth of respondents, also relies on informal information-seeking but complements it with digital sources such as Facebook and local news portals. Professional media products, as well as platforms like YouTube and Instagram, are not typical sources for this group.

In summary, these patterns can be simplified into four groups: an "uninformed" cluster disengaged from local politics, a "media-centric" group blending digital and traditional media, and two clusters emphasizing informal information-seeking – one combining it with traditional media and the other with online media.

Multivariate analysis: The role of Facebook in information consumption

Lastly, we examine the determinants of the perceived role of Facebook in local and national political information consumption. Both variables are measured on a five-point relevance scale, and linear regression models were applied to analyze the data (Table 2.4).

Table 2.4. Linear regression models explaining the perceived role of Facebook in local and national information consumption

	In local	**In national**

Predictors	*Estimates*	*Estimates*
(Intercept)	1.38 ***	2.07 ***
	(0.38)	(0.38)
Age	-0.00	0.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)
Education: secondary	-0.14	-0.03
	(0.11)	(0.11)
Education: higher	-0.27	-0.20
	(0.14)	(0.14)
Gender: female	0.20 *	0.17
	(0.10)	(0.10)
Domicile: city	-0.24	-0.35 *
	(0.16)	(0.16)
Domicile: town	-0.21	-0.37 **
	(0.15)	(0.14)
Domicile: village	-0.40 **	-0.32 *
	(0.15)	(0.15)
News consump.: newspapers	0.03	-0.03
	(0.03)	(0.03)
news consump.: TV/radio	-0.04	-0.02
	(0.03)	(0.03)
News consump.: news sites	0.14 ***	0.12 ***
	(0.03)	(0.03)
Political talk	0.24 ***	0.18 ***
	(0.04)	(0.04)
Political interest: national	-0.18	-0.09
	(0.10)	(0.10)
Political interest: local	0.28 **	0.12
	(0.09)	(0.09)
Internal political efficacy	-0.06	-0.07
	(0.06)	(0.06)
Conflict avoidance	-0.07	-0.01
	(0.06)	(0.05)
Opinion leadership	0.09	0.03
	(0.07)	(0.06)
FB news feed	-0.02	0.02
	(0.03)	(0.03)
FB activity	0.17 ***	0.10
	(0.05)	(0.05)
FB political activity	0.01	0.06
	(0.05)	(0.04)

Observations	676	676
R^2 / R^2 adjusted	0.247 / 0.226	0.168 / 0.144

** p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001*

Socio-demographic factors remain less relevant in this context as well. However, in addition to municipality type, gender also plays a role: women attribute slightly more importance to Facebook for local information consumption than men. Residents of villages are less likely to perceive Facebook as important for local information than those in Budapest, while for national political information, residents of the capital view Facebook as more significant than individuals in other areas.

Once again, those who consume more information from online sources and engage in more frequent political discussions perceive Facebook as more important for both local and national political information consumption. Traditional media consumption, however, neither increases nor decreases the perceived importance of Facebook. The frequency of offline media use does not influence how respondents evaluate Facebook's informational role. Thus, being an active traditional media consumer does not make someone less likely to view Facebook as important. Interest levels play a role at the local level but not nationally. While the perceived importance of Facebook for national information consumption is independent of political interest, at the local level, those interested in local public affairs are more likely to consider Facebook important. Political efficacy, as in other analyses, does not play a role, nor do the two personality dimensions examined.

Active Facebook usage correlates with a greater perceived importance of Facebook for local information consumption, and this relationship is nearly significant for national information as well. However, political activity on Facebook and frequent passive use (e.g., browsing the news feed) do not significantly affect perceptions of Facebook's role in political information. Only active, non-political usage matters at both levels.

In summary, Facebook is perceived as more important for local and national political information consumption by individuals who live in Budapest, consume news from online portals, frequently discuss politics, and are more active on Facebook in general. At the local level, this group also includes women and those interested in local politics. However, the explanatory power of the models is quite low, indicating that the perceived role of Facebook in local and national information consumption does not vary significantly across different social groups, nor is there a substantial difference between the local and national levels.

2.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, we explored localized social media use in unprecedented detail within a specific country, addressing numerous questions that have long intrigued the limited existing literature. One of the most important findings is that local politics is an integral and significant part of users' political experience on social media. In Hungary, Facebook has clearly emerged as the digital hub of local politics, while other social media platforms remain largely irrelevant in this context. Facebook plays a key role in the local information ecosystem, ranking alongside TV and radio as one of the most important sources, following informal sources. However, its role within this ecosystem varies among users: for some, it complements professional media, while for others, it combines with informal and online sources. Meanwhile, 24 percent of users continue to rely exclusively on traditional media, and 35 percent do not use any sources to inform themselves about local politics.

On Facebook, local pages and actors are followed by almost as many users as national-level pages. Moreover, users are exposed to similar amounts of national and local political content, and they tend to favor local content slightly more than national content. Mayors and local

Facebook groups emerge as key actors in localized social media use. Approximately 12 percent of voters directly follow their mayor on Facebook, while an additional 6 percent regularly encounter mayoral content through local groups. More than a quarter of voters are members of local Facebook groups, where they regularly encounter both local and national political content. Moreover, there is also a strong interconnection between local and national politics on these platforms. Users who follow national actors are highly likely to follow local ones, and those exposed to national politics are also exposed to local politics. Similarly, users who appreciate local political content tend to also enjoy national content, and those who find Facebook useful for national information consumption often consider it equally important for local-level information.

This interconnectedness has two important implications. First, openness to politics on Facebook extends to both local and national levels. For users with any degree of political engagement, local community issues are nearly as prominent in their social media experience as national politics. Considering that the traditional media space typically maintains a sharper distinction between local and national politics, it is likely that this interconnectedness is unique to the social media era. Before the rise of platforms like Facebook, openness to political content may not have translated into a stronger involvement in local community issues. Second, the main barrier to local engagement is general political passivity, which is likely exacerbated by Facebook's algorithms. While political factors play a smaller role in determining local following and group membership, they are more significant in influencing content exposure. This indicates that Facebook primarily exposes users with higher levels of political engagement to both local and national political content. As a result, politically passive users are also less likely to engage with local political content, making general political disengagement one of the primary obstacles to connecting with the local public sphere. Notably, about one-third of users completely avoid local politics on Facebook, while an additional 26 percent do not use Facebook at all.

Despite these challenges, local political storytellers prove effective in engaging politically passive users. The two central hubs of local public discourse – mayoral pages and local Facebook groups – are successful in reaching individuals who are uninterested in national politics and politically inactive on the platform. The analysis of explanatory models also shows that localized social media users constitute a highly heterogeneous group. While factors such as political engagement and Facebook usage frequency play a role in exposure, preferences, and perceived importance, socio-demographic and personality differences are minimal. The most notable differences are related to municipality types, as users in the capital tend to be more active than those in other areas. However, beyond this, the differences between municipality types are inconsistent and require further examination.

This complexity highlights the need to also consider the supply side of local social media use. Specifically, it is important to investigate how local social media publics are established across different municipality types. The next chapter addresses this question.

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Chapter 3. The Supply Side: Local Publics on Facebook

Abstract

The chapter examines the infrastructure of local Facebook public spheres across Hungarian municipalities, analyzing how these digital spaces develop as alternatives to traditional local media. Using extensive empirical data collected from over 3,000 Hungarian municipalities, the authors investigate the presence and reach of local Facebook groups, local government pages, media, political parties, and civil organizations.
Findings highlight significant disparities, revealing that while larger municipalities typically boast active and diverse local Facebook public spheres, smaller communities often suffer from digital news deserts, lacking robust local social media infrastructures. The study identifies key municipal-level factors influencing these disparities, including population size, economic conditions, internet access, and political dynamics – particularly the involvement of national political parties. Notably, municipalities led by party-affiliated mayors, especially those from opposition parties, tend to have more extensive and engaged local Facebook publics.
Ultimately, the chapter underscores Facebook's potential role in mitigating the negative impacts of declining local traditional media, particularly in larger municipalities. However, it cautions that significant gaps remain, particularly among smaller communities, emphasizing that local political and economic conditions heavily shape the extent and vibrancy of these digital local public spheres.

3.1. Introduction

Local social media activity largely depends on the availability of local-level social media infrastructure. A citizen can only connect with their local community through these platforms if there are local groups, content creators, and other actors who regularly provide space for discussions on local public affairs. While local-level conversations can also emerge informally on social media, these personal and therefore not universally accessible forms of publicity can only become true local public spheres if some form of infrastructure develops around them. This means having relatively stable actors and arenas that, in principle, are accessible to all relevant members of the community – namely, the residents.
This is why the emergence of local "media deserts" is a cause for concern, capturing the phenomenon of local media outlets disappearing or becoming hollowed out (e.g. Abernathy, 2018; Hayes and Lawless, 2021). From this perspective, the loss of this key infrastructure in local public spheres delivers a severe blow to local communities, even if residents remain connected through informal channels. However, this approach tends to overlook the fact that social media itself can create an alternative infrastructure capable of filling the void left by the decline of offline media (Usher, 2023b). This chapter, therefore, seeks to map out the infrastructure of local-level social media public spheres. Specifically, we focus on Facebook-based public spheres, as Chapter 2 has clearly demonstrated that, in Hungary, Facebook is the only platform of real relevance for local public life.
The literature extensively discusses the public sphere-generating power of social media, as outlined in the introductory Chapter 1. However, large-scale empirical studies have yet to examine how local public spheres develop their infrastructural networks and how these are structured – specifically, the roles played by local groups, local media, political parties, and other pages. Moreover, insights from the media desert literature suggest that significant differences exist between municipalities, yet research has not addressed the intermunicipal variations in Facebook-based infrastructures. Therefore, we also investigate the factors that

explain why some municipalities develop more advanced Facebook public spheres while others remain underdeveloped.
To achieve this, we conducted a large-scale data collection effort, identifying all local public affairs-focused pages and groups across all Hungarian municipalities (N=3,153). Our analysis examines the presence of local groups and public affairs-focused media, party, civil, and other pages across different types of municipalities. While this chapter does not address the activity of local politicians – a topic covered in Chapter 4 – we do incorporate them into our measure of local Facebook public sphere expansion. Using this metric, we assess which municipality-level factors account for the variations in local Facebook infrastructure.

3.2. Can social media revitalize the news desert?

Many argue that the transformation of the media landscape over recent decades has disproportionately affected local communities. For instance, Kari Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) contends that "the greatest challenge facing journalism today lies in the collapse of local news provision" (p. 163). The economic crisis in journalism, declining revenues, and subsequent budget cuts have hit local media outlets the hardest. These challenges have led to numerous closures, reductions in editorial staff, and the acquisition of local outlets by large national publishers that primarily produce centrally distributed, national-level content (e.g. Hayes and Lawless, 2021). Reflecting this trend, scholars have highlighted the rise of "news deserts" – local "communities where residents are facing significantly diminished access to the sort of important local news and information that feeds grassroots democracy" (Abernathy, 2018: 97). While discussions about local news deserts and the decline of local news provision are most prominent in the United States, research shows that this is a global phenomenon. The erosion of local media has been documented in many countries worldwide (Assmann, 2023; Gulyas, 2021; Negreira-Rey et al., 2023; Vogler et al., 2023). Hungary has also experienced decline, with many local news outlets controlled by pro-government owners who use them as propaganda tools, disseminating centrally produced national-level content (Bódi et al., 2023; Kovács et al., 2023).
The severe consequences of declining local news provision are well-documented. Limited access to information about local issues weakens community cohesion, diminishes residents' sense of local identity and belonging, and increases feelings of isolation (e.g. Mathews, 2022). Furthermore, research indicates that reduced exposure to local news is associated with lower levels of local political engagement and participation, including diminished knowledge and interest in local affairs. This trend extends to semi-local political activities, such as elections of local representatives to national parliaments (e.g. Hayes and Lawless, 2021). A lack of awareness about elected officials' activities also undermines the accountability of local elites, granting them greater latitude to act against the interests of their constituents (Usher and Kim-Leffingwell, 2023). Additionally, certain types of information critical to people's daily lives are often tied to local contexts (Friedland, 2023). Without adequate local news provision, individuals may fail to access this essential information, negatively affecting their lives (Usher, 2023a). Moreover, the significant geographic disparities in the level and quality of local news provision (Hayes and Lawless, 2021) exacerbate spatial inequalities. The extent to which people are affected by these negative consequences is increasingly determined by where they live, further entrenching inequalities (Gulyas, 2021).
Nonetheless, some argue that the decline of local legacy media does not necessarily lead to news deserts or a poor supply of local news. For instance, Nikki Usher (2023b) claims that "the concern over the loss of local journalism in the U.S. has become a moral panic" (p. 239). While acknowledging the economic crisis facing local journalism, she contends that the literature on news deserts overlooks the fact that locally relevant news is not exclusively produced by legacy

media outlets. This body of research often neglects the role of social media, which, as several studies demonstrate (Nah et al., 2021; Tai et al., 2023; Thorson et al., 2020) and as highlighted in Chapter 2, serves as a significant provider of locally relevant information. This distinction is crucial because the negative consequences associated with news deserts are tied to low levels of local news exposure, not necessarily to the absence of local legacy media. In other words, the economic challenges of local journalism do not automatically result in local news deserts.
However, our understanding of social media-based local publics remains limited (Pfetsch et al., 2021). While some studies explore the social media presence of specific actors, such as politicians (e.g. Djerf-Pierre and Pierre, 2016; Metag and Marcinkowski, 2012), local governments (Lev-On and Steinfeld, 2015; Silva et al., 2019), or news and hyperlocal media organizations (Nygren et al., 2018; Toff and Mathews, 2024), there is little research on the broader extent to which social media can fill the gap left by declining legacy media. A more holistic approach, encompassing diverse types of actors, has been adopted in only a handful of studies. These studies consistently reveal the existence of vibrant local publics on social media through various methodological approaches. However, they are constrained by limited scope, focusing on just one (Burai et al., 2024; Thorson et al., 2020), or a few municipalities (Fischer et al., 2021; (Pfetsch et al., 2021). Consequently, their findings are less generalizable and unable to fully capture cross-municipality differences.

3.2.1. From place to place: Changing infrastructures

If we aim to assess whether social media can fill the local news gap, two key aspects of the news desert and the decline of local news discourse must be considered. First, this literature highlights the variations across municipalities (e.g. Hayes and Lawless, 2021). The decline of local news is not uniform across communities, making it essential to examine how and why municipalities differ. Second, this perspective primarily – but not exclusively – adopts an infrastructural lens, focusing on the availability and reach of communication infrastructures that enable the circulation of locally relevant information. This perspective aligns closely with the ecological approach of the communication infrastructure theory. As discussed in Chapter 1, according to this theory, communication infrastructure, conceptualized as a local storytelling network embedded within its community context (Kim and Ball-Rokeach, 2006), varies across communities and its level of development directly influences civic engagement, efficacy, and local identity. Consequently, this approach complements the first point by providing a conceptual framework to analyze municipal differences.
While the news desert literature focuses on legacy media outlets as infrastructure, communication infrastructure theory posits that infrastructure encompasses all elements facilitating the flow of locally relevant stories. Social media platforms offer several affordances that can contribute to building such an infrastructure: local institutions, actors, or even ordinary individuals can create pages or groups centered on local issues, thus fostering the dissemination of local stories. However, as Pfetsch and colleagues (2021), aptly note, the existence and effective functioning of a local social media public is an empirical question; the mere affordances of social media do not guarantee the development of a robust local communication infrastructure.
Nah and colleagues (2021) explicitly extended the communication infrastructure theory to social media, arguing that social media constitutes a component of a community's communication infrastructure, acting as an essential storytelling agent. It helps "circulate community-bound news information, promote interaction and dialogue among fellow residents, and serve as the gateway connecting residents and local community organizations" (p. 5). Using survey data, Nah and colleagues established a connection between engagement with social media-based local infrastructure and levels of civic participation. Employing a different

methodological approach, Thorson and colleagues (2020) examined this infrastructure by analyzing local content providers in a Midwestern U.S. city. Their study also found that Facebook plays a central role in the local political information ecosystem.
In Chapter 2, we explored the role of social media in local news exposure, demonstrating that Facebook is the only locally relevant social media platform in Hungary. By adopting an infrastructural approach, we can analyze the supply side of Facebook-based local political information provision across all Hungarian municipalities. This allows us to first assess the extent to which the local information infrastructure is developed on Facebook and determine whether this infrastructure serves as an effective counterweight to the decline of local legacy media (RQ3.1). Second, we can examine geo-spatial inequalities in access to Facebook-based local information and their underlying causes (RQ3.2). To our knowledge, this is the first systematic and comparative attempt to uncover local communication infrastructure on Facebook at the municipal level nationwide.

3.2.2. Actors and followers

When focusing on the local Facebook sphere, infrastructure should be understood not only in terms of presence – i.e., the existence of a particular page – but also in terms of reach. This perspective aligns with the decline of local news and news desert literature, which emphasizes the audience size of local news outlets (Hayes and Lawless, 2021). In the context of social media, however, this aspect is even more critical, as pages with minimal followership can exist without playing a meaningful role in the local public sphere. As Hindman (2008) notes, on the internet, "who speaks and who gets heard" are two separate questions, and "the link between the two is weaker than it is in almost any other area of political life" (p. 8). Therefore, both the existence of locally relevant pages and their follower counts must be considered as infrastructural features.
In this research, we identified four broad categories of Facebook actors that form the key infrastructure of the local social media public: elected politicians (mayors and council members), the central page of the municipal government, other public-spirited local pages (such as local parties, media outlets, civil organizations, and others), and local groups. While local politicians are a central focus of this book and will be discussed in detail in the next two chapters, this chapter highlights the other three categories.
Local governments' social media activity is likely the most extensively studied area within the literature on the local digital public. Since the opportunities and efforts of local governments to involve and connect with citizens through online tools have long been a central focus of public services and local government research (e.g. Moon, 2002; Torres et al., 2006), scholars in these fields began monitoring their social media activity in the early days of these platforms (e.g. Bonsón et al., 2012; Mossberger et al., 2013). Consequently, numerous studies have investigated the extent to which local governments use Facebook for communication in various contexts. Although significant variations exist across regions and countries (e.g. Lev-On and Steinfeld, 2015; Silva et al., 2019; Triantafillidou et al., 2018), many local governments use Facebook as a central tool for citizen communication (Bonsón et al., 2017; Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018). Based on this evidence, the presence and reach of local government pages on Facebook can be considered a vital component of the local Facebook public. As Chapter 2 highlighted, more people follow their local government's Facebook page (13 percent) than the national government's page (11 percent).
In addition to local government activity, our previous chapter also demonstrated that many citizens engage with their local public through local Facebook groups, and a similarly high proportion of local group members (30.5 percent of the population) were observed in Belgium (De Meulenaere et al., 2023). However, despite their importance, there remains a significant

gap in our understanding of how municipalities differ in terms of the existence and reach of local Facebook groups.

The literature has paid much less attention to other local actors who can create pages on social media platforms and become important parts of the local communication infrastructure. Local parties, for instance, are key organizational actors within municipalities, but their social media activity is largely overlooked. Focusing on local branches of national parties, one study from the US showed that they are relatively passive on Facebook (Whitesell et al., 2023). In contrast, research from Germany found that these branches play a significant role in the local Facebook public, especially in the case of the right-wing populist party AfD (Datts, 2024). From Chapter 2, we learned that 7 percent of respondents follow at least one local party.

Another important type of local pages is local media. The previous chapter demonstrated that 9 percent of the population follows media outlets (both legacy and hyperlocal) on Facebook. While a handful of studies focus on the social media activity of local media (Coleman et al., 2016; Nygren et al., 2018; Toff and Mathews, 2024), their overall presence and significance across municipalities remain largely unexplored. Other types of local pages are even less prominent in the academic literature. These include pages run by local civil organizations or even individual figures who aim to share local news and their perspectives on local political matters. In an ethnographic investigation of the local public sphere, we found that such pages can have a remarkable impact on shaping local public discourse (Burai et al., 2024).

3.2.3. Explaining differences across municipalities

After mapping the terrain of local publics in each Hungarian municipality through these Facebook actors, we will explore the municipality-level factors that explain differences in the development of these publics. Our analysis will focus on the overall scope of the local public – measured by the total number of followers across all local pages and groups – as well as the follower sizes of these actor types individually (excluding politicians, who are covered in Chapter 4). Since differences in social media local publics have not been previously investigated, as in Chapter 2, we frame the antecedents of this public as an open research question (RQ3.2) rather than establishing clear hypotheses. In doing so, we discuss the available evidence from the literature on local governments' social media use, as municipality-level effects have only been studied for this specific actor type.

First, it can be assumed that population size plays a significant role, with the Facebook local public being more extensive in larger municipalities. When the potential audience is larger, individual actors are more motivated to create local pages and groups. Additionally, larger communities tend to be less densely connected in offline social networks compared to smaller ones (Long et al., 2024). As a result, residents in larger communities may rely more on intermediary actors, such as pages and groups, for community building. Indeed, most research indicates that local governments are more active in larger municipalities (Guillamón et al., 2016; Ignacio Criado et al., 2012; Lev-On and Steinfeld, 2015; Silva et al., 2019). However, regarding the follower rate (the size of followers as a share of the population), Mabillard and colleagues (2021) found a negative correlation, suggesting that in smaller municipalities, local governments are followed by a larger share of the local population.

However, one could argue that it is not only the size but also the composition of the population that matters. We test the thesis that economic inequalities may extend to other areas of inequality; specifically, in wealthier municipalities, the local Facebook public is more developed. However, the limited available evidence suggests that economic disparities across municipalities do not necessarily translate into differences in the development of the public sphere. For instance, research indicates that income does not significantly influence local community involvement (e.g. Kim and Ball-Rokeach, 2006), nor does it appear that local

governments are more active in wealthier municipalities (Guillamón et al., 2016; Lev-On and Steinfeld, 2015; Mabillard et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2019). Nonetheless, it remains unclear whether these findings can be generalized to the broader social media-based local public.

In addition, the proportion of internet users may play a role. While the digital divide is narrowing, it still persists, particularly among older generations (see, Lythreatis et al., 2022). We can argue that in municipalities with a lower share of internet subscriptions, the local Facebook public is less developed. However, it is worth noting that Guillamón and colleagues (2016) did not confirm this hypothesis in their study of local governments' Facebook activity, though their analysis focused only on governments' posting behavior rather than their reach.

We also expect political factors to influence the size and activity of the local Facebook public. Drawing on the concept of the politicization of local politics (e.g. Anzia, 2021), as discussed in the introduction, we propose that national parties introduce greater conflict into the local public sphere, making it more contentious. The mayor's partisan background serves as a suitable proxy for national party involvement in a given municipality. When a mayor is affiliated with a national party, that party likely has a stronger stake in the community, which may lead to a more competitive and conflict-driven local sphere. This dynamic could result in more active local pages and a more engaged local audience. Nevertheless, existing studies have not found a clear association between mayors' partisan affiliations and the activity of their local governments on Facebook (Guillamón et al., 2016; Silva et al., 2019).

Another political factor we investigate is the level of political involvement in the given municipality measured by local political participation. A politically more engaged population may create a stronger demand for locally relevant political information, potentially leading to a more extensive local public. However, it is important to note that, unlike our other hypotheses where causal relationships are more plausible, this case involves ambiguity. A significant association could also reflect the influence of the local public on political participation, as a more developed local public might motivate greater involvement in local political processes. Consequently, while we can examine the association between these two factors, we cannot definitively establish a causal relationship. Nonetheless, this association remains relevant, as previous research on local governments' social media presence – such as Silva et al. (2019) in Portugal – found that lower levels of political participation were associated with higher posting activity.

Finally, we explore whether regional differences exist in the development level of the local public. Identifying such regional variations would suggest the presence of geo-spatial inequalities. Conversely, if no significant regional differences are observed, we could argue that variations in the development level of local Facebook publics are not spatially determined but rather driven by individual municipality-level factors.

3.3. Methods

The mapping of the local Facebook public sphere was conducted by 21 undergraduate students as part of a university course between February and May 2021. Since there are 3,153 municipalities in Hungary, each student was responsible for mapping 150 municipalities. Due to the fragmented structure of Hungarian settlements, the majority of these were small municipalities, as 57 percent of Hungarian municipalities have populations under 1,000, and 91 percent have fewer than 5,000 residents. As the results will show, these smaller municipalities had only a few pages or groups, making the coding process relatively quick. In larger municipalities, however, the number of pages increases significantly, posing a greater challenge for data collection. To address this, the 84 municipalities with populations over 15,000 were coded independently by two separate students, resulting in each student being assigned an additional four larger municipalities. An additional student was responsible for consolidating

the data from these 84 double-coded municipalities and checking for discrepancies, reducing the potential error rate in the more complex cases. Budapest was excluded from this part of the research because the capital functions more as a meso-level unit comprised of individual districts. These districts differ significantly from the more clearly delineated municipalities in many respects, and the much larger scale of Budapest makes it considerably harder to map.

In line with the theoretical framework, students were required to record whether each municipality had a local government Facebook page and to collect all pages and groups focused on local public affairs. These included pages and groups dealing with the municipality in general, local public affairs, local media, political parties, and civil organizations involved in public matters. We excluded pages related to local businesses, services, non-political public institutions, church organizations, personal pages unrelated to public affairs, buy-and-sell groups, lost-and-found pages, dating platforms, and groups focused on local history, hiking, or other hobbies.

Students were provided with detailed instructions tailored to Facebook's search functionalities at the time, developed after extensive testing. This process involved searching for the municipality's name on the Facebook search interface, which displayed pages and groups that included the municipality's name in their titles or descriptions. For every identified page, students also checked Facebook's "related pages" feature, which often revealed pages that did not include the municipality's name in their title or description (e.g., the page "9500.hu," where the title refers to the municipality's postal code).

For local government pages and other public-interest pages, students were required to record the number of followers, the page type (whether it was a local media outlet, party organization, civil organization, or other entity), and, to indicate activity, the date of the fifth most recent post. For groups, students recorded the number of members and the number of posts.

To filter out irrelevant and inactive pages, we excluded those with fewer followers than 1 percent of the local population and those that had published fewer than five posts in the three months preceding the start of data collection (i.e., if the fifth most recent post was dated before November 30, 2020). For groups, we similarly excluded those with membership below 1 percent of the local population and those with fewer than five posts in the previous month. Local government pages, however, were not removed for inactivity. Instead, we differentiated between municipalities without a local government Facebook page, those with a page that had posted fewer than five times in the three months prior to data collection (inactive pages), and those with more than five posts (active pages). As a result, our final sample included 3,412 local public-interest pages, 2,142 public-interest groups, and 1,198 active and 344 inactive local government pages.

Our unit of analysis is individual municipalities. In the descriptive analysis, we examine the number of pages and their potential reach in terms of followers or members, categorized by population size. Specifically, we analyze 1,810 municipalities with fewer than 1,000 residents, 1,070 with populations between 1,000 and 4,999, 129 with populations between 5,000 and 9,999, 83 with populations between 10,000 and 19,999, and 61 with populations over 20,000.

For the number of pages, we assess the proportion of municipalities within each type that have one, two, three, or more pages or groups, as well as those with active or passive local government pages. For follower counts, we relate these numbers to the population size, analyzing how the followers or members of an individual page or group compare to the municipality's total population. When aggregating the follower or membership counts of multiple pages or groups, we calculate the average number of connections per capita. We present the ratio relative to the population this way because, in the case of aggregated follower or membership counts, a single individual may appear multiple times if they follow multiple pages or belong to multiple groups. We present these results using median values for each

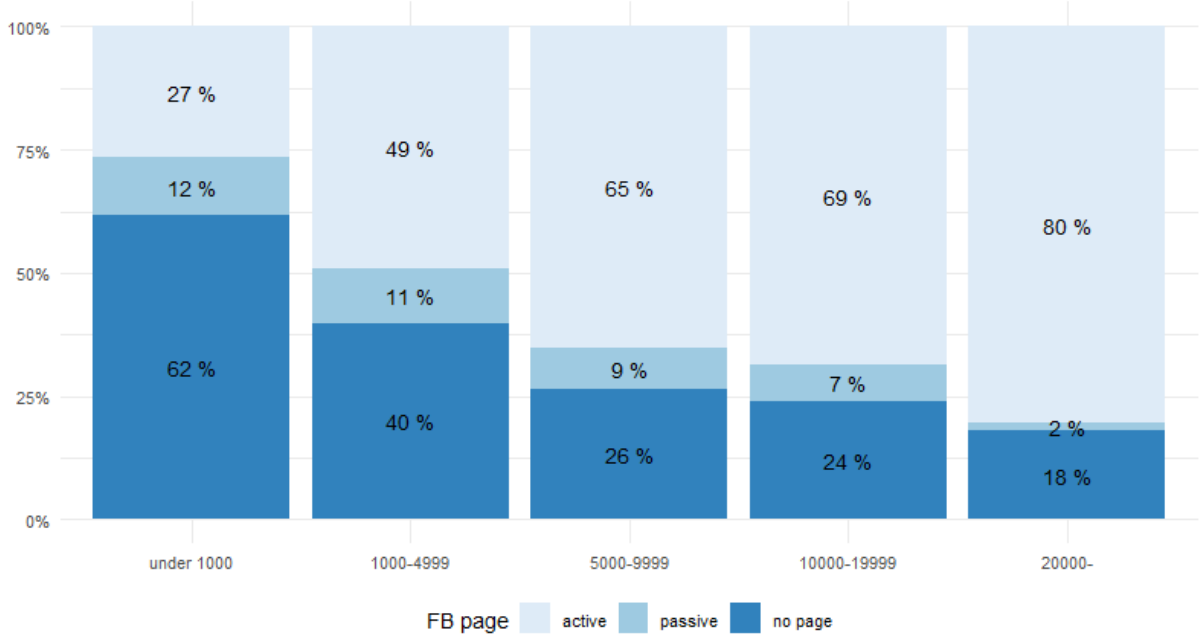
population category, showing this extension relative to the population size in a "typical" municipality within each category.
We apply a similar approach to determine the overall extent of the local Facebook public sphere: We sum the followers of all local pages and the members of all groups, then divide this aggregate by the population size to calculate the number of connections to storytelling agents per capita in the given municipality. However, since politicians – discussed in detail in Chapter 4 – are also significant actors in the overall Facebook public sphere, we included their follower counts in this metric, even though their activities are analyzed separately in the next chapter.
We use this measure of the extent of the local Facebook public sphere (M=1.19; SD=3.14) as the dependent variable in a statistical model to explain differences across municipalities. Here, we move beyond the simple population-based typology and analyze municipal differences along several municipality-level variables. The exact population figures were determined using data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office for 2021 (M=2,599; SD=9,260). The economic situation of municipal populations was measured using two variables. The first is per capita personal income tax paid, expressed in thousands of forints (M=1,312; SD=377), which serves as a good proxy for the average income level of residents. The second is local deprivation, measured by the municipal unemployment rate (M=0.05; SD=0.03), with data sourced from the National Regional Development and Spatial Planning Information System. From the same source, we also obtained data on the proportion of residents with internet subscriptions (M=0.55; SD=0.20). In terms of political context, we recorded whether the municipality's mayor was supported by the governing parties (19 percent), opposition parties (1.8 percent), or ran independently with local civic support or no party affiliation (79.2 percent). Data on voter turnout in the most recent municipal elections were obtained from the National Election Office (M=0.58; SD=0.17). We categorized municipalities into the seven (excluding Budapest) NUTS-2 regions of the EU's official regional classification system: Central Transdanubia (13 percent), Northern Great Plain (12 percent), Northern Hungary (19 percent), Pest (6 percent), Southern Great Plain (8 percent), Southern Transdanubia (21 percent), and Western Transdanubia (21 percent).
For the multivariate analysis, we performed an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression. Due to skewed distributions, several variables were log-transformed, including the dependent variable measuring the extent of the Facebook public sphere, population size, and per capita personal income tax.

3.4. Findings

3.4.1. Facebook pages of local governments

Our results show that local governments are notably active participants in the local public sphere (Figure 3.1). Even in the smallest municipalities, more than a quarter have an active Facebook page. Among municipalities with populations between 1,000 and 4,999, nearly half of the governments maintain an active presence on the platform. This proportion increases with population size: 65 percent of municipalities with over 5,000 residents, 69 percent with over 10,000 residents, and 80 percent with over 20,000 residents have a Facebook page.

Figure 3.1. Municipality-related Facebook pages by population categories



Although the reach of these pages is not negligible, their follower count relative to the population typically lags behind the local Facebook groups discussed below (Table 3.1). On the smallest municipalities, they play a clearly central role: based on median values, the number of followers in municipalities with fewer than 1,000 residents typically reaches 99 percent of the population, while in those with populations between 1,000 and 4,999, it is 49 percent. Their significance decreases in larger municipalities: in places with populations between 5,000 and 9,999, followers account for 31 percent of the population; for populations between 10,000 and 19,999, the figure is 28 percent; and in the largest municipalities, only 17 percent of the population follows these pages. This trend appears to support the findings of Mabillard and colleagues (2021), who observed that municipal pages reach a larger share of the population in smaller communities. This is somewhat surprising, as one might expect that in larger municipalities, the local government's page could attract followers not only from the municipality itself but also from nearby smaller communities.

Table 3.1. Median number of followers of the page of the local government in the ratio of the population by population categories

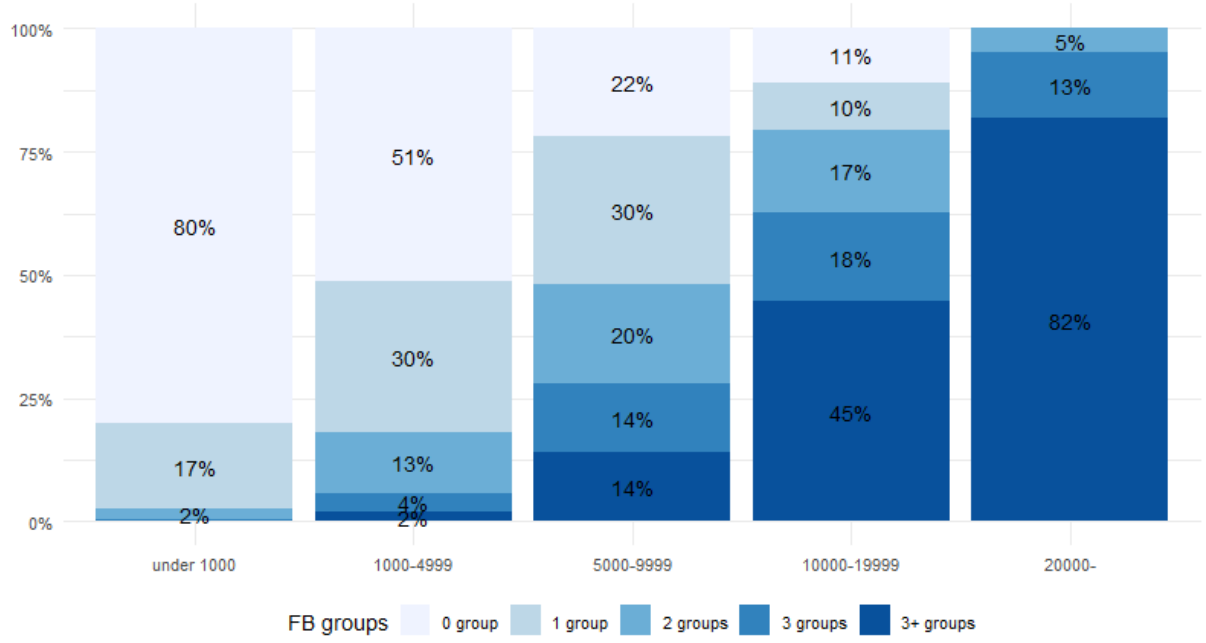
	Population size				
	0-999	1000-4999	5000-9999	10000-19999	20000+
Followers/population (median)	99%	49%	31%	28%	17%

3.4.2. Facebook groups

In smaller municipalities, it is not uncommon for there to be no municipality-level Facebook group, while in larger municipalities, groups focusing on local public affairs are typically present (Figure 3.2). Less than one-fifth of municipalities with fewer than 1,000 residents have a Facebook group, but nearly half of municipalities with populations between 1,000 and 4,999 have such communities. In municipalities with populations exceeding 5,000, it is rare to find places without a Facebook group. Moreover, in many of these larger municipalities, it is common to have more than one group. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that more than one-fifth of municipalities with populations between 5,000 and 9,999, and over one-tenth of

municipalities with populations between 10,000 and 19,999, lack even a single municipality-level group. On average, municipalities with populations of 5,000 to 9,999 have two groups, those with 10,000 to 19,999 have 3.5 groups, and municipalities with more than 20,000 residents have an average of 6.5 groups.

Figure 3.2. Number of Facebook groups by population categories



These groups cover a significant portion of the population (Table 3.2). Based on median values, there are 0.7 group memberships per capita in municipalities with fewer than 1,000 residents, 0.57 in municipalities with 1,000 to 4,999 residents, 0.51 in those with 5,000 to 9,999 residents, 0.69 in municipalities with populations between 10,000 and 19,999, and 0.67 in municipalities with more than 20,000 residents. If we focus only on the largest groups, even in the largest municipalities – where multiple groups compete for attention – they cover more than one-third of the population. In contrast, in the smallest municipalities, this proportion is 70 percent, or 49 percent for municipalities with populations between 1,000 and 4,999.

Accordingly, the largest groups hold a dominant role compared to other groups. In smaller municipalities, a significant proportion of all local group members belong to these groups, while even in the largest municipalities, approximately 45 percent of all group memberships are associated with the largest group. This makes the largest group an integrative hub in the local public sphere, playing a similar – though even more prominent – role compared to the official municipal Facebook page.

The largest groups are also highly active. Even in the smallest and least active groups in tiny municipalities, there is typically one post every weekday. In municipalities with populations between 1,000 and 4,999, this increases to nearly two posts per day, while in the largest municipalities, the group with the most members typically sees around 14 posts daily.

In conclusion, local groups play a significant role in the local public sphere. While they are rare in the smallest municipalities, where they do exist, they cover a substantial proportion of the population.

Table 3.2. Members and activities of local Facebook groups by population categories (municipalities with at least one page only)

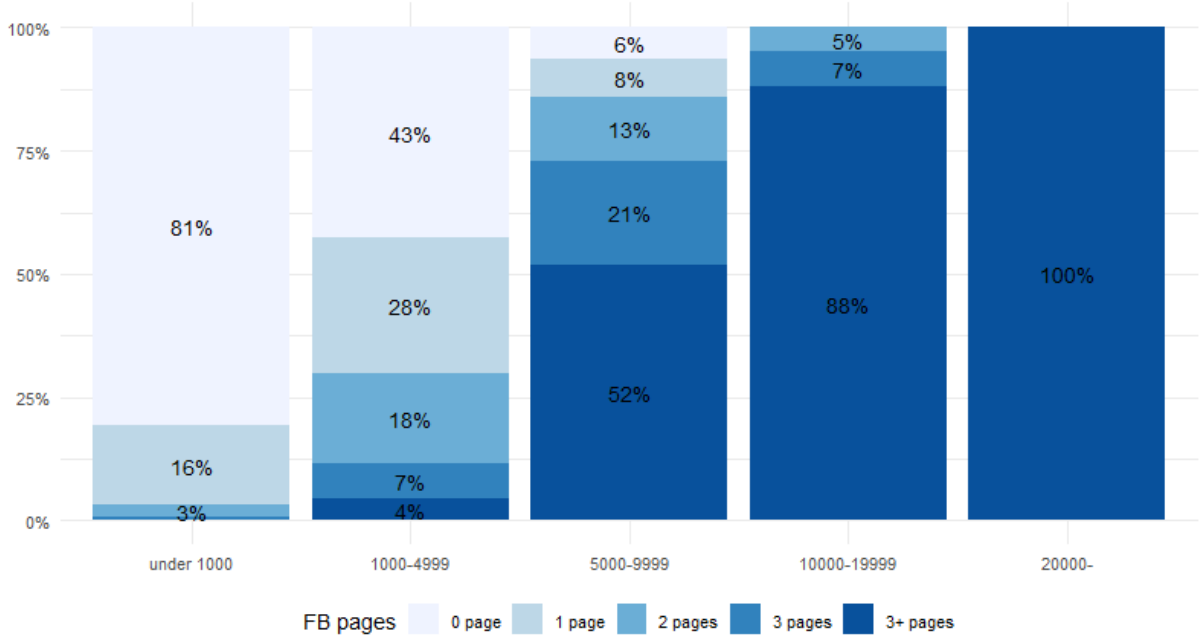
	Population size

	0-999	1000-4999	5000-9999	10000-19999	20000+
Membership per capita (median)	0.71	0.57	0.51	0.69	0.67
Members of the largest group/population (median)	70%	49%	39%	37%	35%
Members of the largest group/all members of local groups (median)	100%	100%	82%	60%	45%
No. of posts in the largest group in the last month (median)	19	56	134	244	430

3.4.3. Local political Facebook pages

In smaller municipalities, local political pages show trends similar to those observed with groups (Figure 3.3). In four-fifths of the smallest municipalities, there are no political pages. Where they do exist, there are usually only one or, at most, two pages. Among municipalities with populations between 1,000 and 4,999, 43 percent have no such pages, but in municipalities that do, it is not uncommon to find more than one. For municipalities with populations exceeding 5,000, it is rare not to have at least one political page, and in municipalities with populations over 10,000, it is uncommon to find fewer than three. Similarly, in municipalities with populations between 5,000 and 9,999, this trend is evident. The median number of local political pages is four in municipalities with populations between 5,000 and 9,999, seven in those with 10,000 to 19,999 residents, and twelve in municipalities with more than 20,000 residents. This indicates that public-interest pages are quite common in municipalities with populations over 5,000.

Figure 3.3. Number of local Facebook pages by population categories



The number of followed pages per capita is relatively high (Table 3.3). However, based on median values, there are typically twice as many political pages in a municipality as groups. In municipalities with populations over 10,000 or under 1,000, the follower connection to pages per capita is much higher than that of groups. In contrast, in municipalities with populations

between 1,000 and 9,999, groups tend to play a more significant role. At the same time, the follower base of political pages is more fragmented. While the largest pages are typically followed by a significant portion of the population – ranging from 22 percent to 43 percent (and as high as 86 percent in the smallest municipalities) – these ratios are slightly lower than those of groups, except in municipalities with populations over 20,000. As a result, it is not surprising that the largest pages account for a smaller share of total local follower activity compared to the largest groups, particularly in municipalities where multiple groups are common. This makes local political pages a more fragmented segment of the local public sphere.

Table 3.3. Followers of local Facebook pages by population categories (municipalities with at least one page only)

	Population size				
	0-999	1000-4999	5000-9999	10000-19999	20000+
Page following per capita (median)	0.89	0.42	0.46	0.82	1.16
Followers of the largest page/population (median)	86%	31%	22%	28%	43%
Followers of the largest page/all members of local pages (median)	100%	94%	54%	41%	31%

Since the category of local political pages is quite heterogeneous, it is worth examining the reach of specific types of pages individually (Table 3.4). Local media pages have a high reach across all population categories, but they are typically only found in municipalities with populations over 10,000. Local media pages are present in less than 1 percent of municipalities with fewer than 1,000 residents, in 6 percent of those with populations between 1,000 and 4,999, and in 26 percent of those with populations between 5,000 and 9,999. However, in municipalities with populations between 10,000 and 19,999, 63 percent have a local media page, and 33 percent of these have more than one. In municipalities with populations over 20,000, 93 percent have local media pages, and 89 percent of these have more than one.

Local media pages have significant reach. In the few municipalities with fewer than 1,000 residents where such pages exist, their combined follower counts often exceed the local population. In municipalities with populations between 1,000 and 9,999, the typically single media page reaches more than 40 percent of the population. In municipalities with populations over 10,000, where multiple media pages are often present, media page following per capita ranges between 0.55 and 0.60.

Next, the presence of local party pages is only common in municipalities with populations over 5,000. However, in the 7 percent of municipalities with fewer than 1,000 residents that have party pages, their relative reach is exceptionally high at 84 percent. In municipalities with populations over 1,000, local party pages are more prevalent: 42 percent of municipalities with 1,000-4,999 residents have a party page, and 13 percent have more than one. Among municipalities with populations between 5,000 and 9,999, 91 percent have party pages, with 75 percent having more than one. For populations between 10,000 and 19,999, 96 percent have party pages, with a median of four pages. In the largest municipalities, 98 percent have party pages, with a median of five.

Local parties are thus more numerous in the local public sphere than local media pages. However, despite their larger numbers, their overall reach is much smaller. Collectively, party pages tend to have about half as many followers as media pages, typically reaching 0.19-0.35 following per capita, excluding municipalities with fewer than 1,000 residents.

Compared to the presence of media and political parties, civil organizations play a much smaller role across all types of municipalities. Facebook pages of civil organizations are present in only 2 percent of municipalities with fewer than 1,000 residents and in 8 percent of those with populations between 1,000 and 4,999. Among municipalities with populations between 5,000 and 9,999, 31 percent have at least one civil organization page, with 7 percent of these having more than one. In municipalities with populations between 10,000 and 19,999, 45 percent have such pages, while 49 percent of municipalities with over 20,000 residents do as well. However, even in larger municipalities, it is typically just one page, and having multiple pages is rare. As a result, their reach is more limited. That said, in the smallest municipalities where such pages do exist, they manage to reach a significant proportion of the population. In larger municipalities, however, even where civil organization pages are present, their role is much smaller compared to that of political parties or local media.

We also found a relatively large number of pages that do not fall into these three main categories. Other types of local political pages are present in 10 percent of the smallest municipalities, 24 percent of municipalities with populations between 1,000 and 4,999, 45 percent of those with 5,000 to 9,999 residents, 64 percent of those with 10,000 to 19,999 residents, and 95 percent of the largest municipalities, where the median number of such pages is three. Their combined reach is similar to that of local political party pages. As such, these pages are more significant than civil organization pages but less prominent than local media pages. The only exception is in municipalities with populations between 1,000 and 4,999, where their role is comparable to that of local media in terms of reach.

In summary, Facebook pages play a crucial role in the local Facebook public sphere, particularly in larger municipalities. However, their large number also significantly fragments the local public sphere. In municipalities with populations over 10,000, local media is a key player, while in municipalities over 5,000, local political parties also hold significant importance. In contrast, local civil organizations struggle to play a prominent role. Meanwhile, other political Facebook pages manage to achieve considerable reach.

Table 3.4. Followers of Facebook pages for local parties, media outlets, civil organizations, and other political pages by population categories (municipalities with at least one respective page only)

	Population size				
	0-999	1000-4999	5000-9999	10000-19999	20000+
Local parties: No of page following per capita (median) (median number of pages)	0.84 (0)	0.26 (0)	0.19 (2)	0.22 (4)	0.35 (5)
Local media: No of page following per capita (median) (median number of pages)	1.05 (0)	0.42 (0)	0.45 (0)	0.55 (1)	0.60 (3)
Civil organization: No of page following per capita (median) (median number of pages)	0.68 (0)	0.22 (0)	0.11 (0)	0.14 (0)	0.5 (0)
Other pages: No of page following per capita (median) (median number of pages)	0.85 (0)	0.39 (0)	0.19 (0)	0.26 (1)	0.29 (3)

3.4.4. The Facebook public as a whole

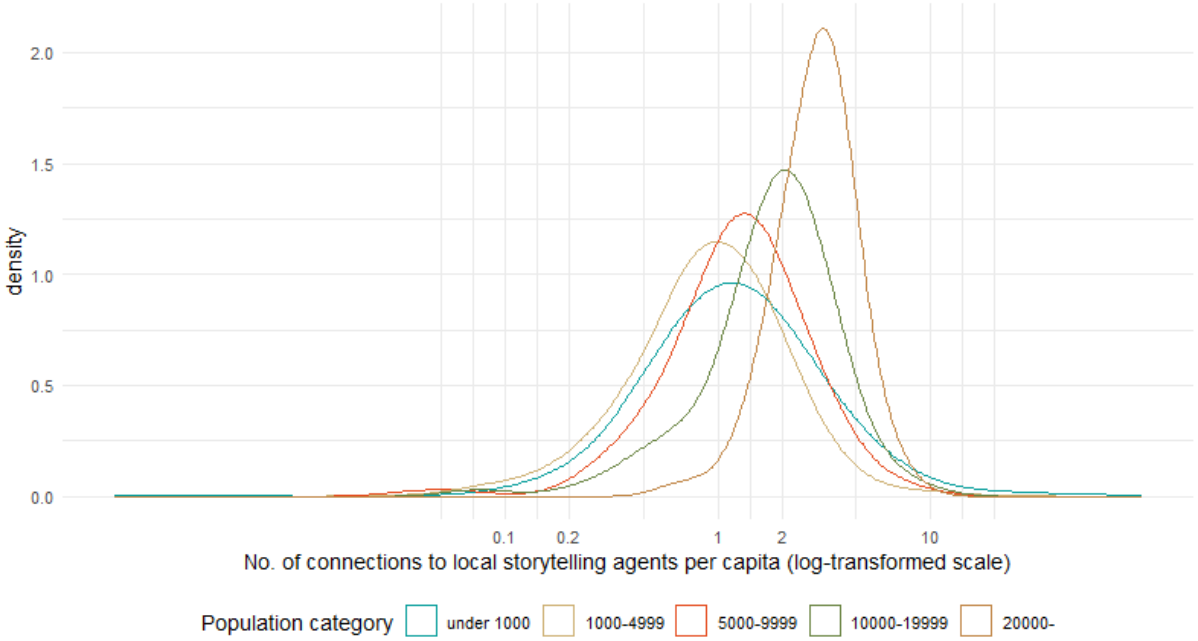
To determine how effectively Facebook can counterbalance the phenomenon of news deserts, we measured the overall reach of the Facebook public sphere using an indicator that sums the followers of all political pages – including politicians' pages discussed in Chapter 4 – and all group members. This total was then divided by the population to calculate the reach of the local Facebook public sphere, showing the number of connections to local storytelling agents per capita. (Figure 3.4).

We define a municipality as a Facebook news desert if it either lacks any local Facebook platforms entirely or if the number of connections to local storytelling agents per capita remains below 0.2. Out of 3,153 municipalities, nearly one-third (1,090 municipalities) qualify as Facebook news deserts, with 1,014 of them having no local Facebook presence at all. Almost all of these are small municipalities: 899 have populations under 1,000, and 186 have populations between 1,000 and 4,999. This means that 50 percent of villages with fewer than 1,000 residents and 17 percent of those with populations between 1,000 and 5,000 are Facebook news deserts. At higher population levels, news deserts are rare. Among municipalities with populations between 5,000 and 10,000, there are only four such cases (two of which lack any local Facebook platform), and among those with populations between 10,000 and 20,000, there is just one.

Thus, news deserts exist on Facebook, but only in smaller municipalities. In these areas, however, they are relatively common, with a significant proportion of villages lacking any public Facebook platform for discussing local issues.

In contrast, larger municipalities generally have a more extensive local public sphere, particularly in those with populations over 20,000, where local pages have significant reach. Interestingly, the municipalities with the most extensive public spheres also include several small villages. For instance, in 261 municipalities with fewer than 1,000 residents (14 percent of such villages), the number of connection per capita exceeds 2. Similarly, this is true for 122 municipalities (11 percent) with populations between 1,000 and 5,000. However, the majority of larger municipalities fall into this category: 82 percent of municipalities with populations over 20,000 and 47 percent of those with populations between 10,000 and 20,000 have a Facebook public sphere whose total follower count exceeds twice their population.

Figure 3.4. Density plots of the extent of the local Facebook public by population categories



3.4.5. Multivariate models

To understand cross-municipality variations, we analyze which municipality-level factors influence the extent of the local public sphere (Table 3.5). Based on the descriptive results, it is unsurprising that larger municipalities generally have a more extensive local Facebook public sphere. All else being equal, there are 0.75 connections per capita in municipalities with 1,000 residents, 1.09 in a municipality with 5,000 residents, 1.25 in one with 10,000 residents, and 2.13 in a municipality with 20,000 residents.

Furthermore, contrary to trends observed in local governments, economic inequalities also seem to influence the extent of the Facebook public sphere. A higher level of per capita personal income tax shows a positive correlation with the extent of the Facebook public sphere. According to predicted values, the poorest municipalities achieve only 46 percent of the reach observed in the wealthiest municipalities, holding all other factors constant. Another economic indicator supports this result: municipalities with a higher proportion of job seekers tend to have a much less extensive local Facebook public sphere. The role of economic inequalities is further highlighted by the continuing significance of the digital divide. Municipalities where a larger share of the population has internet subscriptions tend to have a more extensive Facebook public sphere.

The results also show that political factors play a significant role. In municipalities where the mayor is backed by a national political party, the local Facebook public sphere is more extensive. Holding all else constant, the connections per capita in municipalities led by independent mayors are expected to equal 0.91, compared to 1.45 in municipalities with governing-party leadership and 2.07 in those with opposition-party leadership. The presence of national parties in local politics thus invigorates the local Facebook public sphere, but opposition-led municipalities show a significantly greater effect than those led by the governing party. This disparity may stem from the increased potential for political disputes and contentious issues when the municipal leadership and national government are politically opposed. Such situations often lead to more publicized conflicts, especially since regional administration and parliamentary representation typically align with the governing party. This dynamic may also mobilize local governing-party supporters, further energizing the public sphere.

It is also evident that there is a connection between local political participation and the extent of the Facebook public sphere. Municipalities with higher levels of participatory activity tend to have a more extensive Facebook public. However, the direction of causality here is unclear – it is possible that higher participation leads to a more extensive public sphere, but it could also be that a broader public sphere fosters greater participation. Regardless of the causal relationship, it can be established that the two are correlated: municipalities with higher levels of participation also tend to have a more extensive Facebook public sphere.

The extent of the Facebook public sphere is also influenced by regional factors, reflecting spatial inequalities in addition to economic disparities. However, these spatial differences are not explained by the economic development of the regions. The least extensive Facebook public spheres are observed in the Northern Great Plain (predicted value: 0.75) and Western Transdanubia (0.80) regions. While the former is the second least developed region in Hungary according to 2022 Eurostat data[7], the latter is the second most developed.

In the case of Western Transdanubia, a potential explanation could be its proximity to Austria. Many municipalities in this region may have a significant portion of residents who work in Austria or moved there specifically for that reason, leading to weaker ties and lower interest in the public affairs of their own municipalities. In contrast, the Pest region, one of Hungary's

[7] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tgs00003/default/table?lang=en

more developed areas, has the most extensive Facebook public sphere (1.14), followed closely by the Southern Great Plain (1.07).
In summary, it is evident that the Facebook public sphere is more extensive in larger municipalities, those with a more favorable economic situation, and those more influenced by national politics and with higher levels of political activity. Additionally, regional differences also play a significant role.

Table 3.5. Linear regression models explaining the extension of local Facebook public

	Extension of the local FB public (log)
Predictors	*Estimates*
(Intercept)	-0.98 ***
Mayor's party: opposition	0.17 *
Mayor's party: government party	-0.08 ***
Population (log)	0.11 ***
Unemployment	-1.69 ***
Income tax per capita (log)	0.11 **
Internet subscription	0.14 *
Turnout in local election	0.34 ***
Regio: Northern HU	-0.03
Regio: Central TR	-0.05
Regio: Southern TR	-0.10 *
Regio: Western TR	-0.18 ***
Regio: Northern GP	-0.20 ***
Regio: Southern GP	-0.02
Observations	3112
R^2 / R^2 adjusted	0.194 / 0.191

** p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001*

3.5. Conclusion

This chapter highlights the importance of the Facebook public sphere on the supply side, following its investigation on the demand side: In most municipalities, a storytelling agent infrastructure is established, which has significant reach within the local lifeworld. However, the analysis also highlights significant differences in the development of these infrastructures across municipalities. The communication infrastructure available to residents is not uniform in quality or reach across municipalities. From a theoretical perspective, it is clear that local-level news deserts exist on Facebook as well: one-third of municipalities lack a substantial local Facebook infrastructure. These are predominantly small municipalities, and it is evident that in municipalities with populations under 5,000, it is not uncommon for there to be no local storytelling agents on Facebook.

It is important to note, however, that due to the smaller population sizes, residents in these municipalities may be more interconnected through informal networks. In these networks, local issues might still be discussed, and municipal officials may even use their personal profiles to communicate about municipal matters. However, since our approach focuses on public platforms, we lack detailed insights into the role of these informal networks.

Another important observation is the flip side of the news desert findings: even in the majority of the smallest municipalities, a few storytelling agents are present and capable of creating a local public sphere. Moreover, the results show that in the smallest municipalities, the few existing pages often achieve significant reach. It may be the case that only one or two local storytelling agents exist in a village, but these are followed by a large proportion of residents, effectively monopolizing communication about local affairs. This also means that there are success stories among even the smallest municipalities, with many examples of highly active Facebook public spheres. Since creating and maintaining a local page or group requires minimal effort – especially in smaller municipalities where regular maintenance is less burdensome – just a few active individuals can establish a relatively expansive local public sphere, further reducing the number of news deserts. In larger municipalities, the Facebook public sphere is clearly extensive: nearly half of municipalities with populations over 10,000, and four-fifths of those with over 20,000 residents, have at least two connections per capita.

As in the previous chapter, the results confirm that local Facebook groups, particularly the largest ones, serve as central arenas for the local public sphere. These groups appear in a large proportion of municipalities with populations over 1,000, and the prominence of a central group helps focus local attention and fosters significant activity. Similarly, though to a lesser extent, local government pages play a focusing role. These pages can reach a significant proportion of residents, helping to create a more unified public agenda. Even in the smallest municipalities, local governments are often active on Facebook, making these pages a key tool for preventing news deserts.

In contrast to central local groups and government pages, locally oriented pages contribute to the diversity of the local public sphere. These pages are more numerous, and their audiences are more evenly distributed among different pages. Local media becomes significant in municipalities with populations over 10,000, while local political parties are important actors even in smaller municipalities. Non-institutional pages further enrich the local public sphere, but local civil organizations with a public affairs focus are scarcely present on Facebook.

The multivariate analysis revealed that differences between municipalities in the Facebook-based storytelling infrastructure are not solely determined by population size. Firstly, it became clear that spatial economic inequalities are at least partially reflected in the local Facebook public sphere, as municipalities with poorer populations tend to have less extensive local public spheres. Secondly, the results also confirm that the dynamics of the local public sphere are influenced by significant political factors. While it is challenging to establish a causal relationship with political participation, it is evident that the presence of national political parties serves as an important resource. In municipalities where the mayor is backed by a national party, the local public sphere is more extensive.

This finding aligns well with the "politicization of local politics" approach discussed in the introductory chapter. The next two chapters will focus specifically on how the presence of national politics at the local level shapes the local public sphere through the activities of politicians.

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PART II. POLITICAL ACTORS

Chapter 4. In the Web of the Parties: Local Politicians on Facebook[8]

Abstract

The chapter examines local politicians' use of Facebook in Hungary, exploring how mayors and councilors engage with constituents through social media. Drawing on comprehensive observational data and an elite survey, the chapter assesses factors influencing politicians' adoption of Facebook, their activity levels, and their ability to attract followers. Results indicate significant disparities: mayors, particularly in larger municipalities, exhibit higher adoption and activity rates compared to councilors. Politicians affiliated with national political parties are more active on Facebook, motivated by party expectations and the competitive political landscape.

Contextual factors such as municipality size and economic resources further influence politicians' social media engagement, with politicians in wealthier, larger municipalities demonstrating higher Facebook activity. The local social media environment also plays a critical role; more vibrant local Facebook publics encourage greater political engagement online.

Despite recognizing social media's importance for voter communication and information dissemination, many local politicians, especially in smaller municipalities, remain inactive on Facebook due to resource constraints and perceived risks. The chapter concludes that while Facebook provides opportunities for enhancing local democratic engagement, its use remains unevenly distributed, significantly shaped by political affiliation, municipal context, and local digital dynamics.

4.1. Introduction

Local politicians can be key actors in and promoters of local digital publics, with their pages serving as central hubs of local public life (Thorson et al., 2020). Through their activities, they play a crucial role in exposing citizens to locally relevant content, fostering connections among residents, and contributing to the development of a well-functioning digital local public – an essential element of local communities (Ellison and Hardey, 2013).

However, our understanding of local politicians' social media activity remains highly limited. Given that social media use is likely less widespread among local politicians than among national politicians (Metag and Marcinkowski, 2012), identifying the factors influencing local politicians' engagement on these platforms is critical for understanding why citizens have varying access to locally relevant information and opportunities to participate in digital local publics. While there is a growing body of literature on politicians' social media use (Magin et al., 2017; Williams and Gulati, 2013), research in this field has been largely shaped by methodological nationalism (Chernilo, 2006), focusing predominantly on national-level patterns while largely neglecting local dimensions (Larsson and Svensson, 2014). However, as Larsson and Skogerbø (2018) emphasized, local politicians' social media behaviors can differ significantly from those of national politicians, making it problematic to generalize national-level findings to the local level.

[8] An earlier version of this chapter was published in the journal Media and Communication (Bene and Dobos, 2023). However, in this version, we have revised the empirical model by incorporating the Facebook public sphere variable introduced in Chapter 3. As a result, some findings differ from those in the earlier publication. Additionally, we have expanded the previous study by integrating new elite survey data.

This study aims to bridge this gap by examining local politicians' Facebook use in Hungary. Specifically, we assess the extent to which mayors and councilors use Facebook and attract followers among local residents. Furthermore, we test various theoretical explanations regarding the influence of political incentives, contextual factors, and situational variables on their activity on the platform. To achieve this, we draw upon an exceptionally comprehensive dataset that includes all elected local politicians across Hungarian municipalities and their Facebook activity over a two-year period. Additionally, we complement this observational data with results from an elite survey focusing on local councilors. This allows us to gain insight into how local politicians themselves perceive the political role of social media at the local level.

4.2. Local politicians and Social Media

4.2.1. Costs and benefits of using social media in local politics

The literature on social media and politics has demonstrated that while an active social media presence offers benefits, it also comes with costs and even risks (for an overview see, Jacobs and Spierings, 2016). Many of these factors are also relevant at the local level, albeit with slightly different implications (Mabillard et al., 2021).

Starting with the benefits, information provision has been a central function of politicians' social media use since the early days of these platforms (Golbeck et al., 2010). Social media allows political actors to directly inform voters about issues they consider important, bypassing traditional intermediaries such as journalists or editors. This function is particularly valuable in a local political context, where disseminating publicly important information is often challenging, as residents primarily consume national or regional news (Martin and McCrain, 2019). As demonstrated in Chapter 2, Facebook is one of the most significant local information sources, and political actors can serve as key information hubs within these networked local publics (Thorson et al., 2020). Moreover, because people are naturally interested in local information closely related to their everyday lives (Bonsón et al., 2012), this role enables politicians to attract followers beyond their immediate supporters. This, in turn, helps them overcome one of the key limitations of politicians' social media use – namely, that political actors are typically followed only by their existing voter base (see, Wojcieszak et al., 2022). Accordingly, research has shown that local governments primarily use social media platforms to provide residents with locally relevant information (e.g. DePaula et al., 2018; Hofmann et al., 2013).

Political actors also frequently use social media platforms for impression management. These platforms allow politicians to shape their public image by showcasing both their political and personal characteristics (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011). On one hand, they can report on their daily political work in a visually engaging manner, keeping constituents informed about their activities on their behalf (Lilleker and Koc-Michalska, 2013). On the other hand, they can reveal the person behind the political persona, humanizing themselves (Klinger and Russmann, 2017) – a well-documented phenomenon in strategic social media communication (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013. In the local context, these image management opportunities can be particularly valuable, as local politicians have more limited access to national media platforms to introduce and familiarize the public with both their political identity and personal traits compared to national politicians.

Social media platforms also provide politicians with the ability to directly interact with voters. These interactions help politicians stay informed about voters' concerns, local issues, and incidents while also fostering a sense of closeness between them and the electorate (Kruikemeier et al., 2013). However, research conducted at the national level has shown that

politicians often avoid direct interactions with their followers (Magin et al., 2017). At the local level, one of the key barriers to interactivity – the sheer size of the audience (Golbeck et al., 2010) – is less problematic due to the smaller constituencies. Studies have shown that local politicians view interactivity as a major benefit of social media communication (Larsson and Skogerbø, 2018) and that voters highly value such engagement (Lappas et al., 2022).

Despite these advantages, the costs, risks, and other demotivating factors associated with social media use cannot be overlooked. While setting up a page is cost-free, maintaining an active, effective, and professional social media presence requires time, resources, and expertise (Jacobs and Spierings, 2016). These are particularly scarce at the local level, especially in smaller municipalities and among lower-ranked politicians, who typically have fewer financial resources and lack dedicated administrative support (Jacobs and Spierings, 2016).

Furthermore, interactivity also carries risks. Just as at the national level, local politicians fear losing control over their public image and face reputational risks due to negative, critical, or even aggressive interactions (Mabillard et al., 2021; Thorson et al., 2020). Such interactions are particularly characteristic of local political engagement (Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018). Moreover, in tightly connected local communities, negative interactions can be especially damaging, as commenters are more likely to have personal ties with other audience members (Burai et al., 2024). This dynamic makes critical remarks more impactful than in a national context, where opinions often come from strangers (Anspach, 2017).

Conversely, a lack of engagement can also discourage politicians from maintaining an active social media presence. Many local politicians struggle with low follower counts, and a significant proportion of their posts receive little to no engagement (Bonsón et al., 2016; Silva et al., 2019). This perceived lack of interest can demotivate political actors from investing time and effort into their social media presence and may also be seen as a reputational risk, reinforcing their hesitation. Finally, a major obstacle to social media use at the local level is the skepticism among some political actors, who simply do not believe that social media engagement offers tangible benefits (Mabillard et al., 2021). This perception further discourages them from prioritizing social media as a key tool in their political communication strategy.

At the national level, research has extensively demonstrated that the benefits of social media use outweigh the costs and other demotivating factors, leading politicians to actively engage with these platforms (Williams and Gulati, 2013). However, in local politics, both the benefits and costs take on slightly different meanings. Most importantly, local politicians have fewer available resources to overcome challenges and establish an effective social media presence. Additionally, the risks associated with interactivity – both in terms of critical comments and low engagement levels – are more pronounced at the local level.

Despite these challenges, local politicians' social media activity remains underexplored. The limited research available primarily stems from the early phases of social media platforms (Djerf-Pierre and Pierre, 2016; Metag and Marcinkowski, 2012) and often focuses exclusively on larger municipalities (Szmigiel-Rawska et al., 2018). This study aims to fill this gap by employing two distinct methodological approaches: First, by examining the Facebook presence of all elected local politicians from every Hungarian municipality – on Facebook, the only locally relevant social media platform for political engagement – we analyze three key dimensions of social media use (see, Bene, 2023): adoption (creating a page), activity (number of posts) and audience size (number of followers). Given the lack of prior research on this topic, our first research question is descriptive, focusing on local politicians' presence on Facebook:

RQ4.1. To what extent do elected local politicians (mayors and city council members) (a) use these platforms in terms of adoption and activity, and (b) attract followers in different types of municipalities?

Second, we investigate local politicians' perceptions of social media's role in politics by surveying a sample of local councilors through an elite survey. Accordingly, we ask:
RQ4.2. How important do local councilors consider social media (a) in the local public sphere and (b) in their communication with constituents?
RQ4.3. For what purposes do local councilors use social media?

4.2.2. Motivations behind local politicians' use of social media

Our second research question goes beyond a descriptive approach and examines the factors that explain local politicians' activity on social media. While extensive research has explored the factors shaping politicians' social media performance at the national level (e.g. Williams and Gulati, 2013), local politicians exhibit markedly different social media preferences (Larsson and Skogerbø 2018). At the local level, a few studies have investigated the determinants of local governments' social media activity (e.g. Faber et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2019). While these findings provide valuable insights for formulating our hypotheses, it is important to recognize that the motivations driving an administrative unit's social media presence differ from those of an individual political actor.
We argue that while the benefits and demotivating factors of using Facebook are largely similar for all local politicians, certain political, contextual, and situational factors create additional incentives for some politicians to overcome these challenges and establish an active presence on the platform. Identifying these factors is crucial for understanding why local Facebook publics function differently across municipalities.
RQ4.4. What political, contextual, and situational factors explain elected local politicians' (a) adoption of, (b) activity on Facebook, and (c) the size of their follower base?
Political factors
Broadly speaking, local politicians can be categorized into two groups. Some are official representatives of national political parties, while others are independent or supported by local organizations. Partisan politicians arguably have an additional motivation to be active on Facebook, as they serve as local promoters of their national parties, representing them at the level closest to people's everyday experiences. Research has demonstrated that internal organizational pressure is a crucial factor behind politicians' social media use (Graham and Avery, 2013), and it is a common party strategy to leverage social media to reach and persuade voters at the local level (Karlsen and Skogerbø, 2015; A. Schäfer, 2023).
Moreover, as we previously argued and demonstrated in Chapter 2, local politicians, as key information hubs, may attract politically less engaged voters, who are often the hardest to reach through party campaigns (for further discussion, see Chapter 5). Consequently, parties may pressure their local politicians to engage in effective social media activity. Additionally, partisan local politicians may have access to party resources to enhance their social media presence (Szmigiel-Rawska et al., 2018), including instructions, training, consultancy, and shareable materials provided to local representatives (Klinger and Russmann, 2017). At the local level, Szmigiel-Rawska et al. (2018) found that in Poland, partisan support is associated with higher levels of engagement on mayors' Facebook pages but does not necessarily correlate with their overall posting activity. However, this study focused exclusively on mayors of large cities and relied solely on bivariate analyses. Using a larger sample and a multivariate research design, we expect that local politicians affiliated with national parties are more likely to use Facebook (H4.1a), post more frequently (H4.1b), and attract more followers (H4.1c) than their non-partisan counterparts. Furthermore, our elite survey directly assesses the extent to which party-affiliated councilors are expected to promote their parties, assuming that such expectations are relatively common (H4.1d).

In the Hungarian context, differences across national political blocs are particularly relevant due to the highly asymmetrical political landscape in terms of access to resources and media visibility (Körösényi et al., 2020). However, arguments can be made for both scenarios. On the one hand, the governing party alliance, Fidesz-KDNP, is an extremely centralized and disciplined political organization (Metz and Várnagy, 2021), which facilitates the coordination of local representatives in line with the party's national strategy. Moreover, Fidesz-KDNP is the best-resourced political actor in Hungary, and its local branches benefit from this advantage. On the other hand, opposition parties – which have formed a coalition since 2019 – may place greater emphasis on social media due to their limited access to national and local media. In contrast, Fidesz-KDNP can rely on a well-established and locally embedded partisan media network, as well as more resource intensive offline campaign strategies such as billboards and door-to-door canvassing (Bátorfy and Urbán, 2020). As a result, the governing parties may view Facebook as a supplementary rather than a primary communication tool. Indeed, research indicates that opposition parties attribute greater importance to Facebook (Bene and Somodi, 2018), and opposition-affiliated pages spent more on Facebook ads than Fidesz-KDNP during the 2019 local election campaign (Bene et al., 2023).

In the international literature, studies investigating the impact of partisan ideology on municipalities' social media performance have generally found no significant associations (Guillamón et al., 2016; Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018; Silva et al., 2019), with the exception of a Dutch study showing that municipalities with left-wing dominance tend to be more interactive on Twitter (Faber et al., 2020). Given these contradictory findings, we formulate an open research question to explore which political bloc is more active in terms of Facebook adoption, activity, and follower engagement (RQ4.4a).

Local politicians, however, may not only be motivated by their parties to be active on Facebook but also by the electoral context. While they may perceive the electoral benefits of an active social media presence as limited, even a small advantage can be significant in a highly competitive electoral environment. Most local politicians seek to retain their positions, and when these are at greater risk, the perceived benefits of social media use may outweigh its costs and risks. Studies have shown that heightened political competition – measured by the electoral margin in the previous election – significantly increases the activity of national political actors (Williams and Gulati, 2013), as well as local political actors such as municipalities (Faber et al., 2020; Lameiras et al., 2018; Silva et al., 2019), local parties (Whitesell et al., 2023), and mayors of large cities (Szmigiel-Rawska et al., 2018). However, there is no conclusive evidence on how political competition affects the behavior of ordinary local politicians. Based on theoretical arguments and previous findings, we hypothesize that local politicians are more likely to use Facebook (H4.2a), be more active (H4.2b), and attract more followers (H4.2c) in municipalities where the last election was highly competitive, as indicated by a narrow margin of victory.

Additionally, local politicians may be politically influenced by their peers. If elected representatives observe that their colleagues are active on Facebook, they may feel compelled to establish a presence as well. The bandwagon effect is a well-documented explanation for politicians' social media engagement (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011; Klinger and Russmann, 2017). A study by Metag and Marcinkowski (2012) found that this effect exists primarily at the local level, influencing politicians' attitudes toward personal websites. In line with this theory, we hypothesize that politicians are more likely to use Facebook (H4.3a), be more active on the platform (H4.3b), and attract more followers (H4.3c) in municipalities where other politicians are already present on the site.

4.2.3. Contextual factors

Research on municipalities' social media use primarily focuses on how contextual, municipal-level factors influence activity, examining both municipality-related aspects (e.g., financial resources) and population characteristics (e.g., size, socio-demographic composition). While there is limited evidence on how these factors affect local politicians' Facebook activity, findings on local governments' social media engagement can inform hypotheses about social media use at the local political level.

One of the most frequently studied factors is municipality size. In smaller municipalities, alternative means of communication (e.g. informal channels, posters) are often sufficient, whereas in larger municipalities, mediatized communication becomes more necessary (Jacobs and Spierings, 2016). Additionally, the relative cost of maintaining an active social media presence is higher when targeting a smaller audience, as the time and effort required remain constant regardless of reach. Moreover, perceived indifference – reflected in lower engagement levels – may be more common in smaller municipalities, where local politicians address a smaller audience. The association between population size and social media use has been confirmed in studies on municipal Facebook activity (Faber et al., 2020; Guillamón et al., 2016; Lev-On and Steinfeld, 2015; Silva et al., 2019) and in early research on local government officials (Djerf-Pierre and Pierre, 2016). Based on these findings, we hypothesize that local politicians in larger municipalities are more likely to adopt Facebook (H4.4a), post more frequently (H4.4b), and attract more followers (H4.4c).

Although creating and maintaining a Facebook page is free, effective social media use requires time and effort, making available financial resources a potential determinant of political engagement online (Williams and Gulati, 2013). Wealthier municipalities may provide greater financial and human resources to elected officials, facilitating a more active and effective social media presence. Municipal revenues vary significantly, not only due to population size but also because of local tax revenues, which are tied to the strength of the local economy and residents' wealth. Interestingly, previous research has found no significant link between a municipality's financial strength and its social media activity (Silva et al., 2019). However, this may be because running a single, centrally managed municipal page – primarily for informational and representational purposes – requires minimal resources. The situation may be different for individual politicians, whose engagement on social media is often more resource intensive. Therefore, we expect that local politicians in wealthier municipalities are more likely to use Facebook (H4.5a), engage more actively (H4.5b), and attract more followers (H4.5c).

The demand side may also shape social media engagement. A population that is more familiar with social media may incentivize politicians to use these platforms. While the digital divide is narrowing, older generations remain less active on Facebook compared to younger users generations (Hunsaker and Hargittai, 2018). Accordingly, Faber et al. (2020) found that municipalities with a larger share of residents aged 20-64 tend to have more interactive Facebook pages. Thus, we hypothesize that in municipalities where older residents constitute a smaller proportion of the population, local politicians are more likely to use Facebook (H4.6a), post more actively (H4.6b), and attract more followers (H4.6c).

The general economic status of residents may also play a role, particularly as an indicator of the population's socio-cultural position. More privileged individuals tend to be more educated, more politically engaged, and more likely to use social media for news consumption, increasing the demand for locally relevant political information (Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018). Research on municipalities' social media engagement has yielded mixed results, with studies reporting positive (Lev-On and Steinfeld, 2015; for local parties see, Whitesell et al., 2022), negative (Guillamón et al., 2016), and insignificant (Silva et al., 2019) associations. Despite these inconsistencies, we hypothesize that local politicians in more affluent municipalities are more likely to use Facebook (H4.7a), post more frequently (H4.7b), and attract more followers (H4.7c).

4.2.4. Situational factors

By situational factors, we refer to the state of the local Facebook public – an aspect that remains largely unexplored in the local political context despite its theoretical significance. Local politicians do not operate in isolation; rather, they are embedded in a hybrid local political public sphere that encompasses both offline and online dimensions (see, Chadwick, 2017). As demonstrated in Chapter 3, the role of Facebook in local public life varies across municipalities: in some areas, it serves as a central space for community discussions, while in others, its relevance in local political discourse is marginal.
We hypothesize that local politicians' adoption of Facebook (H4.8a), activity levels (H4.8b), and follower counts (H4.8c) are linked to the development of the local Facebook public. The greater the platform's importance within a municipality, the stronger the incentive for local politicians to engage actively.

4.3. Data and methods

To answer our research questions and test our hypotheses, we used two different datasets. The first dataset, which records local politicians' Facebook presence and activity, is largely derived from the data collection process described in the previous chapter. A team of 21 undergraduate students conducted the mapping of each municipality, using a list of elected councilors and mayors for reference, along with precise search instructions. Based on these guidelines, they recorded whether a given politician had a public Facebook page and documented the page's URL. As with the full sample, the 84 cities with populations exceeding 15,000 were coded twice, and a research assistant reconciled any discrepancies. In total, we examined the Facebook presence of 16,351 councilors and 3,152 mayors across 3,152 municipalities. Through this process, we identified and recorded the Facebook pages of 330 mayors and 901 councilors. To measure local politicians' activity (i.e., the number of posts), we collected all posts published on these pages in the two years following the 2019 local elections (14/10/2019 - 12/10/2021) using CrowdTangle. Additionally, at the time of data collection, we recorded the number of followers on each politician's Facebook page.
To explain the differences in Facebook adoption (6.46 percent has a page), activity (M=357; SD=479), and proportion of followers within the population (M=0.25; SD=2.88), we used several individual- and municipality-level variables, some of which were already utilized in the previous chapter. The local political competitiveness is measured by the electoral margin, that is the vote difference between the first and second strongest candidates of the 2019 mayoral election (M=0.47; SD=0.37), based on the data of the National Election Office. Furthermore, we categorized the partisan leaning of the local actors, by identifying whether they are politicians of the governing party Fidesz (13.69 percent), the opposition coalition (an electoral alliance of opposition parties, the main opponent of the Fidesz) (3.84 percent), any other national party (2.22 percent), or whether they are independent or supported by a local organization (80.25 percent). The categorization is based on previously published works (Dobos, 2022; Kovarek and Littvay, 2022; László and Molnár, 2019).
Regarding the population size (M=5,354; SD=17,853), we used the data of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office for 2021, while we downloaded information on the population's age composition (the share of population between ages 15 and 64; M=0.66; SD=0.04), local government incomes (to measure the prosperity of the municipality, in 10 billion HUF; M=176; SD=706), and the per capita payroll taxes of the citizens (to measure the average level of income of the population, in 1 thousand HUF; M=1,341; SD=343) from the National Regional Development and Spatial Planning Information System (TEIR). In the descriptive analysis, we

used the same population-based classification of municipalities as in Chapter 3 (under 1000 residents=46 percent; 1000-4,999 residents = 38 percent; 5,000-9,999 residents = 6 percent; 10,000-19,999 residents = 5 percent; 20,000 residents = 5 percent).
To measure the development of the local Facebook public, we used the metric introduced in the previous chapter. As a reminder, this variable captures the number of per capita connections to Facebook storytelling agents by summing the total number of followers of public affairs pages and members of local groups within a municipality, then dividing this sum by the population size (M=1.27; SD=2.70). Note that the differences in the mean and standard deviations of variables used in both the previous chapter and this one are due to the differing units of analysis: in Chapter 3, the unit of analysis is individual municipalities, whereas here, individual politicians.
The second dataset used in this study originates from the research project "Return of the Councillors", an international collaborative initiative involving scholars from across Europe. This project collects survey data on the attitudes and behaviors of local political elites in various European countries. For this study, we incorporated a set of social media-related items into the survey, which focus on (1) the evaluation of the local public sphere, (2) the perception of social media's usefulness for voter communication, (3) the perceived importance of social media for specific predefined political goals, and (4) the role of national parties in pressuring local councilors to promote their party.

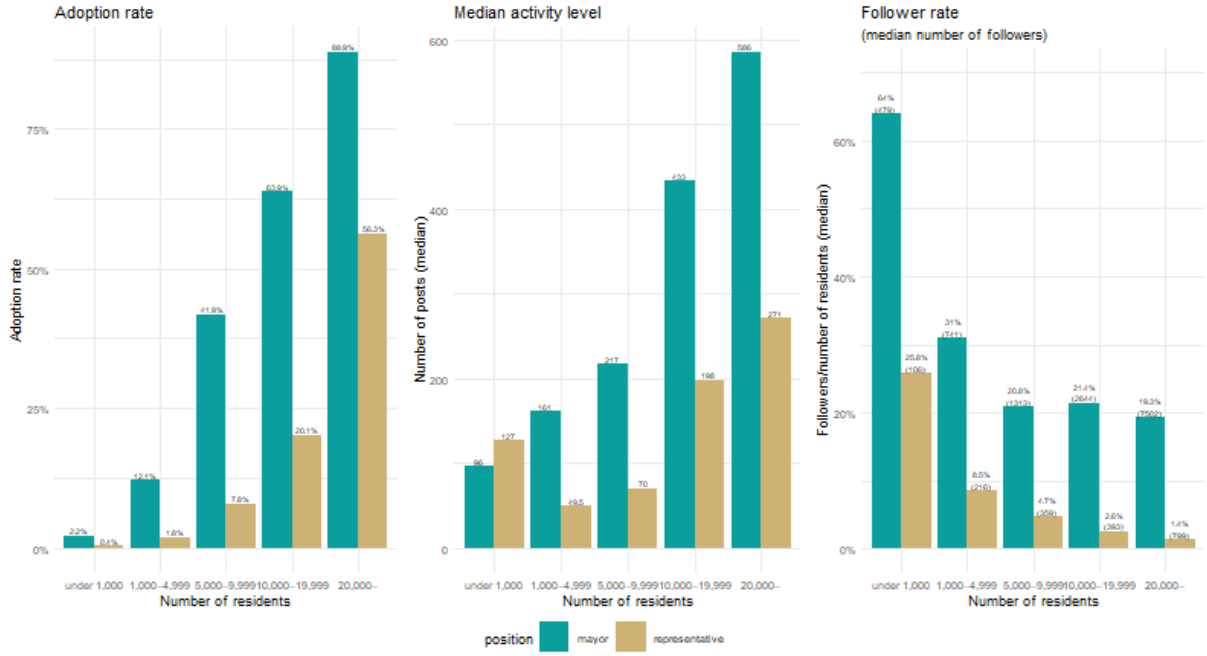
The survey was administered via the online platform Qualtrics using two distinct distribution methods. The preferred approach involved sending direct email invitations to councilors via their individual email addresses. For this, country-specific contact lists were compiled and uploaded to Qualtrics directories. When direct email distribution was not feasible, a collective survey approach was used. In these cases, a unique survey link was sent to each municipality's central contact address, along with a request to forward the invitation to all councilors within that municipality.
In the Hungarian case, a sample of 500 municipalities was selected from the total 3,177 entities (municipalities + districts of Budapest). The sample was drawn using a probability proportional to population size approach. The survey was conducted between 20 November and 23 December 2023, yielding responses from 745 councilors, with an overall completion rate of 17.9 percent. The distribution by municipality size indicates that councilors from larger municipalities are overrepresented in the sample (under 1000 residents=2 percent; 1000-4,999 residents = 24 percent; 5,000-9,999 residents = 14 percent; 10,000-19,999 residents = 27 percent; 20,000 residents = 34 percent).
The first part of the analysis presents descriptive insights into local politicians' social media activity and their perceptions of social media platforms. The second part examines the determinants of their social media usage patterns on our observational data. Regarding the modeling strategy, separate models were fitted to mayors and councilors. Since our three dependent variables have different properties, we need to apply different regression models. Adoption was measured as a dummy variable (1 = has a Facebook page); therefore, it was explained by the logit model. The number of posts is an overdispersed count variable that was analyzed with a negative binomial regression. The number of followers was measured as a proportion of the population size of a given municipality (number of followers/population size). We fitted a linear regression model to the logarithmically transformed version of this variable. Although there is only one mayor in each municipality, there are multiple council members; therefore, in the case of councilors, our data are nested. For this reason, a multilevel modeling strategy is used in models drawing upon councilor data with random intercepts at the municipality level, while the models based on the mayors' data are simple.

4.4. Findings

4.4.1. Descriptive results

In line with RQ4.1, we first provide a descriptive analysis of local politicians' Facebook presence, activity, and follower base. Our findings indicate a relationship between municipality size and Facebook adoption rates (Figure 4.1). Politicians in smaller communities are less active on Facebook, both in terms of having a Facebook page and posting frequency. The political elite of small villages is particularly underrepresented on Facebook. However, the adoption rate increases significantly in municipalities with more than 5,000 inhabitants, and among big city mayors, nine out of ten have a Facebook page. A notable difference emerges between mayors and councilors: across all population categories, mayors are far more likely to use Facebook and post more frequently than councilors. The only exception is found in the smallest villages, but in this category, only 25 councilors actively use Facebook, making broader generalizations difficult. These findings align with the strong mayoral system in Hungary, where mayors hold a central position in the local political sphere.

Figure 4.1. Adoption rate, median activity level, and follower rate of local politicians by population categories (2020-2022)



Overall, local politicians' Facebook activity levels are relatively low across all municipality sizes. Given that the study period covers 730 days, even mayors of large cities post, on average, less than once per day, while mayors of smaller communities typically post about once per week. Councilors are even less active, posting approximately once every three days in the largest municipalities.

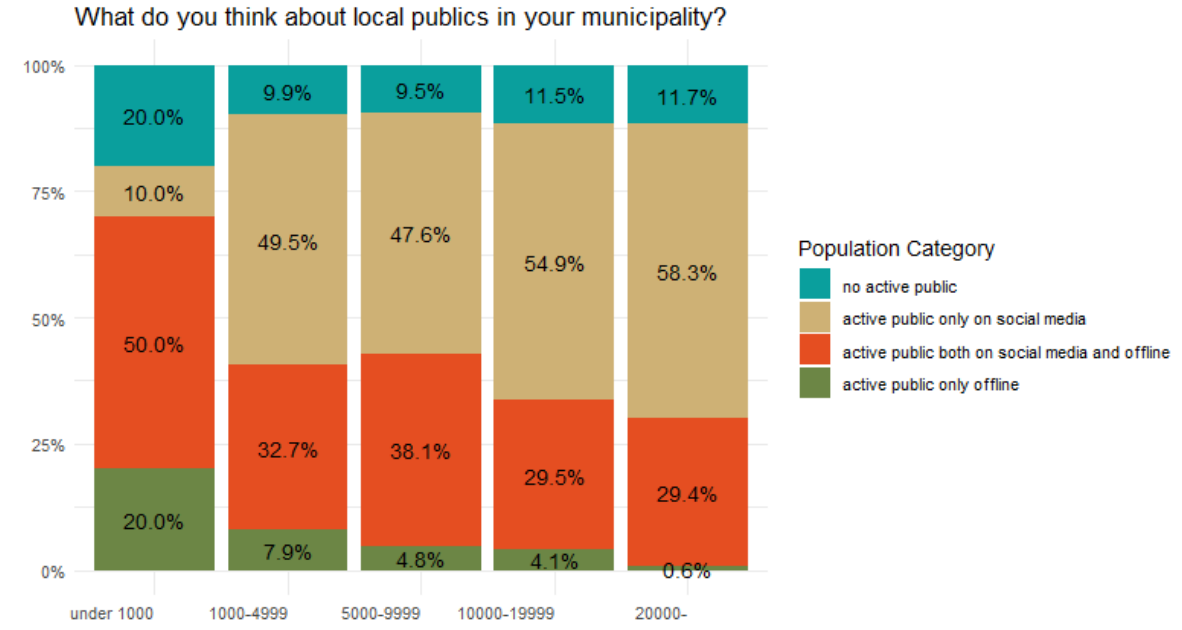
Our findings suggest that local politicians in smaller communities have greater reach among local citizens, as a higher proportion of residents follow them. On average, mayors of small villages are followed by two-thirds of the population, whereas this proportion drops to one-third in larger villages and one-fifth in towns and cities. Given this high follow rate, mayors' Facebook pages serve as key hubs of the local public sphere, comparable in influence to municipal pages and the largest local Facebook groups. In contrast, councilors' reach is

considerably lower – in municipalities with more than 5,000 inhabitants, they are typically followed by only 1-5 percent of the population.

Turning to councilors' perceptions, Figure 4.2 illustrates how they view the role of social media in their local public spheres. In the smallest municipalities, local politicians tend to perceive offline publicity as playing a significant role: 20 percent believe that only offline public discourse matters, while 50 percent consider both social media and offline publicity equally important. One-fifth of candidates in these areas believe there is no active local public sphere at all, and 10 percent think it exists exclusively on social media.

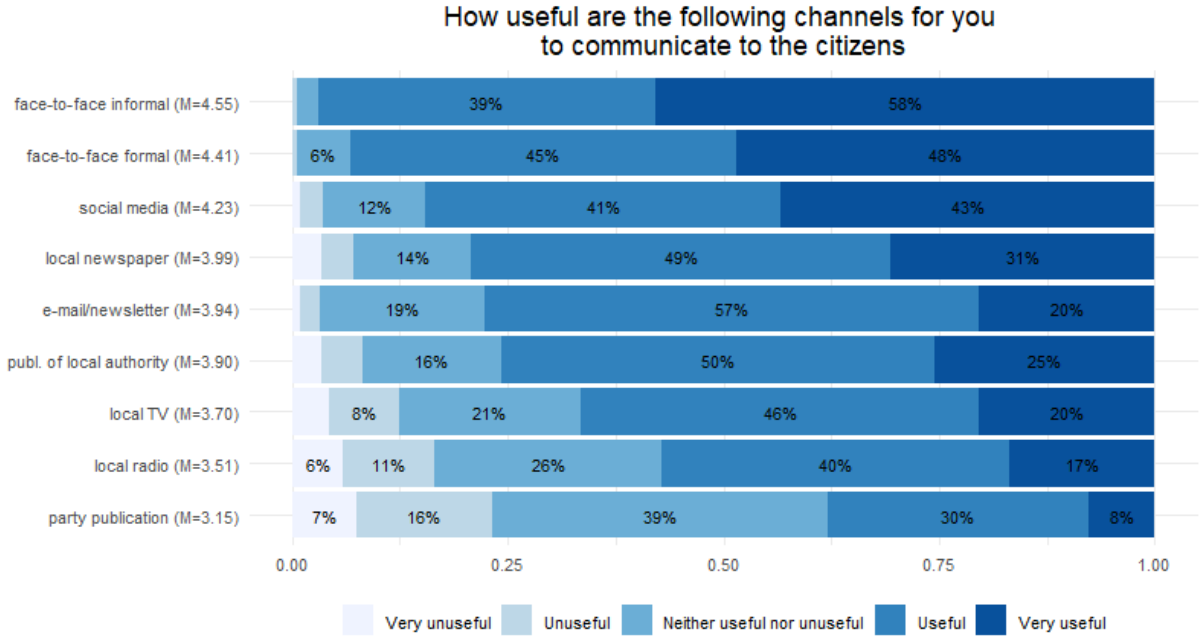
Across all other types of municipalities, a relative majority – nearly half in smaller municipalities and more than half in larger ones – believes that the local public sphere primarily exists on social media. Additionally, roughly one-third of councilors across different population categories consider both social media and offline public discourse important. In contrast, councilors who believe that only offline publicity is active are rare, particularly in larger municipalities. Around 10 percent of councilors in these larger municipalities report that no active local public sphere exists in their municipality. These findings clearly indicate that a significant proportion of local politicians attribute substantial importance to social media in shaping the local public sphere.

Figure 4.2. Local councilors' perceptions of the local public sphere by population categories



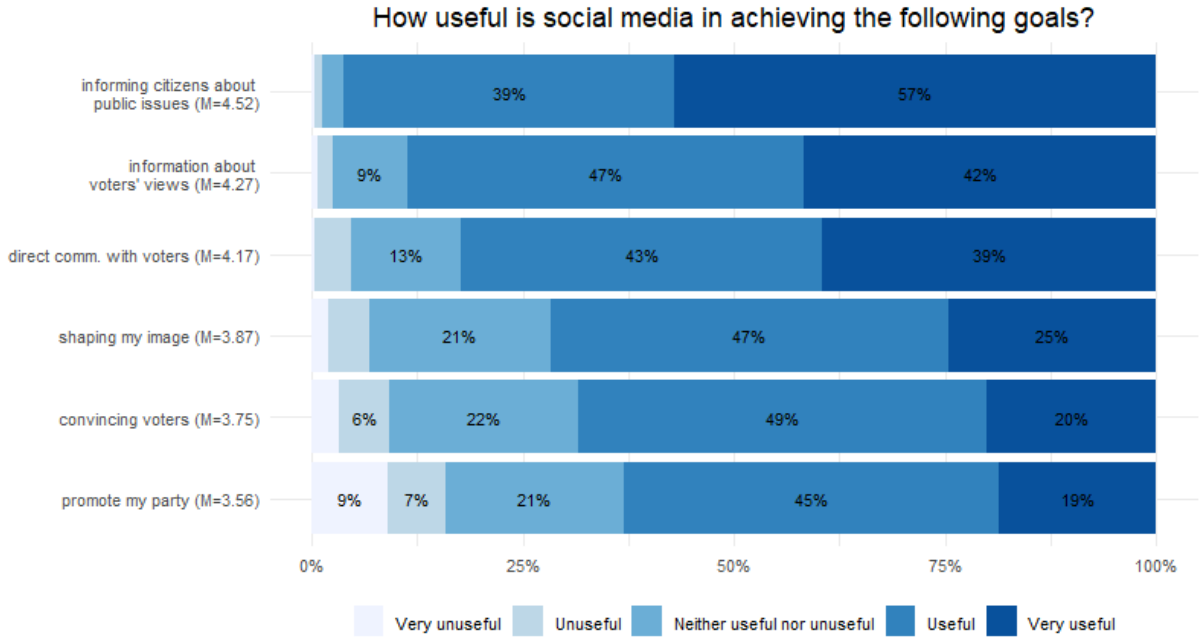
Accordingly, it is unsurprising that local politicians attribute significant importance to social media in their communication with citizens (Figure 4.3). The figure includes only responses from those who did not select the "I do not use it" option for each communication channel. Among councilors, 43 percent consider social media very useful for engaging with voters, while an additional 41 percent find it useful. Only 16 percent believe it does not play a significant role. The only communication methods perceived as more useful are informal and formal direct interactions with citizens. In contrast, communication through local media is seen as far less effective.

Figure 4.3. Local councilors' perceptions of the usefulness of different communication tools



Turning to RQ4.3, Figure 4.4 illustrates that politicians primarily consider social media important for informing voters, highlighting the key role of the information provision motive. A striking 96 percent of respondents find social media particularly useful for this purpose. Similarly, a large proportion (89 percent) view social media as a valuable tool for gathering insights into voter opinions. The motivation for direct communication with voters ranks slightly lower but is still widely recognized as beneficial. This is followed by its perceived usefulness for image shaping. Politicians consider social media the least useful for persuading voters and promoting their own party. However, it is important to note that a majority still view these platforms as more useful than not for these purposes.

Figure 4.4. Perceived usefulness of social media platforms for different purposes



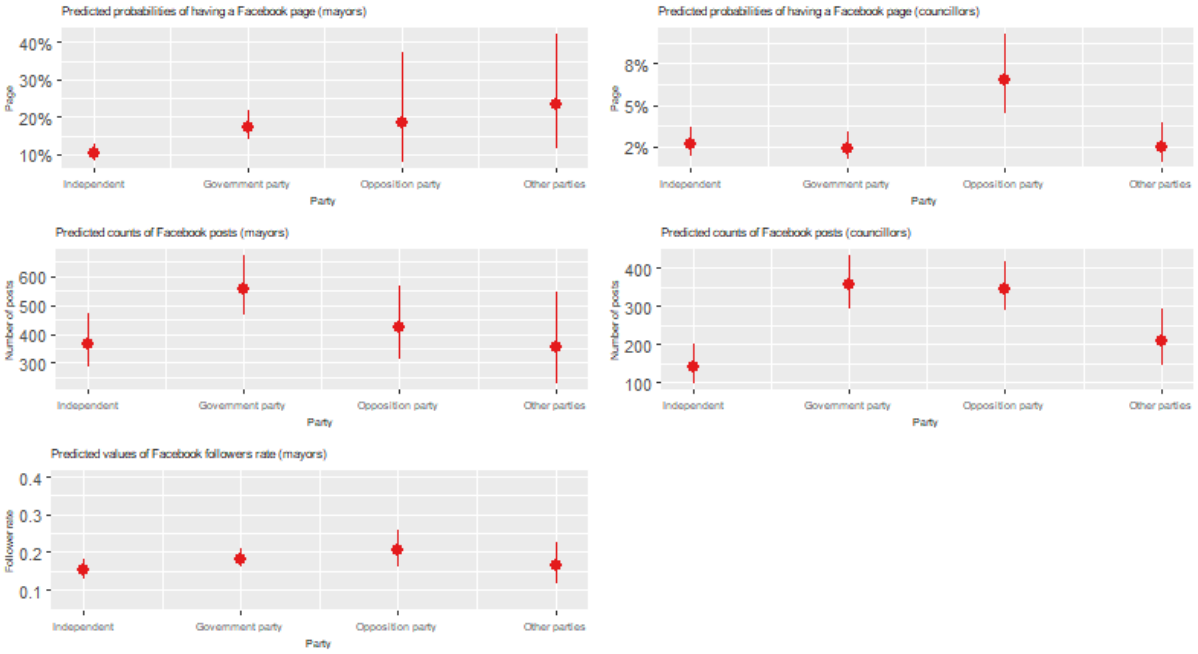
4.4.2. Explanatory analysis

Table 4.1 presents the findings of our regression models. As indicated by the (pseudo) R^2 values, most models exhibit substantial explanatory power, yet a significant portion of the variance remains unexplained. This unexplained variance is likely attributable to personal factors. The analysis of political factors reveals that party affiliation influences local politicians' Facebook-related attitudes (Figure 4.5). Controlling for all other factors, the probability of having a Facebook page is significantly higher for Fidesz-affiliated mayors (18 percent) compared to independent mayors (10 percent). While the probability for mayors from other national parties is similar to that of Fidesz-affiliated mayors (opposition mayors = 18 percent; other national party = 24 percent), the differences between these partisan and non-partisan mayors are not statistically significant. This is primarily due to the large confidence intervals, resulting from the small number of non-Fidesz-affiliated partisan mayors in the sample. Regarding activity levels, the predicted number of Facebook posts for Fidesz-affiliated mayors is 558, whereas for independent mayors it is 367. However, this difference is not statistically significant when compared to other partisan mayors (opposition = 422; other party = 353).

In contrast, the results for councilors present a different pattern. Opposition-affiliated councilors are more likely to have a Facebook page (7 percent) than both Fidesz-affiliated (2.4 percent) and independent representatives (2.7 percent). However, in terms of activity, both Fidesz and opposition-affiliated councilors are significantly more active than independents. Regarding followers, differences are less pronounced. While mayors from the two dominant political blocs (Fidesz and the opposition coalition) tend to have larger follower bases, no significant differences emerge in follower rates among partisan councilors.

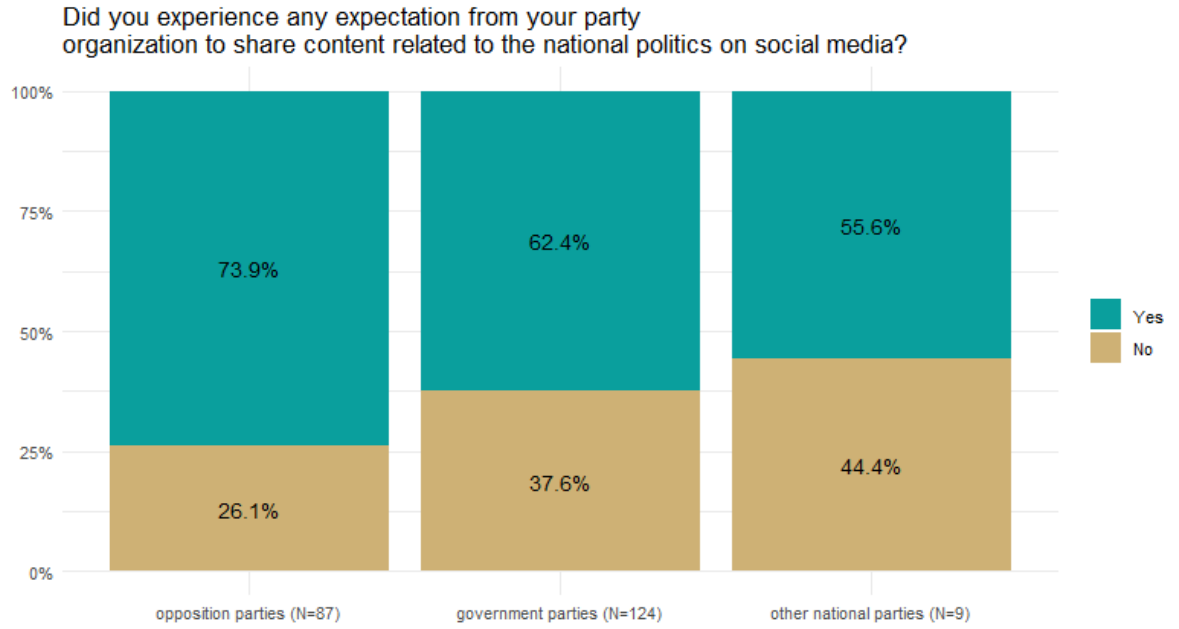
The H4.1 hypothesis can only be partially confirmed: while partisan affiliation influences politicians' social media activity, these effects vary by position and party. Fidesz-affiliated mayors exhibit higher adoption and follower rates compared to independents, and both Fidesz-affiliated mayors and councilors are more active. For opposition-affiliated mayors, the small sample size limits the robustness of the findings. However, opposition-affiliated councilors are more likely to have a Facebook page, post more frequently, and their mayors attract more followers than their independent counterparts. Among the two largest political blocs, the only significant difference is in councilors' adoption rates, with opposition representatives being more likely to create a Facebook page.

Figure 4.5. Predicted probabilities of local politicians' Facebook activities



When examining the role of national parties, it is also important to consider how councilors themselves perceive these expectations. The question presented in Figure 4.6 was asked exclusively to councilors supported by national parties. The results clearly indicate that national parties expect their representatives to promote national politics at the local level. Among opposition councilors, 74 percent reported such expectations from their parties, compared to 62 percent of governing party representatives and 56 percent of councilors affiliated with other parties.

Figure 4.6. Councilors' perceptions of expectations regarding the promotion of national parties



Based on our results, the intensity of the electoral contest clearly influences the adoption rate: local politicians in municipalities with a lower electoral margin in the 2019 election are more likely to have a Facebook page, supporting hypothesis H4.2a. However, the effect is not

substantial – a 10 percent decrease in the electoral margin increases the adoption rate by approximately 1.5 percent for mayors and 0.4 percent for councilors (compared to the average adoption rates of 10.5 percent and 5.5 percent, respectively). Notably, electoral margin does not impact other factors – politicians in more competitive local political environments are neither more active on Facebook nor do they have more followers. As a result, hypotheses H4.2b and H4.2c are rejected.

The analysis also found some evidence of the bandwagon effect. If at least one politician in the local government has a Facebook page, the mayor of that municipality is more likely to create one as well (probability without any local politician using Facebook: 11 percent; probability when a fellow politician has a page: 17 percent), and they tend to attract more followers. However, similar effects are not observed for councilors. In fact, the activity of councilors decreases when another politician – typically the mayor – has a Facebook page. This may be because mayors typically receive more visibility and hold a primary role in information dissemination. Thus, hypotheses H4.3a and H4.3c are supported for mayors but not for councilors, while hypothesis H4.3b is rejected.

Turning to contextual factors, our results indicate that population size has a significant impact on local social media communication. Mayors and councilors in larger municipalities are more likely to adopt and actively use Facebook, supporting hypotheses H4.4a and H4.4b. However, an inverse relationship is observed between population size and follower rate – politicians reach a higher proportion of residents in smaller communities, leading to the rejection of hypothesis H4.4c.

Other contextual factors produce mixed results. Mayors in wealthier municipalities tend to have more followers, but this effect does not extend to councilors (hypothesis H4.5c is supported for mayors but rejected for councilors). This discrepancy may stem from financial support for mayors' Facebook presence in wealthier municipalities, where they serve as the official "face" of the city. A more sophisticated online presence and advertising may attract more followers, whereas ordinary councilors do not receive similar backing. However, financial resources do not influence adoption or activity levels, leading to the rejection of hypotheses H4.5a and H4.5b.

The age composition of municipalities does not correlate with any of our dependent variables, resulting in the rejection of hypotheses H4.6a, H4.6b, and H4.6c. Meanwhile, higher citizen income positively affects councilors' adoption rates, although this effect is not observed among mayors (hypothesis H4.7a is supported for councilors but not for mayors). Interestingly, wealthier citizens are less likely to follow their mayor's Facebook page, but this factor has no significant impact in other models, leading to the rejection of hypotheses H4.7b and H4.7c.

Finally, the analysis of situational factors highlights that the intensity of the local Facebook public influences politicians' activity levels. In municipalities with a more extensive Facebook public, politicians are more likely to create a Facebook page, engage actively, and attract a larger audience. However, while this effect is significant for mayors, it does not hold for councilors in terms of follower rate (hypotheses H4.8a and H4.8b are supported, and H4.8c is supported for mayors but not for councilors).

Table 4.1. Regression models explaining local politicians' adoption of, activity, and follower rate on Facebook

	Adoption (mayor)[1]	**Adoption (counc.)[2]**	**Activity (mayor)[3]**	**Activity (counc.)[4]**	**Follower rate (log)[5] (mayor)**	**Follower rate (log)[6] (counc.)**
Predictors	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*	*Incidence Rate Ratios*	*Incidence Rate Ratios*	*Estimates*	*Estimates*

(Intercept)	0.00 *** (0.00)	0.00 *** (0.00)	2.44 (3.91)	24.63 (52.75)	3.12 ** (1.08)	4.56 ** (1.56)
Party: gov	1.83 *** (0.32)	0.90 (0.18)	1.52 ** (0.20)	2.53 *** (0.44)	0.18 * (0.09)	0.14 (0.14)
Party: opp.	1.95 (0.97)	2.52 *** (0.59)	1.15 (0.23)	2.47 *** (0.44)	0.30 * (0.15)	0.25 (0.15)
Party: other nat.	2.65 * (1.18)	0.93 (0.24)	0.96 (0.23)	1.47 (0.32)	0.08 (0.18)	-0.07 (0.17)
Electoral margin	0.34 *** (0.08)	0.29 *** (0.08)	0.73 (0.13)	0.86 (0.19)	0.14 (0.13)	-0.08 (0.17)
Fellow politicians on FB	1.65 * (0.34)	0.65 (0.21)	1.01 (0.14)	0.55 ** (0.12)	0.26 ** (0.10)	-0.11 (0.15)
Population size (log)	2.96 *** (0.30)	4.80 *** (0.70)	1.35 *** (0.09)	1.27 ** (0.12)	-0.50 *** (0.05)	-0.68 *** (0.07)
Age 15-65	0.01 (0.02)	0.00 (0.01)	19.28 (42.15)	0.23 (0.70)	-0.48 (1.49)	-2.06 (2.22)
Local gov. income	1.00 (0.00)	1.00 (0.00)	1.00 (0.00)	1.00 (0.00)	0.00 *** (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Pop. income	1.00 (0.00)	1.00 ** (0.00)	1.00 (0.00)	1.00 (0.00)	-0.00 ** (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Local FB public	1.08 *** (0.02)	1.10 *** (0.02)	1.10 *** (0.02)	1.04 ** (0.01)	0.15 *** (0.02)	0.04 (0.03)
Random Effects						
σ^2		3.29		0.71		0.98
τ_{00}		1.95 $_{place}$		0.19 $_{place}$		0.07 $_{place}$
ICC		0.37		0.21		0.07
N		3148 $_{place}$		225 $_{place}$		281 $_{place}$
Observations	3144	16348	282	803	322	906
R^2 Tjur	0.380	0.571 / 0.731	0.439	0.264 / 0.417	0.488 / 0.472	0.415 / 0.455

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; [1] logit-model; [2] multilevel logit-model with a random intercept on the level of municipalities; [3] negative binomial model; [4] multilevel negative binomial model with a random intercept on the level of municipalities; [5] OLS model; [6] multilevel linear model with a random intercept on the level of municipalities; for odds and incidence rate ratios values below 1 indicate a negative relationship; for OLS estimates negative relationships are indicated by a negative sign.

4.5. Conclusion

While social media is a fundamental tool for national political actors, our understanding of social media usage at the local level remains limited. Yet, advancing knowledge in this area is crucial, as local politicians' social media activities significantly influence the availability of local content on digital platforms, shaping the local information supply for citizens. This

chapter represents the first comprehensive attempt to explore the entire local political Facebook sphere of a single country, mapping politicians' social media usage beyond large cities.

We argued that the costs and benefits of social media use differ at the local level compared to the national level, given fewer available resources (Jacobs and Spierings, 2016) and an increased danger of interactivity (Mabillard et al., 2021; Thorson et al., 2020). Indeed, our findings confirm that social media usage among local politicians is far from universal, despite Facebook being widely and actively used by national politicians in Hungary for years (Bene and Farkas, 2022). Most local politicians – especially in smaller municipalities – do not operate public Facebook pages. At the same time, it is evident that local councilors recognize the significance of Facebook and consider it a valuable tool for various purposes, but they primarily see its role in information provision.

Our results also show that Facebook activity varies by political position and municipality size: politicians in larger communities and in more prominent roles (mayors vs. councilors) are more likely to use Facebook actively. In large cities, mayors exhibit adoption rates comparable to national politicians, whereas in municipalities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, social media communication is rare. Even in municipalities with 5,000-10,000 residents, the adoption rate does not exceed 50 percent, despite strong public demand for political engagement on social media in smaller municipalities. This demand is reflected in the high proportion of citizens following existing Facebook pages.

This insight is particularly important because of the widespread assumption that social media is universally adopted by political actors. However, our findings challenge this view, demonstrating that it is shaped by "methodological nationalism" (Chernilo, 2006). Subnational political contexts exhibit distinct patterns of social media use, even in a country with extremely high national-level adoption and activity rates (Bene and Farkas, 2022). This also means that many citizens – especially those outside major cities – primarily connect with national-level representatives on Facebook, which may shift their political focus away from local issues and toward national political processes.

In light of these patterns, we aimed to uncover the structural factors that shape the level of Facebook use by local-level elected politicians. The research concludes that different types of Facebook-related outcomes are explained by different factors; moreover, these factors also differ by political position. Based on our findings, the Facebook activity of local politicians is influenced by political, contextual, and situational factors as well. Political incentives are clearly important: both the observational data and the councilor survey suggest that being a member of a national party motivates local politicians to be more active, as they represent and popularize their political group at the local level. This motivation seems especially important for Fidesz-affiliated mayors, while in the case of opposition parties, the councilors are the more active actors. This can be explained by the specificities of the Hungarian context. The opposition is a broad coalition of several parties, and councilors usually represent different parties, whereas opposition mayors have to represent the entire coalition rather than an individual party. Therefore, opposition councilors may be motivated to actively represent their parties in the local public sphere. These findings suggest that national parties use and support their local representatives to reach voters at the level where they live (A. Schäfer, 2023).

The intensity of the electoral contest primarily affects entry costs, meaning that politicians in more contested arenas tend to create Facebook pages but are not necessarily motivated to be active after the election. This suggests that electoral competition may only be relevant in the context of campaigns. The study examines the first part of the electoral cycle when elected officials may not be highly concerned about their positions. Although local politicians clearly respond to the local electoral contest, the findings exclude the possibility that strong competition drives a permanent Facebook campaign. However, in an electoral situation, these

politicians can easily reactivate their existing social media infrastructure and conduct more intensive Facebook campaigns.

The presence of other politicians on Facebook also stimulates mayors' Facebook presence, indicating that mayors are sensitive to the local political context. This reflects a local "bandwagon" effect (Metag and Marcinkowski, 2012), but it is limited to mayors. Councilors are not affected by the Facebook presence of other politicians, perhaps because the "other" politician is usually the mayor, who operates at a different political level, where Facebook presence is more of a requirement than for councilors.

As noted earlier, the most influential contextual factor is population size. However, politicians in smaller municipalities have the comparative advantage of reaching a larger proportion of their population than their counterparts in larger communities. Mayors and councilors in larger municipalities face a more challenging situation: while they must use social media platforms to engage with constituents, relying solely on their central page is insufficient due to its limited reach. To effectively influence voters, city mayors and councilors need to complement their presence with other social media-based strategies (e.g., Facebook groups, targeted ads) or rely on offline communication channels.

The financial status of a municipality also plays a role, as better-funded local governments enable mayors to establish highly followed Facebook pages. Meanwhile, the extent of the local Facebook public is a crucial situational factor explaining politicians' activity. This suggests that, beyond national parties, local demand dynamics also motivate politicians to engage on social media. In municipalities with an active local social media environment, politicians are more likely to increase their presence, creating a self-reinforcing cycle. This also implies that local actors and citizens' activity can exert pressure on politicians to be visibly present in the local Facebook sphere, whereas low public engagement may discourage them from doing so.

If we accept the premise that local politicians' presence on Facebook is key to fostering a vibrant local digital public and providing citizens with locally relevant information, our findings indicate that this effect is strongest in larger municipalities, where national parties play a central role in local political life. This conclusion suggests that local public activity is largely driven by national political interests. Consequently, the local public sphere can be seen as a space for national party mobilization efforts, with local politicians acting as promoters of their national parties. In the next chapter, we will examine this proposition in greater detail.

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Chapter 5. Local Information Hubs or Partisan Promoters? A Longitudinal Investigation of Mayors' Communication Strategies on Facebook

Abstract

The chapter examines Hungarian mayors' strategic use of Facebook, exploring how they balance local informational roles, personal image-building, and partisan political mobilization. Utilizing a five-wave longitudinal content analysis of ninety-eight urban mayors' Facebook activity between 2020 and 2022, the study identifies distinct patterns in mayoral communication strategies. Findings indicate that mayors predominantly position their social media pages as local information hubs, primarily sharing original, locally relevant content. However, practical information provision is mostly crisis-driven, exemplified during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mayors prominently feature themselves in posts but typically avoid sharing personal details, employing mostly formal communication and exhibiting limited responsiveness to follower interactions. Importantly, the analysis reveals that mayors strategically engage with national politics, significantly increasing such content during national political mobilization periods like election campaigns. While engaging cautiously with divisive national issues, they frequently leverage shared content rather than original posts for national-level political communication.

The research underscores mayors' dual roles as local integrative figures and national political promoters, influenced by factors such as party affiliation and follower base size. It concludes by highlighting mayors' underutilization of digital communication opportunities for local community building and the nuanced nature of their involvement in national political mobilization.

5.1. Introduction

Social media platforms have become essential communication tools for mayors to stay connected with their constituents. Moreover, as demonstrated in the previous chapters, mayors' social media pages serve as central hubs for their respective local publics, and the communication that occurs on these platforms can significantly influence local political discourse. However, our understanding of how local political actors communicate on social media platforms remains limited. While the social media communication of national politicians has been extensively studied, only a handful of research efforts focus specifically on local political actors. (e.g. Sobaci and Karkin, 2013; Triantafillidou et al., 2018).

As discussed in Chapter 4, local politics is a fundamentally different field of political activity from national politics, particularly regarding the position of mayors. The activities of local politicians and mayors are more closely tied to the everyday experiences of voters, and local political issues are often not easily framed or understood through the same political discourses that dominate national debates (Das et al., 2022). Moreover, local politicians generally have fewer resources and are, therefore, less professional in their communication compared to their national counterparts (Bernhard and Dohle, 2015). Supporting this distinction, Das and colleagues (2022) demonstrated in a large-scale automated text analysis of a US sample that mayors' communication on Twitter differs significantly from that of members of Congress, while the two groups exhibit internal consistency in their communication styles. Consequently, the patterns observed in the social media communication of national political actors cannot be directly applied to local politicians (Kelm, 2020; Larsson and Skogerbø, 2018).

In our research, we assume that mayors possess a unique social media communication style shaped by their specific position in the political sphere. Their social media pages serve as focal points for their local publics and as valuable access points to ordinary voters. In addition, while

mayors represent the entire population of their municipality, many also represent specific national parties and their interests. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, political parties significantly motivate local politicians to use their pages to promote national party agendas. Accordingly, mayors use social media communication to achieve two primary goals. First, they seek to establish, maintain, and enhance their prominent status within the local public sphere. This visibility can increase their electoral support, as some evidence suggests that effective use of social media can yield electoral gains (Effing et al., 2016; Sobaci et al., 2016). Second, mayors may leverage their unique position and local reputation to promote national causes or actors. Doing so can bring personal benefits, such as career advancement within their party or party support for re-election, as well as community-level advantages, such as securing resources or funding ("pork-barrel politics") from national parties (Rosas and Lucardi, 2020; Ventura, 2021). From national actors' perspective, mayors' social media communication can effectively engage a politically heterogeneous and less-involved voter segment, which is critical in elections but challenging for national political actors to reach organically due to their more partisan and engaged follower bases (C. Fisher et al., 2019; Wojcieszak et al., 2022).

In this chapter, we examine how mayors navigate their social media communication in light of these conflicting motivations. To achieve this, we conducted a five-wave longitudinal manual content analysis, tracking the Facebook activity of 98 urban mayors between January 2020 and November 2022. In alignment with local considerations, we expect mayors to prioritize local information provision, community building, and personalization while avoiding divisive national political issues. This communication style can position their pages as essential integrative and informational hubs within the local public sphere, appealing to both supporters and non-supporters. However, we also anticipate that during periods of national political campaigns, mayors leverage their position and reputation in the local public sphere for national mobilization by temporarily increasing the prominence of national political messages and opinions.

We also expect that national-level content differs from local-level content in specific ways. We hypothesize that national-level messages are more impersonal than local messages, allowing mayors to distance such content from their personal identity.

Lastly, we expect the extent to which mayors focus on national-level politics to depend not only on timing but also on differences among mayors and municipalities. We hypothesize that mayors with national party support, larger support bases, and from larger municipalities are more likely to actively communicate about national-level politics. For mayors backed by national parties, re-election often depends significantly on maintaining their party's support. A larger support base may indicate that their dominant local position is relatively secure, giving them more freedom to adopt a divisive communication style. Furthermore, larger municipalities are generally more closely tied to party politics and national issues, making a national focus a less risky strategy in these contexts.

5.2. Toward a Mayoral Social Media Communication Style

As highlighted in Chapter 4, mayors can integrate various strategic considerations into their social media strategies. In this discussion, we argue that mayors strive to fulfill three roles that, while sometimes contradictory, can be reconciled through careful execution. First, to maintain and strengthen their position in the local social media public sphere, they aim to function as crucial informational hubs, thereby attracting even those who do not support them but have an interest in local issues. Second, the sympathy of voters drawn in for informational purposes is sought and sustained by presenting themselves as integrative personalities. This is achieved by emphasizing their personal traits and striving to appear approachable and accessible to their audience. Third, for strategic reasons, mayors must also assume the role of national political

promoters. They navigate this role in a manner that does not compromise their integrative function. The following sections explore these three roles and the hypotheses built around them in greater detail.

5.2.1. Mayors as local information hub

The prominent role of mayors in the local public sphere can be enhanced primarily by serving as an original and crucial information hub for local issues (e.g. Eom et al., 2023). This approach can motivate non-supporters and individuals with low political interest to follow their pages, as it provides them with locally relevant, first-hand information. The previous chapter demonstrated that representatives view information service as the primary goal of their social media use. Accordingly, we expect that mayors' communication strategies are also largely shaped by this priority, leading them to focus on enhancing the informational value of their pages.

To be a hub, be original

To fulfill this role, mayors must primarily offer original content rather than relying heavily on shared content, which positions them as mere information brokers. Due to the more limited resources available at the local level (see, Bernhard and Dohle, 2015), sharing links and second-hand content may seem like an attractive strategy, as it allows for a relatively low-effort yet active social media presence. Indeed, research has shown that local politicians often circulate second-hand content in their social media communication (Skogerbø and Krumsvik, 2015; Triantafillidou et al., 2018). However, while cost-effective, second-hand content alone is insufficient to establish a page as a critical information hub for the local public or to attract non-supporters. Therefore, we expect that mayors primarily communicate in an original way on their pages (H5.1a). Even when acting as information brokers by sharing external content or links, we anticipate that they complement these with their own contributions (H5.1b).

To be a hub, be informative

Additionally, this role suggests that mayors' social media communication is dominated by locally relevant information provision. Numerous studies have shown that national politicians often employ a top-down, information-centric broadcasting approach in their social media communication (e.g. Magin et al., 2017). This strategy has been criticized as inconsistent with the interactive and participatory nature of social media platforms and as failing to engage users effectively (Coleman, 2005; Stromer-Galley, 2014). However, at the local level, where information is more difficult to access due to the scarcity of information providers but has a direct impact on residents' daily lives (Holman and Lay, 2021), mayors' ability to deliver locally relevant information may be highly valued. Effectively fulfilling this function can significantly bolster mayors' prominent position in their local public spheres, as the primary motivation for non-supporters and less politically involved residents to follow their mayors is often direct and immediate access to important local information. The limited research available supports this idea, showing that local politicians tend to focus on information provision in their social media communication, using their pages as bulletin boards (Sobaci and Karkin, 2013; Triantafillidou et al., 2018). Additionally, local politicians often perceive social media primarily as a tool for providing information services (Bjørnå et al., 2022; Firmstone and Coleman, 2015; Heaselgrave and Simmons, 2016), a finding that was also confirmed in Chapter 4.
However, information can take different forms. Practical and widely applicable information that directly impacts residents (see, Triantafillidou et al., 2018) can be extremely valuable to

followers and may motivate even non-supporters to follow mayors. Other types of informational content may focus on aspects of local community life, such as events, developments, or sports achievements (Sobaci and Karkin, 2013). While the practical utility of this content is more limited, it can play a crucial role in community building and fostering a sense of belonging by keeping residents informed about the latest developments in their community. Accordingly, we hypothesize that both practical information (H5.2a) and community-building information (H5.2b) will be extensively used in mayors' social media communication.

5.2.2. Mayors as integrative personalities

Mayors can also use their social media communication to cultivate the image of an approachable, integrative, and personal leader. As discussed in the previous chapter, research has demonstrated that impression management is one of the key purposes of political actors' social media use (e.g. Hoffmann and Suphan, 2017; Jackson and Lilleker, 2011). Strategically, combining the role of an informational hub with an integrative and personal image can be particularly effective. This approach allows mayors to shape the impressions of non-supporters who follow their pages primarily for informational purposes.

Personalization in mayors' communication

A personal image requires mayors to regularly share aspects of their lives and personal environments on their pages. The literature on personalization commonly differentiates two dimensions of personalized communication: individualization, which centers political matters around the individual political actor, and privatization, which involves presenting non-political aspects of their background, such as family or hobbies (Van Aelst et al., 2012). Personalized communication has long been a focus of research on political social media use, showing that political actors frequently highlight their individuality and personal lives (e.g. Farkas and Bene, 2021; Metz et al., 2020). However, research at the local level remains limited, but Triantafillidou and colleagues (2018) found that Greek mayors significantly emphasize both private and political personalization in their social media communication. Based on these findings, we expect mayors to bring their personality closer to their followers by placing their political persona at the forefront of their communication (H5.3a) and by frequently referencing their personal background (H5.3b).

„I'm here with you, I hear you": Being approachable

An approachable impression of mayors can be highly attractive to followers, particularly in the more personal and densely connected local public sphere (see, Burai et al., 2024). Social Presence Theory posits that the more a communication activity resembles a genuine interpersonal interaction, the closer individuals feel to one another (Short, 1976). An impression of approachability can be conveyed by directly appealing to followers. While these appeals may not constitute genuine interactions, they can make the message feel more personal. In Hungarian, formal and informal modes of direct appeal are clearly distinguished grammatically. Informal appeals can make a message feel much more personal and align well with the casual style of social media communication. However, they may conflict with traditional norms of courtesy, which favor formal communication between individuals who are not personally acquainted. Overall, we expect that mayors frequently use direct appeals in their social media communication (H5.4). We also examine the formal and informal nature of these appeals. Since

both forms personalize the communication, we do not hypothesize which is more prevalent in mayors' communication.

Nonetheless, approachability does not need to remain an impression alone. Social media platforms enable political actors to directly and publicly interact with followers by responding to their comments. Interactivity between political actors and users is a prominent topic in the literature on social media and politics, originating from early techno-optimistic ideas about revitalizing representation through elite-citizen exchanges (Coleman, 2005). On a national level, however, empirical research has shown that political actors rarely interact directly with citizens; instead, their social media activity often provides only the facade of interactivity (Magin et al., 2017; Stromer-Galley, 2014). One reason for this is that, at the national level, the sheer volume of citizen input makes adopting an interactive communication approach highly challenging (Kalsnes, 2016). In contrast, at the local level, the volume of follower comments is typically much smaller and more manageable. Furthermore, the personal nature of local publics may exert stronger pressure on mayors to engage in responsive behavior (Burai et al., 2024).

Indeed, interactivity between local politicians and residents is one of the most widely discussed topics in this niche literature. On one hand, Larsson and Skogerbø (2018) found that local political actors consider direct interactions with their electorate to be the most important aspect of social media communication. Similarly, Eom and colleagues (2023) argued that mayors' centrality can be enhanced by using their social media pages to act as brokers between local authorities and citizens. On the other hand, interview-based evidence suggests that a lack of resources and skills often serves as a barrier to interactive behavior (Firmstone and Coleman, 2015; Heaselgrave and Simmons, 2016). Many local politicians also avoid interactions due to the intense negativity and uncivil nature of local publics (Bjørnå et al., 2022; Thorson et al., 2020). Observational studies similarly indicate limited willingness among local politicians to respond to comments (Sobaci and Karkin, 2013; Triantafillidou et al., 2018). Accordingly, we hypothesize that mayors will occasionally respond to comments to reinforce their approachable image, which may help attract followers beyond their core supporters (H5.5).

5.2.3. Mayors as local promoters of national causes

Lastly, mayors can leverage their prominent role in the local public sphere to advocate for national political actors and causes. Although there is limited evidence in the literature that national politics occasionally surface in mayors' social media communication (Skogerbø and Krumsvik, 2015; Thorson et al., 2020), little attention has been paid to the extent to which mayors leverage their local social media reputations for national-level political activities. As a result, we lack empirical knowledge on whether national politics infiltrate the local public sphere through mayors' social media communication.

As shown in Chapter 4, one important motivation for mayors' social media communication could be the local promotion of national-level political actors and causes. Locally embedded political mobilization for national causes is an effective campaign strategy, as suggested by the concept of localized campaigning (e.g. Karlsen and Skogerbø, 2015). Mayors can play a key role in this mobilization process. For instance, some research highlights the effects of reverse coattails, whereby national political actors perform better electorally in municipalities where the mayor belongs to the same party. This phenomenon is attributed to the informational and reputational resources associated with the mayor's position (Ames, 1994; Ventura, 2021). While this association can stem from the direct support or mobilization efforts of a mayor deeply rooted in the local community, this aspect is rarely explored in the literature. (see, however, Rosas and Lucardi, 2020; Ventura, 2021).

However, we can reasonably assume that the role of mayors in national-level mobilization is even more significant in the context of social media. The unique position of their social media

pages, as discussed earlier, makes them highly valuable political resources for national-level mobilization and persuasion efforts. National political pages are typically followed by individuals who are highly interested in politics and already supportive of the respective political actors (C. Fisher et al., 2019; Wojcieszak et al., 2022). Consequently, reaching less engaged and less politically interested voters – who often play a decisive role in elections (Le Pennec and Pons, 2023) – is more challenging on these platforms. While these voters can be targeted through sponsored posts, this method is rather impersonal and has limited effectiveness (Haenschen, 2023). Alternatively, peer mediation via followers' engagement with posts offers a more personal way to reach non-followers. However, since followers tend to respond more to partisan and negative content, this approach may deter less engaged and interested voters (Bene, 2025). In contrast, mayors' broad and heterogeneous follower base, as demonstrated in Chapter 2 – including non-supporters and less politically engaged voters – along with their local reputation, provides an invaluable tool for national politics.

Mayors may also be motivated to support the electoral fortunes of specific national political actors. Many mayors are party members or have been explicitly nominated or supported by national parties (Ennser-Jedenastik and Hansen, 2013) . This connection can be crucial for their re-election prospects, as local voting behavior is largely influenced by national-level political attitudes, a phenomenon known as the nationalization of political behavior (Hopkins, 2018). Furthermore, parties can provide financial support for mayors' campaigns. At the same time, national parties may expect reciprocal support during the mayor's term in office. This expectation could be a condition for continued party backing. Nonetheless, it is not only party-affiliated mayors who can benefit from supporting national political actors. Ventura (2021) demonstrated in a Brazilian context that mayors who align with national actors often gain access to more "pork" – direct financial resources controlled by national elites. These resources and the developments they enable can significantly enhance mayors' re-election prospects.

Meanwhile, it is important to recognize that the role of local promoters of national causes conflicts with the integrative function of mayors and the unique dynamics of local politics, which operate differently from those at the national level (Das et al., 2022). By aligning themselves with national political divisions and tensions, mayors risk alienating their heterogeneous follower base, which is likely divided along these lines. However, effectively reconciling these conflicting roles is crucial not only for mayors but also for national political actors. The valuable reputation and broad reach of mayors' social media presence stem from their integrative and informational approach, making it vital to preserve this balance. Rosas and Lucardi (2020) argue that mayors make rational calculations about whether to engage in national-level political activity, carefully considering the context. Therefore, we expect that the presence of national politics in mayors' social media communication is contextually conditioned, influencing who communicates national issues, as well as when and how they do so.

5.2.4. Resolving the integrative personality vs. national promoter dilemma

First, we hypothesize that the primary reconciliation strategy is to limit discussions of national political issues to specific key periods when national political mobilization is critical. During normal periods, national politics is likely to play a marginal role in mayors' social media communication. However, in contexts where parties are actively mobilizing voters for national political activities – such as campaigns or protests – mayors are expected to "activate" their partisan promoter role and increase their focus on national issues. If this role is confined to a few specific short periods, their integrative function remains largely intact, as the majority of their communication continues to focus on locally relevant issues. Accordingly, we hypothesize that national issues will be marginal during "normal" periods but will significantly increase in

prominence during national mobilization periods (H5.6a). We attempt to capture the same tendency in other dimensions of national politics, such as the presence of national politicians (H5.6b) and national parties (H5.6c) and explicit calls for national-level political actions (H5.6d), expecting that they also appear more frequently in mayors' communication during mobilization periods.

Another way to reconcile these roles is by addressing national politics in a less divisive and more personal manner. National political discourse often revolves around highly divisive issues and values, which allow actors and voters to distinguish themselves from opposing political blocs (e.g. Woods et al., 2023). However, mayors are likely motivated to communicate about national politics in a less divisive manner to accommodate their heterogeneous support base. Therefore, we hypothesize that divisive issues and values will rarely appear in mayors' communication (H5.7a). Even when such issues are referenced, we expect mayors to limit their discussions to national political contexts, avoiding the infusion of these divisive topics into local political discourse (H5.7b).

An alternative approach to balancing the conflicting roles is for national politics to appear in mayors' communications in a less personal manner, detached from their carefully managed social media persona. Accordingly, we hypothesize that posts about national politics are more likely to consist of shared content without personal commentary (H5.8a), and the mayor is less likely to appear or be mentioned in these posts (H5.8b). Additionally, we expect that comments on these posts will be ignored more frequently compared to locally focused posts (H5.8c).

Since mayors consider their own contexts when deciding whether to address national politics (Rosas and Lucardi, 2020), we expect that both mayor- and community-level differences play a role in this regard. Based on our theoretical framework, we hypothesize that party-supported mayors are more likely to focus on national politics because they aim to maintain their parties' support for future campaigns (H5.9). In fact, parties may endorse these mayors specifically to leverage local resources for their national ambitions, directly expecting them to fulfill this local promoter role. This partisan motivation is supported by Chapter 4, which shows that party-supported mayors are more likely to use Facebook as a communication tool.

If, as suggested by Rosas and Lucardi (2020), mayors make decisions based on cost-benefit calculations, we can argue that mayors with larger follower bases face lower costs when engaging in national-level activities compared to those with smaller audiences. Prominent mayors with strong local followings face less risk in occasionally posting national content. Conversely, less embedded mayors may prioritize strategies aimed at growing their follower base while avoiding actions that could alienate local users, which would increase the perceived costs of discussing national-focused topics. Therefore, we hypothesize that mayors followed by a larger proportion of their population are more likely to post national content than those with fewer followers (H5.10).

Finally, the characteristics of the municipality itself may also be an important contextual factor. Larger municipalities and those with higher administrative status are often less densely connected and exhibit political and public life more aligned with national political divisions (e.g. Dodeigne et al., 2021). This explains why partisan mayors are more common in such municipalities. Given their closer ties to and greater integration into national politics, we hypothesize that discussing national issues on social media is less risky for mayors in larger and administratively higher-status municipalities. Accordingly, we hypothesize that both municipality size (H5.11a) and administrative status (H5.11b) are positively associated with the presence of national-level content in mayors' social media communication.

5.3. Methods

We conducted a five-wave longitudinal manual content analysis of Hungarian mayors' Facebook communication to test our hypotheses. Our focus was exclusively on Facebook because Chapter 2 identified it as the only social media platform of significant relevance to local politics in Hungary, a pattern also observed in other contexts (Bjørnå et al., 2022; Larsson and Skogerbø, 2018; Thorson et al., 2020). Despite this, the few existing content analysis research in this field has focused on Twitter (Sobaci and Karkin, 2013; Triantafillidou et al., 2018).

5.3.1. Sample

Our research focused on the communication of 98 mayors across five waves between January 2020 and November 2022. The sample was based on an imbalanced stratified design, including mayors from all districts of Budapest, the capital city (N=23); cities with county rights (cities) (N=23); and a random sample of mayors from ordinary cities (towns) (N=54). This approach was chosen because a purely random sample would predominantly include mayors from towns due to their larger numbers, leaving districts and cities underrepresented. Consequently, while the sample is not representative of all Hungarian mayors, it accurately reflects these three sub-categories. For this reason, descriptive analyses were conducted separately for each municipality type. Additionally, since Chapter 4 revealed that mayors' Facebook use is highly limited in villages, this municipality type was excluded from the analysis.

Initially, we aimed to include 100 mayors in total. However, one district mayor was excluded due to the absence of a Facebook page. Another mayor from a city, who also served as a prime ministerial candidate during the research period, was removed from the sample because his activity predominantly focused on national politics. These adjustments resulted in a final sample of 98 mayors.

The research spanned five distinct waves, capturing periods both within and beyond national political campaigns. This included two specific national campaign periods: a national election campaign and a separate timeframe with significant national-level political mobilizations. For each period, all Facebook posts from the sampled mayors were collected, and a random subset of posts was analyzed. Most posts were downloaded using CrowdTangle, a research tool owned by Meta. For Wave 1 and for mayors whose posts were not accessible via CrowdTangle, we used the Facepager application (Jünger and Keyling, 2019). During shorter periods (Waves 2, 3, and 4), 15 posts per mayor were included, while in the longer periods (Waves 1 and 5), 30 posts per mayor were analyzed. Due to variations in post frequency and sample size across waves, descriptive analyses were performed separately for each wave. The waves and their technical details are discussed as follows:

Wave 1 (1 January 2020 - 30 June 2020): The local elections took place in October 2019; therefore, this half-year period covers the early months of the newly elected municipality councils. There was no major national mobilization event during this time, making it a relatively "normal" period politically. However, the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic occurred during this period. The pandemic became a significant topic starting in February, and the state of national emergency was declared on 11 March; thus, much of this period revolved around the crisis. This sample includes 2,938 posts from 98 mayors. This is the only wave where numerous coders, 14 in total, worked on the data since the data collection was conducted within a research seminar.

Wave 2 (1 September 2021 - 23 October 2021): This was a turbulent and unique period in national politics, marked by several national mobilization activities over one and a half months, involving significant public participation. The first national primary in the opposition camp occurred between 18-28 September (first round) and 10-16 October (second round), with over 500,000 participants in each round. In response, the governing parties launched a petition

against opposition politicians on 1 September, reportedly signed by over 1 million people by early October[9]. Lastly, on 23 October, Hungary's national day, two major political protests took place in Budapest: a pro-government "Peace March" with approximately 70,000 participants and a smaller opposition protest with 5,000-6,000 attendees. This period was characterized by strong mobilization efforts from both the opposition and the government, with campaigns, primaries, and signature collections conducted across the country. We identified 80 mayors from our Wave 1 sample who posted at least 15 posts during this period, and 15 posts were randomly selected for each mayor. After removing 9 posts, this sample contained 1,191 posts. Two coders, both involved in Wave 1, coded all posts.

Wave 3 (24 October 2021 - 31 December 2021): This wave represents the in-between period between two national mobilization phases. It comes immediately after the heightened period of the primary, the petition, and the protest events, and represents the final months before the launch of the election campaign. While the opposition's prime ministerial candidate had already been elected, the upcoming election was a central topic in public discourse, though major mobilization efforts had yet to begin. We identified 86 mayors who posted at least 15 posts during this period, and, after removing 2 posts, this sample included 1,298 posts. The same coders from Wave 2 coded these posts.

Wave 4 (12 February 2022 - 03 April 2022): This wave corresponds to the official campaign period of the 2022 General Elections. The electoral turnout was notably high at 69.6 percent, marking the third-highest participation since the regime change. During this period, 80 mayors were identified as having posted at least 15 posts each. After removing 12 posts, the final sample consisted of 1,188 posts. One coder who was involved in Waves 1-3 coded all the posts.

Wave 5 (01 May 2022 - 01 November 2022): The first six months following the general election saw national mobilization efforts drop to negligible levels due to the absence of significant national events. In this sense, this period represents the "most normal" wave in our sample. Given the extended duration of this wave, we included mayors who posted at least 30 posts during this period. After the removal of 12 posts, the final sample consisted of 2,538 posts from 85 mayors. Three coders coded all posts: one coder who was involved in Waves 1-3 and two newly recruited students.

5.3.2. Variables

We coded the entire content of the posts; however, for videos, only the first minute was considered.

Regarding the *originality of the posts*, we recorded whether the given post was: (a) a shared content without any contribution from the mayor, such as links without notes or shared posts; (b) a shared content with an original contribution from the mayor; or (c) entirely original content without any external material. For *shared content*, we also recorded its source, categorizing it as:(a) a local news site; (b) a national news site; (c) the mayor's own party; (d) another party; (e) another politician; (f) a government site; (g) the municipality's page; (h) another user's post; or (i) other sources.

We further examined the presence of various *topics* in the mayors' communication. These topics were not mutually exclusive categories; therefore, for each post, we recorded whether or not a given topic was present. In line with H5.2a, one variable focused on *practical information*, coded when posts included information directly affecting the everyday lives of locals, such as

[9] https://hvg.hu/itthon/20211003_hollik_istvan_stop_gyurcsany_stop_karacsony_peticio. It could be signed until the end of October, but no information is available on the final number of signatures, as it remained relevant only during the opposition primary. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that the online platform used for collecting signatures is highly susceptible to manipulation, leading to the reported numbers being widely questioned and not generally accepted.

public announcements, traffic changes, or practical details about public institutions. Additionally, we recorded whether posts contained any *COVID-related information* that could have been useful during the pandemic, which predominantly characterized Wave 1 but was present throughout the entire research period. We also coded types of information that, while less practically relevant, could contribute to community-building efforts. Accordingly, we recorded whether posts included information about: (a) any type of local *developments*; (b) *celebratory content*, where the mayor reported on local celebrations, award-giving ceremonies, or commemorations; or (c) *sports* events or achievements. Furthermore, we recorded whether posts addressed *party politics*, including comments on or presentations of local or national parties. In relation to H5.3b, we also noted whether posts focused on the *personal* background of the mayors, such as their families, hobbies, or personal events.

We also recorded if the *mayor* or any *national political actors* are explicitly mentioned or presented in the posts.

We also examined direct appeals in the posts. We coded whether the post included any: (a) *formal* appeals; or (b) *informal* appeals. From this, we created a four-category variable with the following categories: no appeal, formal appeal, informal appeal, and mixed appeals. To measure *responsiveness*, each post was classified based on a four-category variable. The first category included posts without comments, the second included posts with comments but without responses from the mayor, the third indicated a low level of responsiveness (when at least one and at most three comments were replied to), and the fourth indicated a high level of responsiveness (when more than three comments were answered).

Turning to the spatial aspect, we also recorded the presence of local and national references. When a post refers to *local issues* in a broader sense, including the region and county of the municipality, we coded the presence of a local focus. When the post's spatial focus extends beyond the region, it was coded as *national*. From these two items, we created a four-category variable, distinguishing posts as exclusively national, exclusively local, mixed, or without local and national focus.

To gain deeper insight into the presence of national politics, we also considered whether any *national parties* were mentioned or shown (e.g., by their symbols) in the post. Additionally, we coded the presence of topics and values that are divisive and widely discussed in Hungarian national politics. We recorded references to: (a) *LGBTQ/gender* issues; (b) *ethnic minorities in neighboring countries*; (c) *family* as a political value; (d) *national identity*; (e) *environment* and climate change; (f) *EU- and Western*-orientation; or (g) *immigration*. Lastly, we recorded whether the post included any direct calls for: (a) *national activities*; or (b) *local activities* as a mobilization appeal. However, this variable was not included in Wave 1.

For the multivariable analysis, we also utilized several mayor- and municipality-level variables. At the mayor level, we categorized mayors by their *party affiliation* and the size of their follower base relative to the municipality's population. Based on the parties that explicitly support mayors, we categorized them as: (a) pro-government; (b) opposition; or (c) non-partisan/independent mayors. The *size of the follower base* was calculated by dividing the number of followers by the population size of the municipality. Lastly, *population size* was included as a municipality-level variable.

5.3.3. Inter-coder reliability

To test the reliability of our coding scheme, we conducted three rounds of intercoder reliability tests: one for the first wave involving 14 coders, one for Waves 2-4 involving the same two coders, and one for Wave 5, which included three coders. Due to a technical error, the variable call for national and local political actions, which was also used in Waves 2-4, was omitted from the intercoder test for those waves and could not be reliably tested later. However, for Wave 5,

appropriate Brennan-Prediger Kappa values were obtained for these variables, and one of the coders from Waves 2-4 was also part of the Wave 5 team. Additionally, it is evident that the Brennan-Prediger Kappa values were typically higher in Waves 2-4 compared to Wave 5, and for no variable did the value fall below 0.7. This gives us reason to believe that these variables performed well in Wave 5 and were likely reliable in Waves 2-4 as well.
In most waves, we were able to measure the majority of the variables at a reliable level. However, there are a few exceptions that must be considered during the analysis (Table 5.1). These are highlighted in bold in the table: the representation of the mayor's persona in Wave 1, as well as the identification of informal appeals and responsiveness in Wave 5, were only measured at a low reliability level.

Table 5.1. Brennan-Prediger kappa values by variables in our three inter-coder tests

	Wave 1	Wave 2-4	Wave 5
Originality of the posts	.60	.79	.85
Type of shared content	.65	.95	.70
Practical information	.71	.91	.73
COVID-related information	.81	.91	.99
Local developments	.74	.93	.92
Celebratory content	.71	.74	.84
Sport	.93	.98	.93
Party politics	.76	.89	.78
Personal background	.86	.89	.96
Mayor in the post	**.50**	.80	.76
National political actors in the post	.74	.91	.84
Formal appeal	.72	.89	.71
Informal appeal	.79	.89	**.51**
responsiveness	.68	.96	**.48**
Local focus	.81	.76	.68
National focus	.60	.72	.56
National party reference	.76	.89	.78
LGBTQ/gender	1	1	1
Ethnic minority	.87	.91	.78
Family	.84	.96	.98
National identity	.74	.80	.87
Environment	.90	.93	.92
EU/Western orientation	.85	.85	.97
Immigration	.96	.96	.91
Call for national act.		missing	.85
Call for local act.		missing	.68
No of posts	*95*	*92*	*101*
No of coders	*14*	*2*	*3*

5.3.4. Analysis strategy

H5.1-H5.7a are tested through a descriptive analysis of the proportion of the respective content elements in mayors' communication, presented separately by waves and municipalities. We frequently discuss which differences are significant. In such cases, we compare proportions using a z-test, considering a difference significant if the p-value of the respective test is smaller than 0.05.
To examine which content-, page-, and municipality-level factors are associated with national content in mayors' communication, we ran several logistic regression models predicting the

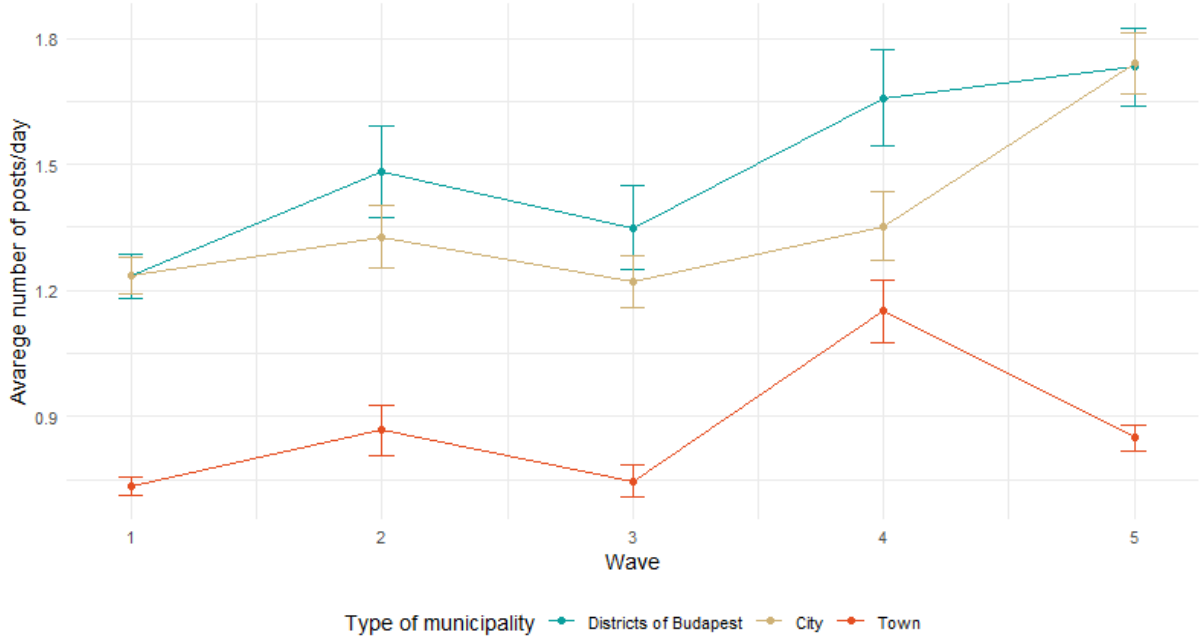
presence of (a) national-focused posts, (b) local-focused posts as a contrast, (c) national politicians, (d) national parties, and (e) divisive values (Table 5.2). For categorical variables with multiple categories, models were run with different reference categories, but only the main model is presented in Table 5.1. However, when discussing differences across these categories, we also consider results from these alternative models.

5.4. Results

5.4.1. Mayors' activity and communication styles

Before discussing the hypotheses, we address the general characteristics of mayors' Facebook communication. In terms of activity, it is evident that mayors across different types of municipalities and time periods post an average of 1-2 posts per day (Figure 5.1). Mayors in towns are the least active in all periods, posting less than one post per day on average outside campaign periods, and only reaching 1.2 posts per day during the campaign. However, they become noticeably more active during the two mobilization periods, particularly during the election campaign. Mayors in Budapest districts and cities exhibit similar average activity levels outside the campaign period. However, Budapest district mayors increase their activity during the two mobilization periods, while the same cannot be said for city mayors, who only become more active during the fifth wave, posting an average of 1.7 posts per day. This is comparable to the activity level of district mayors during the campaign. Notably, the activity of district mayors does not decrease after the campaign; instead, it stabilizes at this higher level.

Figure 5.1. Average number of posts per wave and municipality types

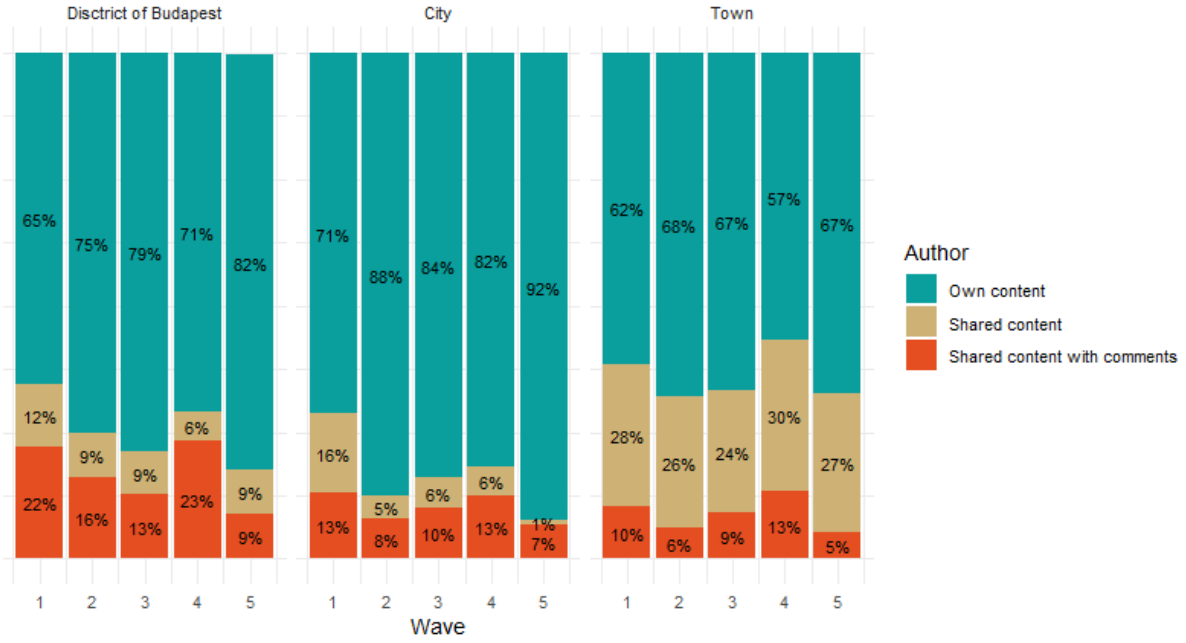


Mayors across all municipality categories predominantly use text in their Facebook posts during all the time periods studied. More than 93 percent of the communication by mayors in districts and cities includes text. This proportion is slightly lower for mayors of towns, ranging between 80-90 percent across the waves of the research. At the same time, visual content is present in 76-90 percent of posts across all municipality types and time periods, indicating that the majority of mayors' posts combine text and visual elements.

5.4.2. Mayors as local information hubs

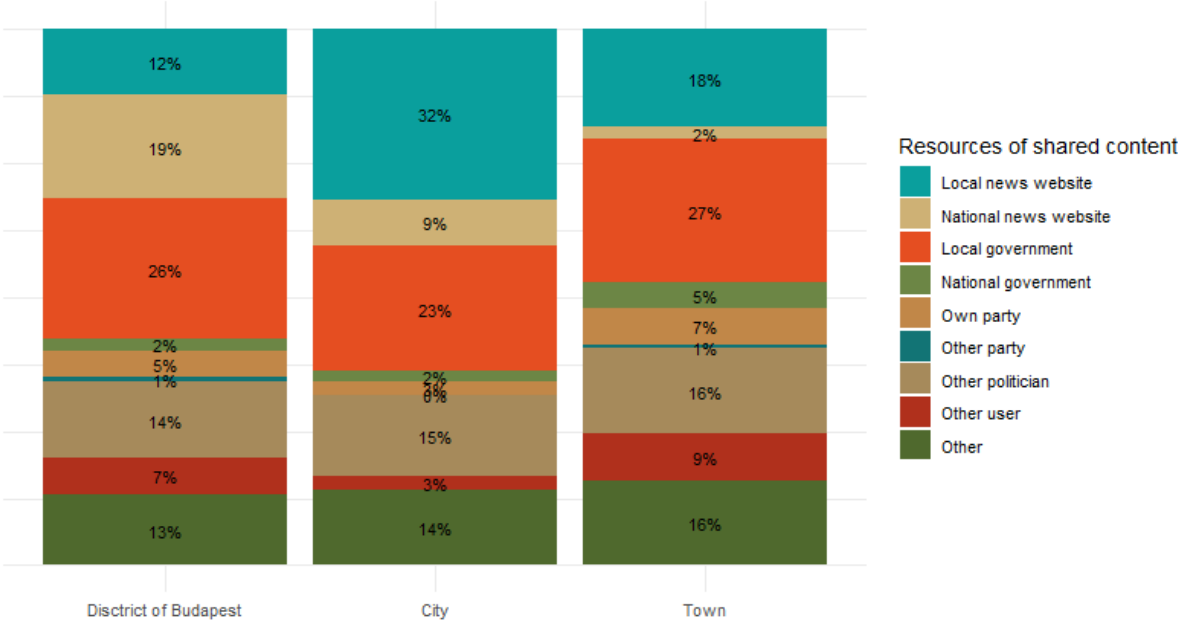
Turning to our first hypothesis, our data indicates that mayoral posts are predominantly composed of original content, particularly among district mayors and leaders of cities (Figure 5.2). These groups rarely share posts from other authors, and when they do, they often include their own commentary. In contrast, town mayors are more likely to share content created by others, typically without adding any additional commentary.
While some remarkable differences are observed across the examined time periods, these variations are minor and unrelated to the mobilization periods. Overall, H5.1a is supported, as mayors primarily engage in original communication, thereby enhancing their role as local information hubs. H5.1b is also supported for district mayors and mayors of cities but not for town mayors.

Figure 5.2. Share of posts by wave and municipality types



While not directly related to our hypothesis, it is worth exploring the sources mayors rely on when sharing content, as this provides insights into their role as informational hubs. To simplify interpretation, we focus solely on municipality types and exclude time periods. Figure 5.3 highlights the diversity of sources mayors use. The official page of the local government is a significant resource for all mayors, accounting for 23-27 percent of shared content. Local news sites are another crucial source, particularly for mayors of towns and cities. For city mayors, local news sites represent the most important source, contributing 32 percent of all shared posts. Mayors also frequently share content from other politicians (14-16 percent), although posts from political parties or central government pages are rarely used. For district mayors, national news sites play a relatively prominent role; they share links from these sources more often than from local news sites. In contrast, this pattern is not evident among city and town mayors, for whom sharing links from national news sites is almost non-existent. Finally, it is notable that mayors actively engage with citizens on social media by occasionally sharing posts from residents, further reinforcing their role as connectors within the local public sphere.

Figure 5.3. Share of different resources in shared content by municipality types



Examining the topics of mayors' Facebook posts across time periods reveals remarkable differences between the first period and subsequent waves (Figure 5.4). In the first period, communication is dominated by posts related to public interest and the pandemic. Notably, there is some overlap between these two categories, with 11 percent of topics coded into both the "public interest" and "COVID" categories. During this period, 61 percent of posts from district mayors focus on one or both topics, compared to 53 percent for city mayors and 62 percent for town mayors. In later periods, the prominence of these topics declines sharply, with their share ranging from 0 to 10 percent, depending on the type of municipality and time period.

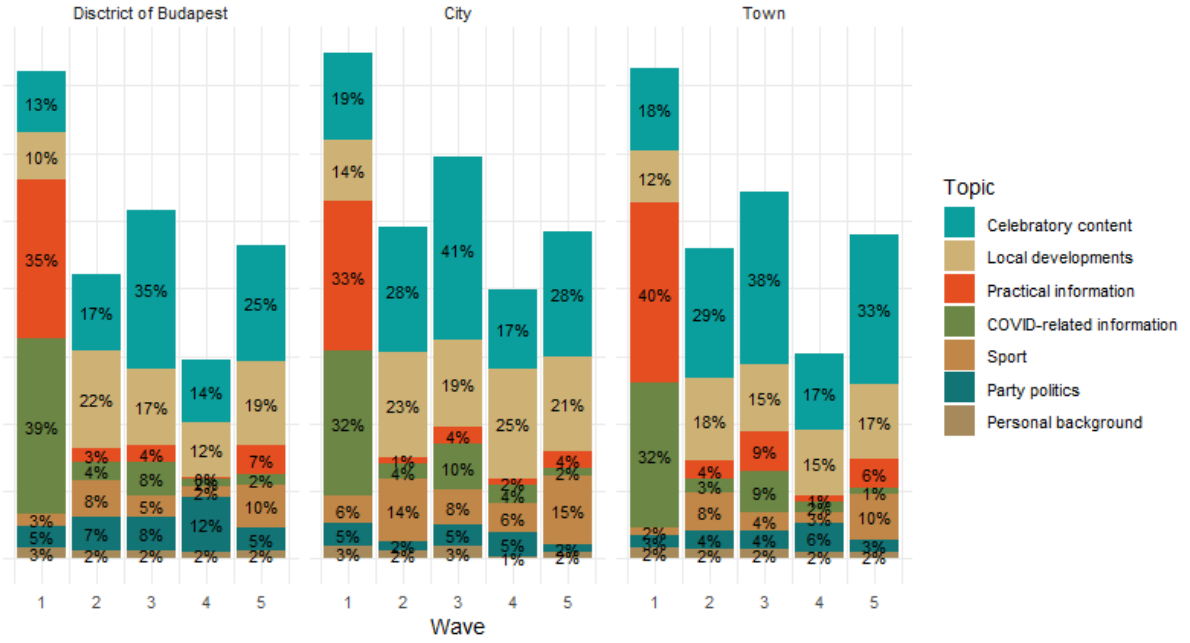
In these later periods, two other topics take center stage. Mayors most frequently post ceremonial content, such as reports or commemorations of celebratory events. This community-building topic maintains the highest relative importance across most time periods and municipality categories, although its lowest levels are observed during national mobilization periods (the second and fourth waves), particularly during the election campaign. The second prominent topic is information about local development projects. Unlike ceremonial content, the importance of this topic remains consistent during campaign periods. Together, posts about ceremonial events and local development projects account for 35-56 percent of posts across the different time periods and municipality categories.

Other topics, such as party politics and sports, play a relatively minor role in mayoral communication but remain present. Sports-related posts are particularly relevant for city mayors during the second and fifth waves. This trend may be attributed to the integrative role of sports teams in local society. Nationally recognized teams with long traditions are typically based in cities, whereas the sports teams of towns receive less attention, and the identities of sports teams in Budapest are not exclusively tied to individual districts. Party politics, meanwhile, constitutes only 4-7 percent of posts in most periods.

Overall, the data indicates that mayors prioritize posting informational content, particularly about past events and local development projects. While this content has limited practical value, it helps keep residents informed about the community's daily life (supporting H5.2b). However, practical local information is primarily characteristic of emergency periods, such as during the pandemic, and is largely absent in other periods (H5.2a rejected). This suggests that mayors' role as information hubs is manifested in their ability to provide local information that fosters

community building, but they do not actively enhance their informational value by offering first-hand, practical information outside of crisis situations.

Figure 5.4. Share of different topics by wave and municipality types

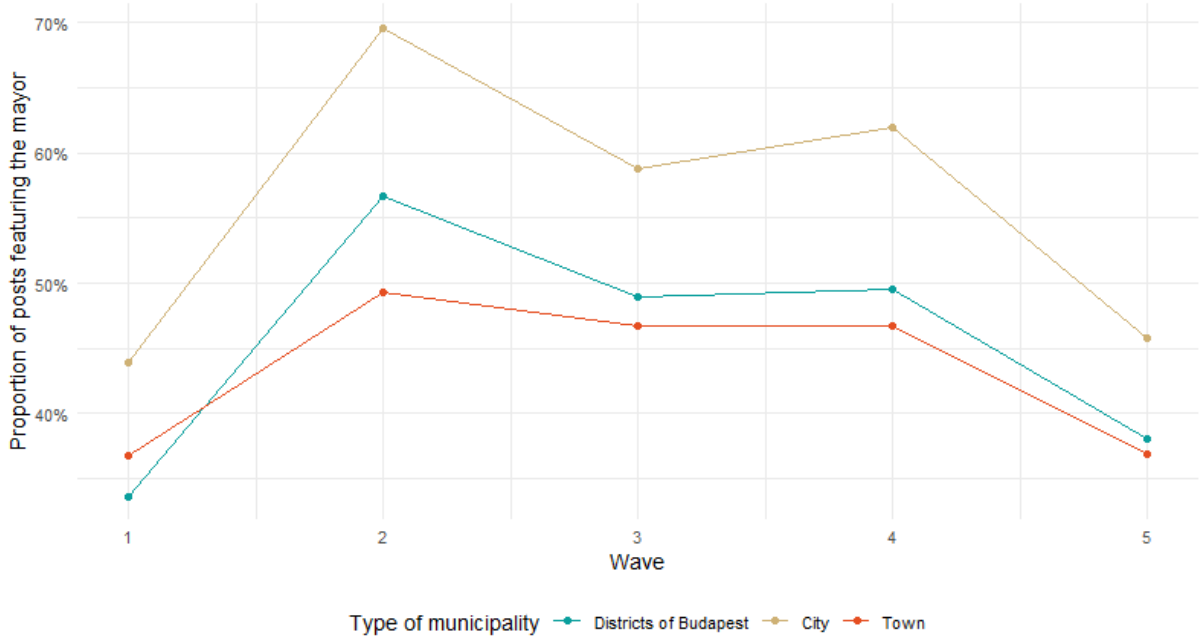


5.4.3. Mayors as integrative personalities

Turning to our H5.3a, Figure 5.5 illustrates the extent to which mayors appear in their own posts. The results indicate that in every wave, mayors tend to feature themselves in some way in their posts. However, while this applies to less than half of the posts in Wave 1 and Wave 5, it becomes more common across all municipality types in Waves 2, 3, and 4. City mayors engage in the most personalized communication. In Wave 2, they feature themselves in nearly 70 percent of their posts, while in Waves 3 and 4, this share remains around 60 percent. Even in Waves 1 and 5, they still appear in close to 50 percent of their posts. In contrast, town and district mayors tend to stay below the 50 percent threshold during the middle waves, except for district mayors in Wave 2, where more than half of their posts include their presence. Overall, we find that mayors consistently allocate significant space to personal representation in their communication, with city mayors exhibiting the strongest tendency in this regard (H5.3a is supported).

Regarding H5.3b, the lowest segment of Figure 5.4 is telling. The proportion of personal topics in mayors' Facebook communication is very low, either in "normal" periods or in times of mobilization, i.e. mayors do not like to publish posts about their private lives. This indicates that while mayors put their political persona into the forefront, they clearly disclose their private life and family from the local public (H5.3b is rejected).

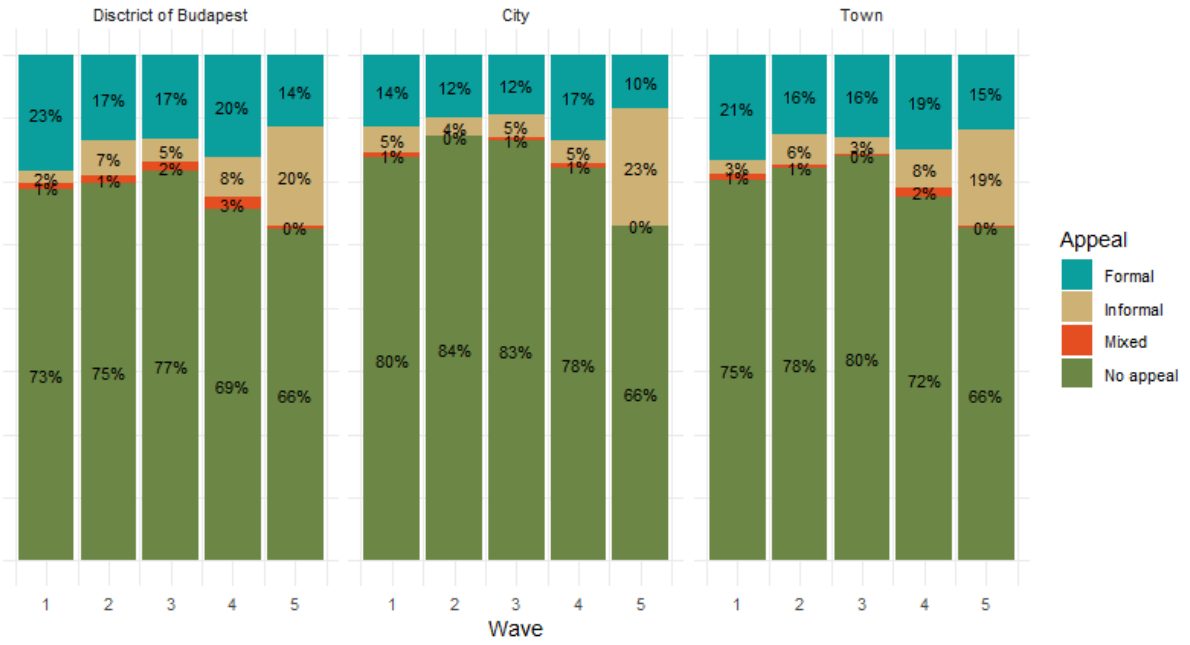
Figure 5.5. Share of posts featuring the mayor by waves and municipality types



The personal nature of Facebook communication can also be enhanced through an engaging and more direct style. To explore this, we analyze whether mayors directly appeal to their followers and, if so, whether they use a formal or informal style. Here, we do not observe any major differences between time periods or municipality types (Figure 5.6). In most posts (66-84 percent), mayors do not directly address their followers, and even when they do, their approach is predominantly formal (H5.4 is rejected).

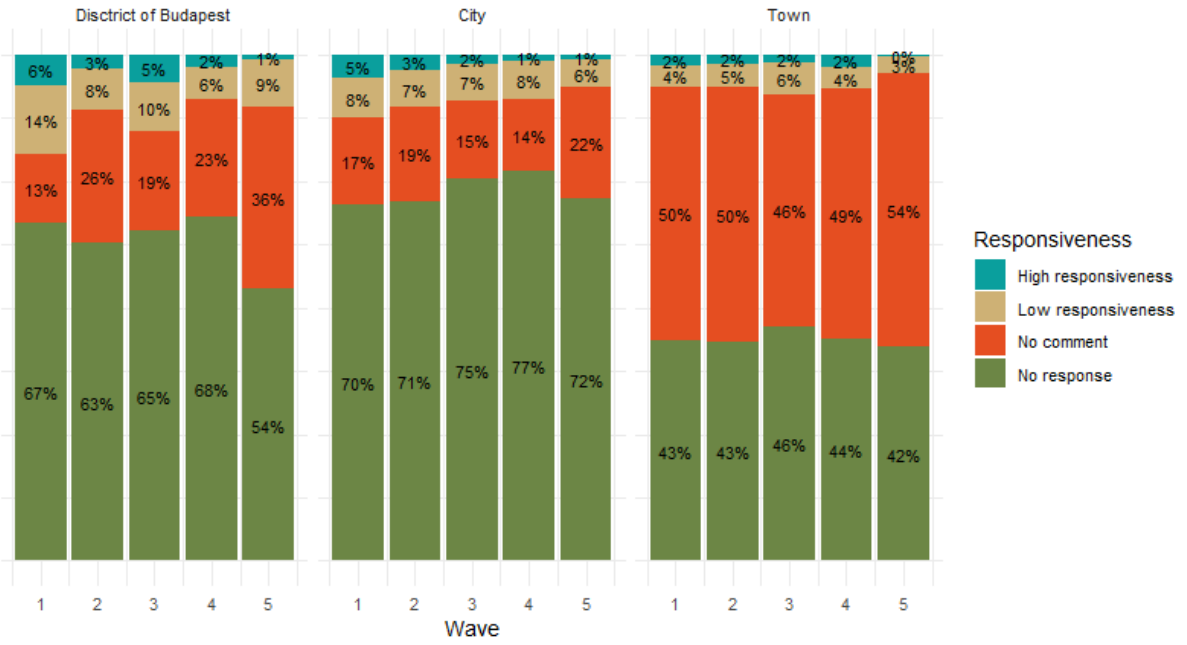
A minor change over time can be observed in the use of informal appeals, which occur more frequently in the fifth period. During this wave, posts are more informal than formal, and the proportion of posts without any kind of appeal shows a slight decrease (with the change being insignificant only for district mayors). However, this result should be interpreted cautiously, as the identification of informal appeals in Wave 5 showed low reliability based on the inter-coder test.

Figure 5.6. Type of appeals in mayors' Facebook communication by waves and municipality types



Secondly, we examine mayors' responsiveness to users' comments (Figure 5.7). In general, mayors rarely respond to comments, but a low level of responsiveness is observed. District mayors respond to at least one comment in 8-20 percent of their posts across the different waves, with particularly higher activity during the COVID period and the third wave. Other mayors exhibit even lower response rates, with only 6-10 percent of their posts receiving any response from the mayor. A high level of responsiveness in the comment section remains very rare. It is worth noting that for town mayors, about half of their posts receive no comments, reducing their opportunities to respond. However, our data also shows that many posts with comments remain unanswered by mayors, even during mobilization periods. In summary, H5.5 is supported, as occasional interactions between mayors and citizens do occur on these pages. Nevertheless, the overall level of responsiveness remains rather limited.

Figure 5.7. Responsiveness to comments in mayors' Facebook communication by waves and municipality types



The findings regarding the integrative personality strategy are mixed. While mayors place themselves at the center of their communication, they do not reveal much about their personal backgrounds. They rarely make direct appeals to their followers, and when they do, it is typically in a formal manner. Although they occasionally respond to followers' comments, this happens relatively infrequently. Overall, there is little evidence to suggest that mayors actively strive to make themselves more relatable or bring their personalities closer to their followers.

5.4.4. Mayors as promoters of national political actors and causes

Descriptives

Figure 5.8 shows that, regardless of municipality type, mayors' Facebook communication primarily focuses on local issues, with national topics playing a relatively minor role across all categories. However, clear differences emerge when examining the time periods. Consistent with our assumption, the national focus becomes more pronounced during periods of national mobilization (Waves 2 and 4) but remains consistently low in other periods and across all municipality types (H5.6a is supported). Since temporal changes are key, we discuss our findings by wave.

In Wave 1, there are no significant differences between municipality types. Posts with a local focus account for 76-79 percent of content, 11-13 percent of posts focus exclusively on national politics, and 4-5 percent of posts address both local and national politics.

In Wave 2, during a period of multiple national-level political campaigns, the proportion of posts with a local focus decreases significantly across all municipality types (61-68 percent). Interestingly, this decline is not accompanied by a significant increase in posts focusing solely on national politics for any municipality type. Instead, there is a notable and significant rise in the proportion of mixed-focus posts, where national political messages are integrated into the local context during this period of mobilization.

In Wave 3, the proportions return to the levels observed in Wave 1, with a significant increase in locally focused content across all categories. A significant difference between Wave 1 and

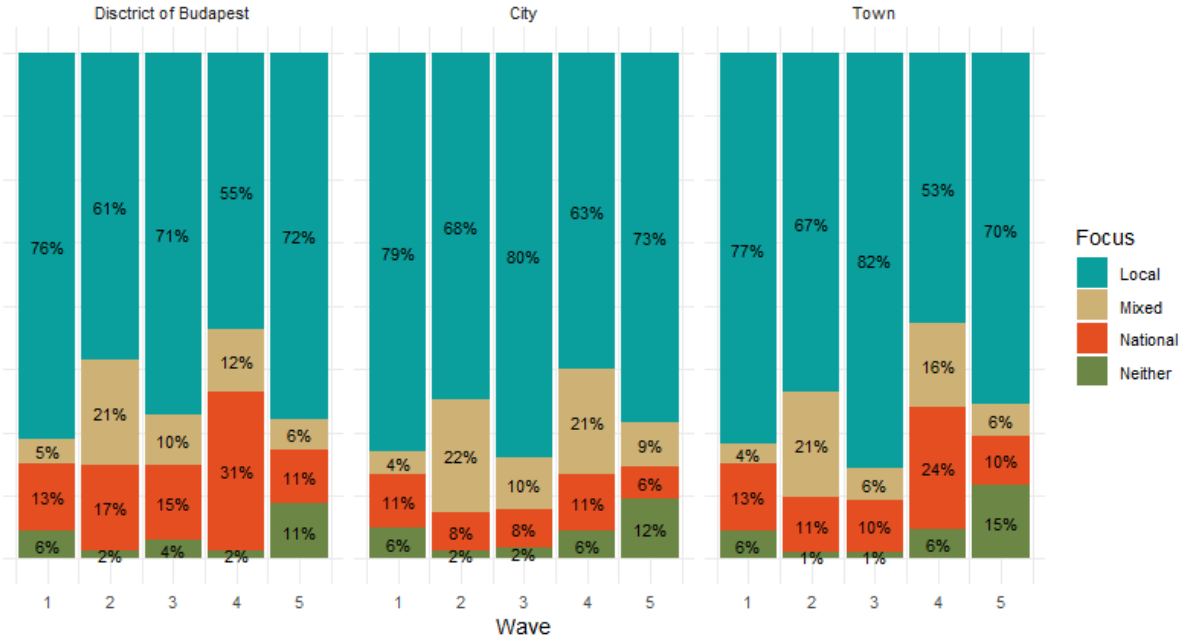
Wave 3 is observed only in the local posts of town mayors, which are slightly more frequent in Wave 3. At the same time, the proportion of mixed-focus posts decreases in all categories, although their share remains significantly higher than in Wave 1 (but lower than in Wave 2). The proportion of posts with a national focus in Wave 3 shows no significant difference compared to Waves 1 and 2.

The proportion of posts about local content dropped drastically and significantly in Wave 4, decreasing by 17-29 percent compared to Wave 3, returning to levels similar to those observed in Wave 2. However, the decline is significantly more pronounced among town mayors compared to the second period. Among mayors of cities and towns, the proportion of mixed-focus posts increased again, reaching levels comparable to Wave 2, while no significant changes were observed among district mayors. In contrast, the share of posts with an exclusively national focus doubled and increased significantly among town and district mayors. However, this increase was not significant for city mayors. Overall, mayors' Facebook communication shifted towards national politics across all municipality types. For town mayors, this shift manifested as an increase in both national and mixed-focus posts. District mayors, on the other hand, leaned more heavily toward exclusively national content, while city mayors primarily used mixed-focus posts in their communication.

The data from Wave 5 reveals another rearrangement. The proportion of locally focused content increased significantly across all categories, though it remained noticeably lower for town mayors and city leaders compared to Wave 3. The share of posts with a national focus fell back to Wave 3 levels in all categories, as did the proportion of mixed-focus posts.

When comparing the Facebook communication strategies of mayors across different municipality types, only minor differences emerge in each period examined. This indicates that Hungarian municipal leaders generally adopt similar communication strategies regardless of their municipality type.

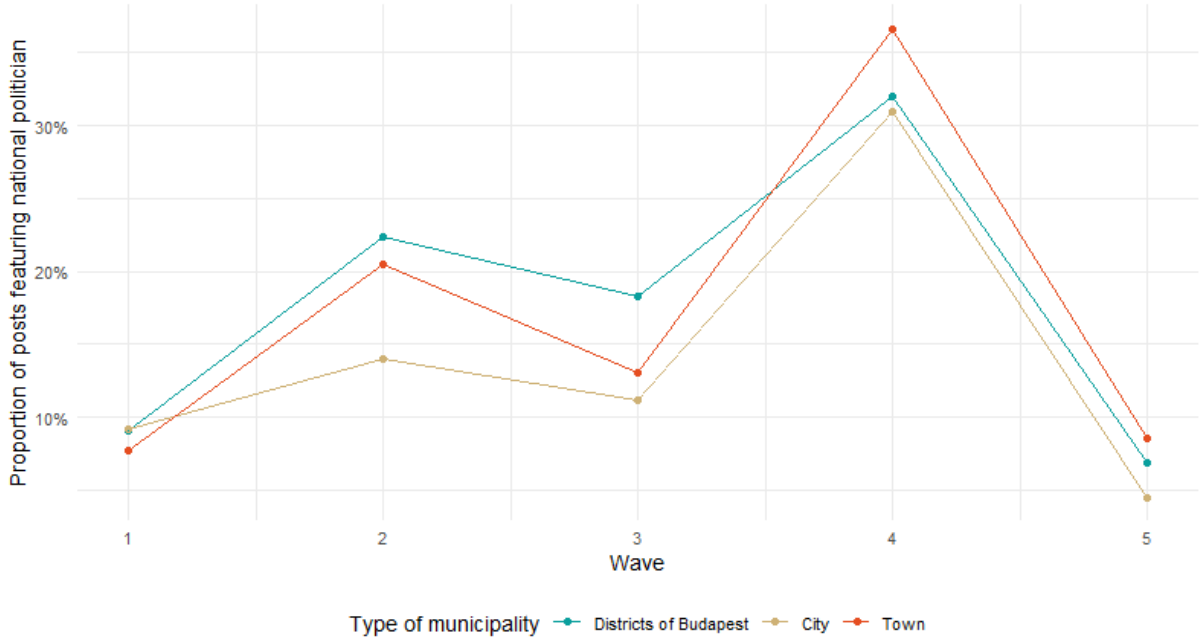
Figure 5.8. The spatial focus of mayors' Facebook communication by waves and municipality types



It is also important to examine how national politics appear in mayors' communication. In the next step of our analysis, we investigate the presence of national parties and politicians, nationally divisive topics, and direct mobilization appeals in mayors' posts.

The presence of national-level politicians in mayors' posts follows similar temporal patterns to the national/local focus of their communication: their presence increases during periods of mobilization across all municipality categories, with a decline observed during intermediate periods (Figure 5.9) (H5.6b is supported). The only exception is the communication of district mayors and city mayors in Wave 3, where the decline is not significant. In Wave 1, national politicians appeared in only 10 percent of mayoral posts, even though this period coincided with the COVID pandemic. Wave 5 recorded even lower figures for the presence of national politicians, except among town mayors. During the national election campaign (Wave 4), national-level politicians featured in every third post by mayors, regardless of their municipal background. Additionally, in Wave 2, national politicians appeared in around 20 percent of posts by district and town mayors, while this figure was slightly lower (14 percent) for city mayors. Overall, no remarkable differences are observed between the different types of municipalities in terms of the presence of national politicians. For example, the results for Waves 1 and 4 show no significant variation across municipality types.

Figure 5.9. Share of posts featuring national politicians by waves and municipality types

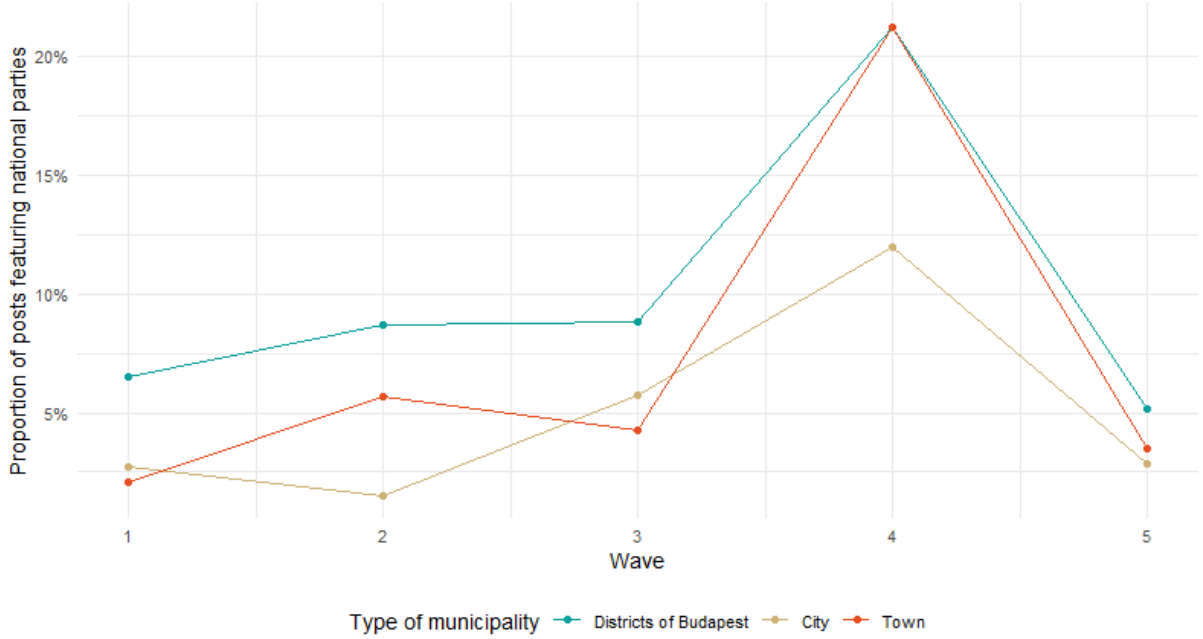


National parties appeared with their names or symbols only exceptionally in the Wave 1 posts of town mayors (3 percent) and city mayors (2 percent), while district mayors featured them in 7 percent of posts – although this share is significantly higher compared to the other municipality categories (Figure 5.10). These shares increased significantly only among town mayors (6 percent) during the first period of national mobilization (Wave 2). The only notable change in Wave 3 was an increase in the proportion of posts about national parties among city mayors, rising to 6 percent. However, during the national election campaign (Wave 4), these shares rose sharply: over 20 percent for town and district mayors and up to 12 percent for city mayors. After the election campaign period, in Wave 5, these figures dropped uniformly to 3-5 percent, with no significant differences between municipality types (H5.6c is supported).

To summarize, national election campaigns significantly influence the Facebook communication of mayors, with national parties appearing frequently in their posts during such periods, while remaining marginal during other times. However, this pattern applies specifically to the national election campaign; during other national mobilization periods (e.g., Wave 2), the

presence of national parties plays only a minor role. It is also noteworthy that 60 percent of posts involving national parties concern those affiliated with the governing parties.

Figure 5.10. Share of posts featuring national parties by waves and municipality types



The next aspect we address is the presence of nationally important but divisive issues in mayors' communication. Our results show that these topics play a very limited role overall. Among the topics analyzed across all waves, environmental protection (4 percent) and national identity (2.5 percent) are the only ones that are at least marginally represented. It is worth noting that while these issues can carry significant weight in national politics, they may appear in a neutral context at the local level. Other topics, such as migration, family (as a political value), Western and Eastern orientation in foreign policy, Hungarian ethnic minorities in neighboring countries, or LGBTQ issues, appear in less than 1 percent of mayoral Facebook posts. However, when these topics are combined into a single variable ("divisive issues"), some temporal trends emerge (Figure 5.11).

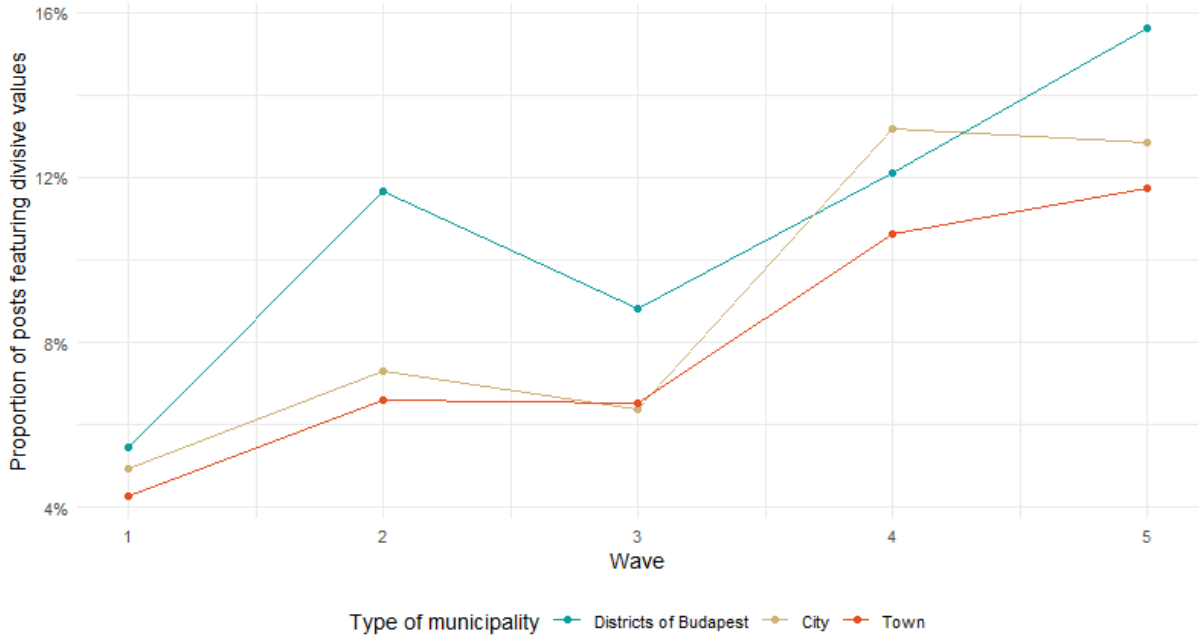
Divisive issues were present in 4-5 percent of posts in Wave 1, with no significant differences between municipality types. However, in Wave 2, their prevalence rose significantly among town and district mayors. For town mayors, this increase was moderate, reaching 7 percent, while it doubled to 12 percent for district mayors. In Wave 3, there was no significant change, and differences between municipality types also remained insignificant. During the campaign period of Wave 4, the share of divisive issues increased notably across all categories, although the change was not statistically significant for district mayors. In this wave, 11-13 percent of mayors' Facebook posts contained content related to divisive national issues.

Unlike earlier patterns, divisive issues exhibited a spillover effect in Wave 4, as their prevalence did not decline in Wave 5 for any municipality category. However, when examining the topics individually, it becomes evident that 35 percent of all divisive posts addressed migration, with 72 percent of these posts being published in Wave 4. However, migration largely disappeared as a topic by Wave 5. The stabilization of divisive themes in Wave 5 can be attributed to the strong presence of national identity, which was a marginal topic during the first three periods but gained prominence in Wave 4 and became even more significant in Wave 5.

Overall, it can be observed that under normal political circumstances, mayors significantly minimize the presence of divisive political values in their communication, most likely to present

themselves as integrative figures at the local level. However, during national campaign periods, these topics gain somewhat more prominence.

Figure 5.11. Share of posts featuring divisive values or issues by waves and municipality types

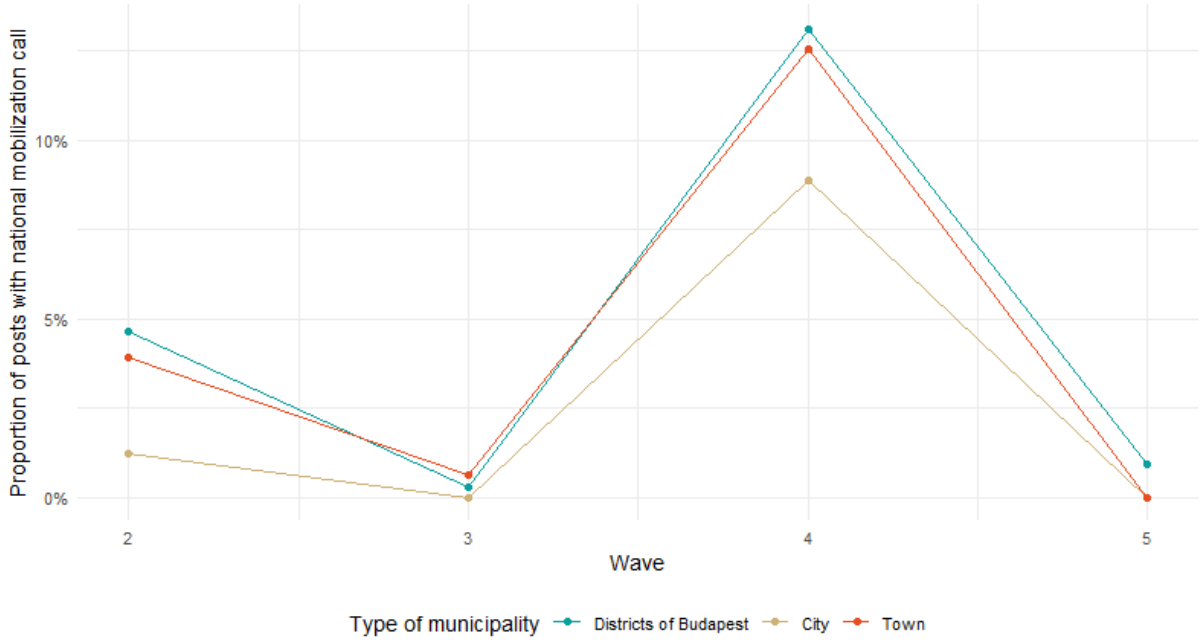


Next, we examined the extent to which direct mobilization appears in mayors' Facebook communication. Specifically, we analyzed how often mayors called on their supporters to participate in national or local political activities across all periods, except Wave 1, where the related items were not included (Figure 5.12).

In Wave 2, moderate mobilization activity was observed among district (5 percent) and town mayors (4 percent), while it was negligible among city mayors (1 percent) (Figure 5.11). This moderate activity nearly disappeared in Wave 3 (0.4 percent), and similarly low levels persisted in Wave 5 (0.2 percent). In contrast, during the election campaign period (Wave 4), the share of Facebook posts aimed at mobilizing followers for national political action rose significantly, reaching 9-13 percent, with no significant differences between municipality types (H5.6d is supported).

On the other hand, mobilization for local political activities remained completely insignificant across all periods, with less than 2 percent of posts addressing this, even during the fourth and fifth periods.

Figure 5.12. Share of posts featuring call for national political actions by waves and municipality types



Overall, we were able to confirm the time-bound nature of national-level political activity across multiple dimensions. Mayors generally refrain from presenting national topics, politicians, parties, divisive values, or calling for national political action. However, during national campaign periods, they tend to allocate more space to these elements, while still maintaining primacy of a local focus. Importantly, this increased national activity is not confined to election campaigns; mayors also intensify their national partisan political activity during other national mobilization periods outside of elections. Although differences between municipality types are minimal, it is evident that town mayors are particularly active in switching to a national focus during campaign periods.

How national posts feature in mayors' communication

In examining post-level correlations, we rely on predicted values in the interpretation of logistic regression models (Table 5.2). However, for better interpretability, we do not always describe these values as probabilities; instead, we often translate them into proportions within posting activity. For example, rather than stating that a government-affiliated politician has a 20 percent probability of posting content focused on national topics, we express this as the expectation that – ceteris paribus – 20 percent of their posts will deal with national politics. In practice, a 20 percent probability effectively represents this proportion.

Starting with the post-level variables, it is clear that shared content disproportionately features national topics, whereas local content is more often original posts rather than shared content without commentary. For original posts, ceteris paribus, the predicted probability of focusing on national topics is 16 percent, compared to 86 percent for local topics. In the case of shared content without commentary, the probability of a national focus rises to 23 percent, while local topics account for 82 percent. Shared posts that include the mayor's commentary do not significantly differ from those without commentary in terms of national topics (24 percent national focus, 85 percent local focus) or from original posts in the likelihood of featuring local topics.

The results also reveal that original posts are less likely to feature national politicians or parties compared to shared content, whether or not the mayor's commentary is included. However, there is no difference between shared and original content in the likelihood of featuring divisive values (H5.8a is supported, except for divisive values).
Posts that prominently feature the mayor are less likely to focus on national politics and more likely to emphasize local issues (H5.8b is supported). Interestingly, these posts are also more likely to feature national politicians. This suggests that national politicians often appear in posts alongside the mayor rather than independently.
Turning to responsiveness, posts without comments are more likely to focus on national topics and less likely to address local issues. Similar patterns are observed across other categories: posts that generate no comments are more likely to feature national politicians than highly responsive posts, as well as more likely to include divisive values. However, posts featuring political parties are more common in low-responsiveness or non-responsive posts than in posts with no comments at all. This indicates that posts about political parties often elicit comments, but these comments are more likely to be ignored by mayors. Posts without mayoral responses are more likely to focus on national topics and less likely to emphasize local content. This suggests that mayors appear to be more responsive to local issues than to national ones. Overall, it is evident that national posts tend to avoid comments, and even when comments are present, mayors are less likely to engage with them compared to posts about local issues (H5.8c is supported).
The results also reveal that posts containing divisive political values are more likely to feature national content and less likely to focus on local topics. Additionally, national politicians and parties are more frequently present in these posts.

Variations among mayors

The results clearly show that party affiliation of mayors plays a significant role in how they communicate on Facebook. Party-affiliated mayors are more likely to post content that focuses on national politics (predicted values: pro-government: 20 percent, opposition: 20 percent, independent: 11 percent), content that features a national-level politician (pro-government: 11 percent, opposition: 9 percent, independent: 5 percent), any party motive (pro-government: 2 percent, opposition: 5 percent, independent: 0.4 percent) or even a divisive political value (pro-government: 8 percent, opposition: 7 percent, independent: 5 percent) – although there is no significant difference between independent and opposition mayors on the latter (H5.9 is supported). Independent mayors are much more passive in these regards, but post more local content (pro-government: 83 percent, opposition: 86 percent, independent: 89 percent), although the differences are smaller for the latter. For most dimensions, there are no significant differences between pro-government and opposition mayors, although opposition mayors are significantly more active in displaying party motives than their pro-government counterparts.
The ability of mayors to reach citizens significantly impacts the content of their posts. Mayors who can reach a larger portion of their population are more likely to share national political content, while those with a smaller reach rely more heavily on local topics. Based on predicted values, mayors with the lowest reach – 3 percent of their population in our sample – include national politics in 15 percent of their posts and local politics in 88 percent. In contrast, the most followed mayors, with a reach of 58 percent of their population, discuss national politics in 24 percent of their posts and local topics in 77 percent (H5.10 is supported). This relationship also holds for posts featuring party symbols. However, there is no difference among mayors in terms of featuring divisive values based on their reach. Interestingly, less-followed mayors are more likely to include national political leaders in their posts, so in this dimension, H5.10 is rejected.

Additionally, municipality type does not play a significant role: mayors in smaller and larger municipalities present national and local topics, as well as content related to national politicians, parties, and values, to a similar extent (H5.11a is rejected). Likewise, there is no significant difference based on the administrative status of the municipalities (H5.11b is rejected).
Finally, as highlighted in the descriptive analysis, timing plays a crucial role. Even when controlling for all other factors, the probability of national political content is significantly higher during the two national mobilization periods – Waves 2 and 4 – compared to any other wave. However, the difference between these two periods is only marginally significant, slightly favoring the election campaign period (H5.6 is supported).
The probability of local content generally decreases during these mobilization periods, but with a few exceptions. In the election campaign period (Wave 4), the likelihood of local content is similar to that of Wave 5, while in Wave 2, it is higher than in the two later waves. Wave 2 also aligns with the levels of Wave 3, although it falls short of Wave 1. In Wave 3, national politics is more likely to appear than in Waves 1 and 5, though it is less prominent than in the two campaign periods. However, Wave 3 represents the most active period for local content, with the highest proportion of local topics across all waves.
Similar trends are evident in other models, but the official campaign period (Wave 4) shows a stronger likelihood of featuring national politicians, parties, and divisive values compared to Wave 2. The only exception is divisive values, where no significant difference is observed between Waves 4 and 5. Compared to Wave 1, Wave 2 also shows an increased presence of national politicians, parties, and divisive values. However, by Wave 3, only the likelihood of featuring national politicians declines significantly, while divisive values remain more prominent even in Wave 5.

Table 5.2. Logistic regression models explaining the occurrence of (a) national focus, (b) local focus, (c) national politician, (d) national party, and (e) divisive values in mayors' posts

	National focus	**Local focus**	**National politician**	**National party**	**Divisive value**
Predictors	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*
(Intercept)	0.19 ***	3.64 ***	0.11 ***	0.02 ***	0.05 ***
	(0.05)	(1.20)	(0.04)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Resource: shared with own contr.	1.06	1.24	0.84	1.00	0.94
	(0.11)	(0.14)	(0.11)	(0.18)	(0.15)
Resource: own post	0.66 ***	1.35 ***	0.38 ***	0.49 ***	0.94
	(0.06)	(0.12)	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.11)
Mayor in post	0.71 ***	2.45 ***	1.98 ***	1.15	0.97
	(0.04)	(0.16)	(0.15)	(0.13)	(0.08)
Responsiveness: no comments	1.62 ***	0.74 *	0.96	0.51 **	1.20
	(0.22)	(0.11)	(0.16)	(0.11)	(0.21)
Responsiveness: high	0.73	1.48	0.53 *	0.55	0.87
	(0.18)	(0.41)	(0.16)	(0.22)	(0.28)
Responsiveness: no reply	1.39 *	0.59 ***	1.05	0.73	0.92
	(0.18)	(0.08)	(0.16)	(0.14)	(0.15)
Positive	0.86 *	1.50 ***	1.05	1.09	1.33 **
	(0.06)	(0.10)	(0.08)	(0.13)	(0.12)

Negative	3.00 ***	0.54 ***	2.70 ***	5.88 ***	1.51 ***
	(0.23)	(0.04)	(0.25)	(0.68)	(0.16)
Divisive values	1.87 ***	0.66 ***	1.30 *	1.38 *	
	(0.17)	(0.06)	(0.14)	(0.21)	
Party: opposition	1.01	1.28	0.81	2.45 **	0.81
	(0.16)	(0.26)	(0.17)	(0.75)	(0.12)
Party: independent	0.49 ***	1.74 **	0.41 ***	0.21 ***	0.62 **
	(0.08)	(0.37)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.11)
Share of followers	2.65 *	0.24 *	0.54	7.99 *	2.00
	(1.24)	(0.15)	(0.34)	(7.36)	(0.89)
Population size	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Municipality type: city with country rights	0.91	1.41	0.87	0.80	0.78
	(0.16)	(0.32)	(0.20)	(0.27)	(0.13)
Municipality type: city	0.78	1.35	1.12	1.15	0.66 *
	(0.16)	(0.35)	(0.30)	(0.48)	(0.12)
Wave 2	2.98 ***	1.41 **	2.89 ***	1.75 **	1.76 ***
	(0.26)	(0.15)	(0.31)	(0.32)	(0.25)
Wave 3	1.29 **	1.49 ***	2.02 ***	2.10 ***	1.63 ***
	(0.12)	(0.16)	(0.23)	(0.37)	(0.23)
Wave 4	3.58 ***	0.61 ***	6.85 ***	9.93 ***	2.98 ***
	(0.32)	(0.06)	(0.73)	(1.55)	(0.40)
Wave 5	0.93	0.67 ***	0.87	1.23	2.71 ***
	(0.08)	(0.05)	(0.10)	(0.20)	(0.30)
Random Effects					
σ^2	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29
τ_{00}	0.24 $_{name}$	0.43 $_{name}$	0.41 $_{name}$	0.89 $_{name}$	0.13 $_{name}$
ICC	0.07	0.11	0.11	0.21	0.04
N	98 $_{name}$	98 $_{name}$	98 $_{name}$	98 $_{name}$	98 $_{name}$
Observations	9135	9135	9135	9135	9135
Marginal R^2 / Conditional R^2	0.166 / 0.223	0.143 / 0.242	0.212 / 0.300	0.303 / 0.452	0.082 / 0.117

** p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001*

5.5. Conclusion

This chapter empirically tested the theoretical assumption that mayors attempt to reconcile three partially conflicting objectives in their Facebook communication. First, by leveraging their role as key local information hubs, they aim to attract a broad and politically diverse local audience to their pages. Second, they seek to foster sympathy among this heterogeneous following by presenting themselves in a more relatable and personable manner. Third, they also take on the role of supporting national political actors and objectives to gain political advantages. However,

there is a significant conflict between the latter goal and the effort to engage and maintain the support of a diverse community. As a result, we theorized that mayors generally strive to avoid national political topics that could divide their audience, only becoming active in such discussions during high-stakes mobilization periods – and even then, they tend to adopt a more reserved stance.

The content analysis, covering five waves of data over nearly three years and involving 98 mayors, only partially confirmed the theoretical expectations. While the general approach aligns with the hypothesis, several specific assumptions were contradicted by the findings. The study clearly indicates that mayors primarily function as sources of local information on Facebook, with a significant portion of their activity focused on sharing information. However, this information-sharing is mostly limited to reports on local events rather than the dissemination of universally practical information that would reinforce their role as key information providers. While event-based reporting may appeal to those actively engaged in community life, it is the sharing of practical information that would make the mayor's page a crucial source for a broader audience. That said, it is important to note that in times of crisis, mayors do actively embrace their informational role. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, their communication focused primarily on providing updates related to the pandemic and other practical concerns.

The findings on image formation present a nuanced picture. It is undeniable that mayors place themselves at the center of their communication. While their primary focus is on providing information, they frequently integrate their own persona and role into their messaging. However, beyond this, they tend to avoid bringing their personal image closer to their followers, keeping their private background out of their communication and refraining from more direct or informal interactions. They rarely address their audience directly, with informal appeals being particularly uncommon, and they engage only minimally with comments from their followers.

Our expectations regarding their role in national mobilization, however, were largely confirmed. It is clear that while mayors actively avoid national politics and political actors during "normal" periods, they become significantly more engaged in such topics during mobilization periods. Although this shift may risk alienating their politically diverse audience, the benefits of national political support, party backing, or access to resources ("pork") incentivize them to participate in mobilization and persuasion efforts. This behavior is observed not only during national election campaigns but also in other mobilization periods outside of elections. At the same time, their engagement with national politics remains cautious and somewhat distant. They make a concerted effort to avoid divisive ideological debates that dominate national discourse. Instead of directly exposing themselves through original content, they prefer to maintain a degree of separation from politically charged topics, and they are even less likely to respond to followers' comments on national politics than they are on local issues. The data also show that mayors supported by national parties, as well as those with a larger follower base – and thus less to lose – are more inclined to engage in national political discussions.

These findings indicate that mayors can indeed serve as valuable instruments of national political mobilization. It is no coincidence that party-affiliated local politicians tend to show greater engagement on social media. Mayors have the capacity to reach a broad, heterogeneous audience that is not necessarily driven by national political interest or partisanship. However, the need to maintain this valuable base requires restraint and a carefully timed approach – effectively making mayors "sleeper agents" of political parties. While they generally operate at the local level, distanced from national politics, they can mobilize their existing resources in service of national political objectives when necessary. At the same time, the findings suggest that mayors do not fully exploit all the digital opportunities available to strengthen their local

position. They underutilize two key strategies that could help attract a broader audience and enhance their public image: serving as a hub for practical, widely relevant information and adopting a more personal, relatable communication style to foster stronger connections with their followers.

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PART III. EFFECTS

Chapter 6. Localized Social Media as a Catalyst of Local and National Political Processes? The Effects of Local Social Media Experiences on Political Trust, Satisfaction and Participation

Abstract

The chapter investigates how localized social media experiences influence political trust, satisfaction, and participation at local and national levels, using data from a nationally representative survey in Hungary. We test whether following local mayors, exposure to local politicians' content, and participation in local Facebook groups can act as catalysts for enhanced political engagement and attitudes.
Findings reveal that following mayors can boosts trust and satisfaction with local political actors, particularly in larger municipalities, while exposure to local politicians' content moderately enhances local political participation. Conversely, membership in local Facebook groups without active mayoral participation correlates negatively with political trust and satisfaction, suggesting active local political leadership is crucial in digital community spaces. At the national level, the catalytic role of local political participation is minimal. Experiences in local settings have little impact on political behavior at the national level. This suggests that voters perceive a sharper divide between local and national politics, and even under favorable conditions, localized social media experiences generate positive attitudes and increased activity that do not significantly influence their views or behavior regarding national politics.

6.1. Introduction

Ognyanova and Jung (2018) suggest that the role of the Internet in local communities can be understood from two distinct perspectives. The Internet may function as either a facilitator or a catalyst of social processes. As a facilitator, the Internet simply provides another arena for activities and community functions that have long existed offline. Conversely, as a catalyst, online tools generate outcomes that would not have occurred without the Internet. This chapter explores the validity of this catalytic role from a broader perspective, focusing on political outcomes such as political trust, satisfaction, and participation at both local and national levels. The catalyst framework is predominantly employed by the Communication Infrastructure Theory, which posits that individual connectedness to local storytelling agents on social media platforms can lead to positive outcomes at the individual level (Nah et al., 2021). However, this research line primarily concentrates on local civic outcomes related to community engagement and cohesion. Prior studies have found that local social media activities can enhance neighborhood belonging, collective efficacy, and, under certain conditions, local civic participation (Choi et al., 2021; Jung and LeNoble, 2023; Nah et al., 2021, 2022).
While community cohesion is a crucial outcome of localized social media use, we hypothesize that it can also influence political outcomes, which are largely unexplored in literature. Moreover, our previous chapters have demonstrated that political actors' political motivations are significant drivers of local social media activities. Social media, by providing direct and personal cues about local political processes in an unprecedented manner, likely affects users' local political attitudes and behaviors. We hypothesize that this directedness can enhance political attitudes toward local political elites and increase political participation. If this assumption is confirmed, social media is considered a catalyst of local politics which can generate political support and involvement.

However, our previous findings indicate that political actors' motivations are not confined to local political objectives; these actors are also driven by their perception that localized social media activity can influence national-level political views and actions. In addition, beyond the motivations of politicians, we posit that local experiences may "spill over" to shape national political attitudes. The local level offers the most direct and immediate experiences of public affairs and political actors, which may influence how people perceive politics more generally. Regular interactions with the mayor and other political actors, combined with connections with fellow citizens on public matters, could significantly impact perceptions of political processes. Local politics, typically less burdened by ideological conflicts and partisan tensions (Oliver, 2012), presents a distinct political experience compared to national politics. As demonstrated in our Chapter 5, mayors, as central figures in the local social media sphere, tend to avoid polarizing issues, creating a unique political environment. If this spillover hypothesis holds, and individuals project their local political social media experiences onto national politics, then localized social media could be seen as a catalyst for national political processes, producing outcomes that would not have emerged without local social media engagement.
In this chapter, we examine these questions using the nationally representative survey dataset introduced in Chapter 2. Specifically, we explore whether following the mayor, exposure to local politicians' content, and membership in local Facebook groups are associated with local and national political trust, political satisfaction, and political participation.

6.2. The catalysts: localized social media experiences

This chapter examines the effects of three types of localized social media experiences. The first is the effect of following the mayor. Previous chapters have demonstrated that mayors play a pivotal role in the local public sphere as key sources of information, regularly informing followers about their political activities through an integrative communication style. Our understanding of the general effect of following political actors is limited; however, Dvir-Gvirsman and colleagues (2022) found that it is associated with a stronger sense of representation. Individuals frequently exposed to politicians' social media posts feel that their interests and views are well-represented. Therefore, we hypothesize that following mayors may result in favorable impressions of them, with these effects potentially spilling over to the broader political class.
However, as argued in Chapter 2, exposure to political actors is not solely a result of following them. The second type of localized social media experience is the actual exposure to local political actors' posts. The same rationale applies as with following: regular exposure to local political elites' activities may bring political processes closer to the public. However, this exposure extends beyond the mayor and is not necessarily the result of purposive engagement, which could weaken its favorable effects. Nonetheless, for this variable, we can also examine the ratio of exposure to local versus national political actors.
The third experience concerns participation in local social media groups, another focal point of the local social media sphere. Existing research has shown that activities in local social media groups increase community awareness, a sense of community (Meulenaere et al., 2020), and social cohesion (Robaeyst et al., 2022). Awareness of public life and political processes, along with the active presence of political actors in these groups (see Chapter 2), could be crucial in developing favorable attitudes toward local political actors, increasing the willingness to participate, and potentially generalizing these experiences to the national level.

6.3. The outcomes: political attitudes and behavior

We expect that these experiences will shape (a) trust in local and national political actors, (b) satisfaction with the mayor, and (c) local and national political participation. If our hypotheses are confirmed, it would substantiate the thesis that localized social media use acts as a catalyst in political processes by exposing users to local political actors' content and raising awareness of local issues. At the local level, if localized social media use increases trust and satisfaction with the mayor and local government, it could strengthen incumbent actors, thereby reducing political volatility and fostering a closer relationship between local elites and residents, enhancing the perception that local institutions adequately represent the public. This would also suggest that Facebook is a crucial tool for mayors and political actors to build electoral support and mobilize local voters. At the national level, it would imply that social media has transformed the local level into a key area of political socialization and mobilization, where local social media activity can improve general perceptions of the political class. Additionally, it could be seen as a vital arena for political mobilization, enhancing the perceived political value of mayors.

6.3.1. Political trust

Political trust is defined as the belief in the trustworthiness of individual politicians or the political class in general, which involves the expectation that the trusted party will not betray the trust of the public (Levi and Stoker, 2000). Political trust is a critical resource for political actors and the political class as a whole, with lower levels of trust diminishing the perceived credibility and legitimacy of parties and politicians at both individual and collective levels (e.g. Marien and Hooghe, 2011).

While the impact of news media consumption on political trust is a well-researched topic with mixed findings (e.g. Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Norris, 2000), the influence of social media on political trust remains underexplored. An early study by Ceron (2015) found that social media use negatively affects political trust due to its highly critical and anti-establishment discourse. Klein and Robinson (2020) further nuanced this finding, showing that social media use is associated with increased polarization of political trust, with pro-government voters becoming more trustful and opposition voters less so. These studies, however, focused on general social media use rather than how these platforms are utilized by users. There are arguments that exposure to political actors' social media activities can increase political trust. On these platforms, politicians are perceived as more honest (Enli and Rosenberg, 2018), and exposure to their content enhances feelings of representation (Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2022). Moreover, Chapter 5 demonstrated that mayors make efforts to present themselves as integrative political personalities, which can foster trust in them, particularly since they rarely employ the negative or anti-establishment communication that Ceron (2015) found could provoke distrust.

At the local level, Kwon and colleagues (2021) found that socially-oriented localized social media use can boost local political trust, though informational use was not related to it. However, this study differentiates only between usage motivations (social versus informational) rather than focusing on specific types of localized social media use. Additionally, as previously argued, we can assume that localized social media use impacts trust not only locally but also nationally. For instance, Putnam (2001) argued that the local community is where social trust can develop, and experiences at this level can extend to higher levels. In relation to political actors' social media presence, specifically, Starke and colleagues (2020) demonstrated that people extend their positive social media experiences with individual political actors to the political class, thereby increasing their trust in the government.

Accordingly, we expect a positive association between following mayors and trust in the mayor (H6.1a), the local government (H6.1b), and political actors in general (H6.1c). In the case of

exposure to other local political actors, who may introduce more conflictual elements, we still anticipate a positive relationship with each trust-related variable (H6.2a-H6.2c), though the effect size may be smaller. Regarding membership in local groups, the association is less straightforward, as these groups can be characterized by a more critical discourse (Burai et al., 2024). Nevertheless, as demonstrated in Chapter 2, mayors and other local politicians are active in these groups, which could still enhance political trust locally and more broadly (H6.3a-H6.3c).

6.3.2. Political satisfaction

From the perspective of mayors, a critical question is whether they can generate general satisfaction with their work through their Facebook activity. If so, Facebook could be a crucial tool for maintaining their position, while their challengers might struggle due to their more limited reach in the local public sphere. Interestingly, the literature has not thoroughly investigated whether political actors' social media activity can increase satisfaction with their work. The few studies available that address political satisfaction focus on the relationship between general or news-oriented social media use and satisfaction with democracy. These studies found that the highly negative political environment on social media platforms weakens satisfaction with democracy (Bene, 2017; Ceron and Memoli, 2016), although Placek (2024) argued that this is true only in less developed democracies; in more robust democracies, the relationship is actually positive.

While satisfaction with political actors is not synonymous with trust, the arguments presented above can also apply to political satisfaction. Individuals, more frequently exposed to the mayor's interpretation of local political work on their page or in local groups could be expected to be more satisfied with their job performance. As discussed in Chapter 5, mayors place significant emphasis on reporting their political work on Facebook, and given that local politics is a low-information context (Holman and Lay, 2021), these one-sided accounts could serve as important cues for evaluating mayors' performance. Naturally, general exposure to local politicians' posts and participation in local groups could introduce challenging information. However, the mayor's narrative likely still plays a key role in these experiences, given the relative scarcity of Facebook communication from ordinary local politicians and mayors' intensive presence in local groups, as demonstrated in previous chapters. Therefore, we hypothesize that following mayors (H6.4a), exposure to local politicians' posts (H6.4b), and group membership (H6.4c) will all increase satisfaction with mayors' performance. To determine whether this effect is specific to local satisfaction rather than a general increase in political satisfaction, we also examined the impact of these factors on satisfaction with the government. In this context, we do not anticipate a significant association, as the perceived performance of mayors is less likely to be projected onto the government's performance.

6.3.3. Political participation

The relationship between social media use and political participation is a well-established topic in the literature, with localized social media use frequently linked to participation. Meta-analyses of the extensive research in this area have demonstrated that social media use, particularly when motivated by information-seeking or expressive, and social goals, enhances political participation (Boulianne, 2015, 2020; Skoric et al., 2016). At the local level, Communication Infrastructure Theory posits that connections to local storytelling agents lead to more active local citizenship, and most related studies support this notion by showing a positive association between localized social media use and local participation, though findings vary in terms of the precise causal mechanisms (direct, indirect, or moderated relationships)

and operationalization of the dependent and independent variables (Choi et al., 2021; Jung and LeNoble, 2023; Kim et al., 2019; Kwon et al., 2021; Lie, 2018; Nah et al., 2021, 2022; Nah and Yamamoto, 2017; Ognyanova et al., 2013).

It remains unclear, however, whether following political actors, exposure to their content, or group membership specifically increases participation in political processes. Only Marquart et al. (2020) have shown that following political actors generally enhances campaign participation, and Ohme (2019) confirmed that politicians have strong mobilization potential on these platforms. Consistent with this, we hypothesize that mayors and other local politicians can also boost local political participation through their Facebook activity, influencing mayors' followers (H6.5a) and those exposed to local politicians' content (H6.5b). In the case of group membership, we draw upon evidence of the participation-boosting role of localized social media use, as well as findings that these groups increase the sense of community (Meulenaere et al., 2021a; Meulenaere et al., 2021b), which is a driving force behind local participation (Kim and Ball-Rokeach, 2006). Accordingly, we hypothesize that membership in local groups can increase local-level political participation (H6.5c).

However, Chapter 5 revealed that local political actors' activities are also driven by national-level party political goals, with mayors using Facebook to mobilize voters during national mobilization periods. In this chapter, we test the effectiveness of this mobilization effort by examining the impact of following mayors and exposure to local politicians' Facebook content on national-level political participation (positive associations are expected: H6.6a and H6.6b). Moreover, we are able to test this assumption not only on general participation levels but also in relation to the specific mobilization period in the fall of 2021. As discussed in Chapter 5, this period featured several significant political events, such as the opposition's primary election, a large-scale national petition movement, and two major protest events. Mayors used their Facebook activity to mobilize their followers to participate in these political acts. Since we have data on participation in these specific events, we can test whether mayors' followers and individuals exposed to politicians' Facebook posts were more likely to participate in these actions (H6.7a and H6.7b). Regarding groups, our hypothesis on the positive spillover effect to national-level participation, both in general (H6.6c) and for this specific period (H6.7c), is based on our findings in Chapter 2 that national politics is vividly discussed in these local groups, with local politicians actively participating in the discourse.

6.4. Methods

To test our hypotheses, we utilized a nationally representative survey dataset introduced in Chapter 2. The previous chapters demonstrated that Facebook is the only relevant platform for local-level political activities in Hungary. Consequently, our analysis focused on individuals who use Facebook at least occasionally (N=730).

We examined three key variables that were previously analyzed both descriptively and in terms of their determinants in Chapter 2. The first variable measured whether the respondent follows their local mayor on Facebook, recorded as a binary indicator. The second variable captured the frequency of exposure to posts from local politicians on Facebook, measured on a 7-point frequency scale. The third variable examined membership in local Facebook groups, also recorded as a binary indicator. For some analyses, we differentiated between group members who reported never or rarely encountering posts from the mayor (42 percent of group members, 17 percent of Facebook users) and those who encountered the mayor's posts at least monthly (58 percent of group members, 23 percent of Facebook users).

Our hypotheses proposed that these variables would influence political trust, political satisfaction, and political participation. To measure political trust, respondents were asked to rate their trust in various political actors and institutions on a 10-point scale, with higher values

indicating greater trust. For local trust, we focused on trust in the mayor (M=5.3; SD=2.6) and trust in the local government (M=5.2; SD=2.4). To assess general political trust, we analyzed responses to an item measuring trust in politicians (M=3.9; SD=2.3).

Political satisfaction was similarly assessed on a 10-point scale, where respondents rated their satisfaction with the current Hungarian government (M=4.3; SD=2.7) and their local mayor (M=5.4; SD=2.5). Higher values indicated greater satisfaction.

Political participation was evaluated by asking respondents whether they had engaged in specific activities over the previous 12 months. Local political participation included actions such as contacting the mayor (in person or online), attending local public forums, and signing petitions related to local issues. National-level activities included contacting national politicians (in person or online), participating in protests, engaging with political organizations, and displaying political symbols. We also recorded participation in specific political activities from autumn 2021, such as attending the government-organized Peace March, voting in the opposition primary election, signing government-organized petitions, or taking part in the government's national consultation. Respondents who participated in any of these activities were included in the national participation variable. However, a separate variable specifically accounts for the political activities of 2021.

Due to the low frequency of specific activities, we treated political participation as binary variables. Respondents were categorized as active if they participated in any of the listed activities in the past 12 months. Within the sample, 14 percent were active in local politics, 31 percent were active at the national level, and 27 percent participated in specific activities during autumn 2021.

In certain analyses, we also accounted for whether respondents voted for the incumbent mayor in the last municipal elections, recorded as a binary variable (43 percent voted for their current mayor).

To ensure robust testing of our hypotheses, we controlled for several factors that could influence the dependent variables. These included the frequency of informal political discussions, levels of national and local political interest, whether respondents followed national-level political leaders on Facebook, and the frequency of exposure to posts by national politicians on Facebook. Sociodemographic variables such as age, education, gender, and municipality type were also included.

We simplified the questions related to political information consumption, as these variables serve solely as control variables in the analysis. Accordingly, we included two measures in the model: the frequency of information consumption from professional media and the frequency of information consumption from Facebook. For the former, we assessed how often respondents gather information from newspapers, TV, radio, or news websites, using a 7-point frequency scale (M=6.0, SD=1.2). Similarly, we recorded the frequency of information consumption from Facebook using the same scale (M=5.1, SD=1.9). Additionally, we accounted for the homogeneity of respondents' personal environments, as prior research suggests this can influence political attitudes and behaviors (e.g. Mutz, 2006). Respondents were asked to evaluate the extent to which the political views of their friends and family aligned with their own. Those who reported that their friends and family predominantly supported the same political force as they did were classified as being in a homogeneous environment (35 percent). Conversely, those who stated that their circle of friends was politically balanced, predominantly supported opposing political forces, were unsure about the majority's political stance, or did not sympathize with any political force, were classified as being in a non-homogeneous environment (65 percent).

Finally, we controlled for populist attitudes, which can significantly shape political behaviors and perceptions. These were measured using a composite variable derived from six items on a

5-point agreement scale[10] (Cronbach's alpha = 0.8; M=3.7; SD=0.7), based on the work of Akkerman and colleagues (2014).
A major limitation of our analysis is that the cross-sectional nature of our survey does not allow us to directly test the causal hypotheses our theory predicts. While we cannot empirically address this limitation, we devote significant attention to demonstrating, through the interpretation of specific elements of the research design, that the likelihood of reverse causality is relatively limited. Therefore, based on theoretical arguments, the identified associations are likely – but not empirically provable – to align with the presumed causal relationships suggested by our framework.

6.5. Findings

6.5.1. Localized social media use and political trust

Analytical approach

The relationship between political trust and local social media experiences is examined through multiple approaches. As a first step, we use the same set of variables to explain trust in mayors, local governments, and politicians in general. Here, we also reflect on differences between municipality types, as previous chapters have demonstrated that both the supply and demand sides show variations across different types of municipalities.
Next, we analyze trust in local institutions using more stringent models, which are not feasible for general political trust. First, it is reasonable to assume that trust in the mayor or local government is influenced by general levels of political trust. Therefore, controlling for general trust in politicians allows us to isolate factors specifically related to local trust from those tied to broader political trust. Second, it can also be assumed that individuals who voted for the incumbent mayor in the previous local elections are more likely to trust local institutions, making it important to control for this aspect as well. In addition, we investigate whether following the mayor has different effects on trust among those who are generally trusting or distrustful of politicians, as well as among the mayor's own voters and other voters. This can be tested using interaction terms, providing a more precise understanding of the factors affecting trust at the local level. Following this, we summarize the complex findings and reflect on the arguments supporting the causal nature of the identified relationships.

Local Facebook experiences and political trust: the comparable models

The main linear regression models (Table 6.1), which use consistent control variables to allow for comparison, reveal that following the mayor is positively associated with trust in politicians, trust in the mayor, and trust in the local government. However, mere exposure to local politicians' content does not have a significant effect on these trust measures. On average, those who follow their mayor on Facebook trust the mayor 0.65 points more, politicians 0.71 points more, and the local government 1.02 points more on a 10-point trust scale compared to otherwise identical citizens who do not follow their mayor.

[10] (1) The politicians in the parliament need to follow the will of the people; (2) The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions; (3) The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people; (4) I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician; (5) Elected officials talk too much and take too little action; (6) What people call "compromise" in politics is really just selling out on one's principles.

Table 6.1. Linear regression models explaining local and general political trust

	Trust in mayor	**Trust in mayor**	**Trust in local government**	**Trust in local government**	**Trust in politicians**	**Trust in politicians**
Predictors	*Estimates*	*Estimates*	*Estimates*	*Estimates*	*Estimates*	*Estimates*
(Intercept)	2.78 **	2.98 **	3.53 ***	3.54 ***	3.67 ***	3.42 ***
	(0.84)	(0.99)	(0.76)	(0.87)	(0.66)	(0.83)
Following mayor on FB	0.65 *	2.31 ***	1.01 ***	2.79 ***	0.71 **	1.84 **
	(0.28)	(0.55)	(0.28)	(0.61)	(0.26)	(0.57)
Exposure to local politicians on FB	0.08	-0.03	0.06	-0.01	0.13	0.25
	(0.08)	(0.14)	(0.08)	(0.13)	(0.07)	(0.13)
Local FB group membership	-0.49 *	-0.42	-0.41 *	-0.61	-0.14	-0.67
	(0.20)	(0.49)	(0.18)	(0.49)	(0.17)	(0.48)
News consumption from media	-0.02	-0.01	-0.07	-0.05	-0.05	-0.03
	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.07)	(0.07)
News consumption from FB	0.05	0.02	0.01	0.01	-0.12 *	-0.15 **
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Follow national leaders on FB	0.07	0.06	0.07	0.07	-0.07	-0.04
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Exposure to national politicians on FB	0.95 ***	0.95 ***	0.62 *	0.61 *	0.37	0.40
	(0.27)	(0.28)	(0.26)	(0.27)	(0.23)	(0.24)
Populist attitudes	-0.23	-0.29	-0.25	-0.32 *	-0.48 ***	-0.43 ***
	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.11)	(0.13)
Talking about politics	-0.07	-0.06	-0.02	-0.02	0.09	0.07
	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)
Homogeneity of personal context	0.25	0.24	0.23	0.20	-0.09	-0.02
	(0.22)	(0.21)	(0.19)	(0.19)	(0.17)	(0.18)
Interest in national politics	-0.42 *	-0.36	-0.33	-0.25	0.66 ***	0.64 ***
	(0.20)	(0.20)	(0.18)	(0.18)	(0.19)	(0.19)
Interest in local politics	1.20 ***	1.18 ***	1.14 ***	1.08 ***	0.44 **	0.39 *
	(0.18)	(0.18)	(0.16)	(0.16)	(0.17)	(0.17)
Age	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Education: secondary	-0.23	-0.28	-0.14	-0.17	-0.30	-0.34
	(0.21)	(0.21)	(0.19)	(0.19)	(0.18)	(0.18)
Education: higher	0.21	0.31	0.25	0.36	-0.25	-0.06
	(0.30)	(0.30)	(0.27)	(0.27)	(0.24)	(0.27)
Gender: female	0.16	0.12	0.01	-0.03	0.21	0.09
	(0.19)	(0.19)	(0.18)	(0.18)	(0.16)	(0.17)
Domicile: city	0.02	0.44	-0.33	-0.33	-0.43	0.92
	(0.32)	(0.77)	(0.31)	(0.69)	(0.27)	(0.61)

Domicile: town	0.61 *	0.73	0.38	0.84	-0.14	0.23
	(0.30)	(0.63)	(0.29)	(0.57)	(0.26)	(0.57)
Domicile: village	0.70 *	1.02	0.29	0.74	-0.56 *	-0.57
	(0.30)	(0.64)	(0.29)	(0.59)	(0.25)	(0.56)
Following mayor * domicile: city		-1.59		-1.80 *		-1.70 *
		(0.88)		(0.90)		(0.77)
Following mayor * domicile: town		-2.87 ***		-2.37 **		-1.65 *
		(0.70)		(0.72)		(0.73)
Following mayor * domicile: village		-1.65 *		-2.56 ***		-0.97
		(0.65)		(0.71)		(0.73)
Exposure to local politicians * domicile: city		0.04		0.06		-0.40 **
		(0.18)		(0.17)		(0.15)
Exposure to local politicians * domicile: town		0.25		0.10		-0.08
		(0.16)		(0.14)		(0.14)
exposure to local politicians * domicile: village		0.00		0.01		-0.09
		(0.17)		(0.15)		(0.15)
FB group membership * domicile: city		-0.14		0.80		0.44
		(0.69)		(0.66)		(0.61)
FB group membership * domicile: town		-0.49		-0.31		0.31
		(0.60)		(0.58)		(0.58)
FB group membership * domicile: village		0.27		0.43		1.06
		(0.60)		(0.58)		(0.57)
Observations	662	662	660	660	665	669
R^2 / R^2 adjusted	0.220 / 0.196	0.247 / 0.214	0.245 / 0.223	0.276 / 0.244	0.289 / 0.268	0.299 / 0.269

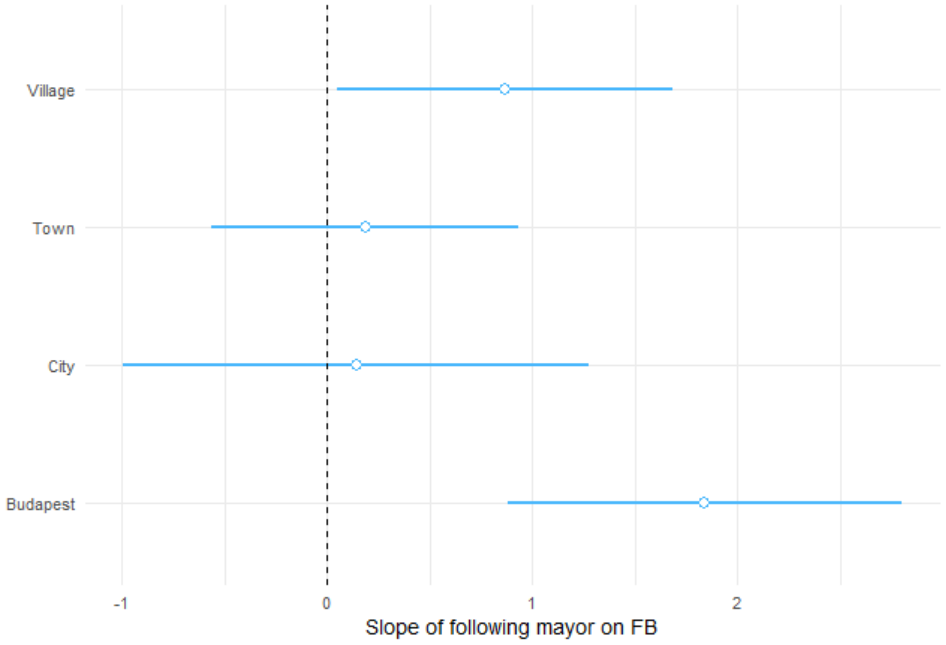
** p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001*

It is important to highlight that following the mayor is also associated with general political trust, and exposure to local political actors' content is marginally significant in this regard. In contrast, following national leaders or exposure to content from national politicians does not play a similar role. This suggests that local politics can contribute to building general political trust as well.

Surprisingly, membership in local Facebook groups is negatively associated with trust in local political institutions, although it does not influence general trust in politicians. Among the control variables, political interest shows an interesting pattern: higher national-level political interest increases general trust in politicians but decreases trust in the mayor and local government. Conversely, higher local political interest enhances trust across all dimensions, particularly trust in local institutions. The results also show that trust in the mayor is higher in villages and towns compared to the capital and county seats.

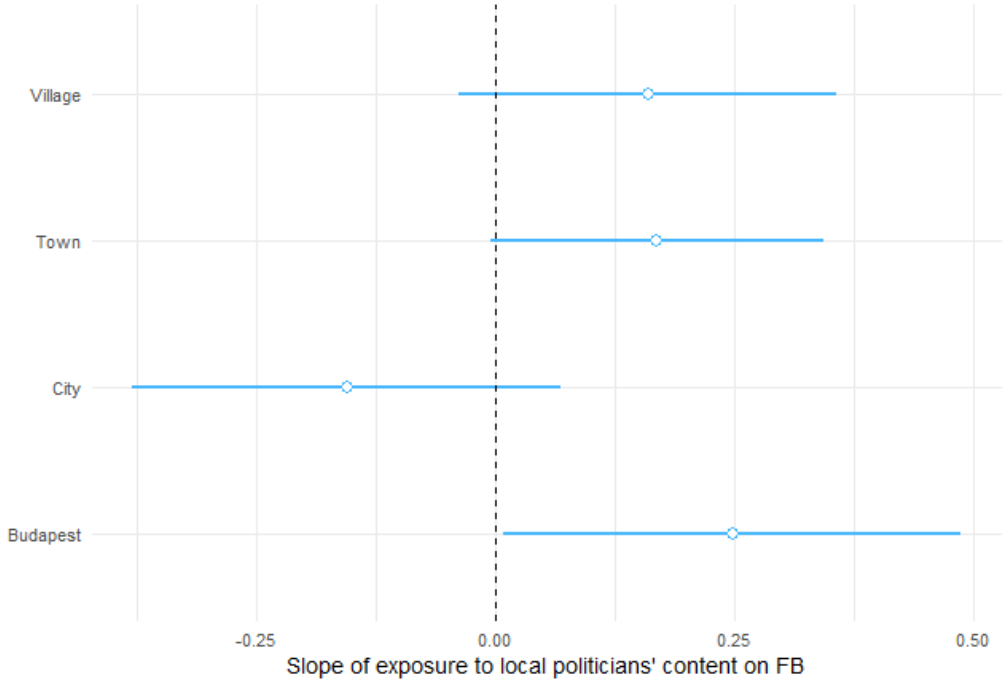
Our interaction terms show that municipality types also influence the relationship between political trust and following the mayor. Trust in local institutions is significantly associated with following the mayor only in Budapest, a finding that will be examined further using stricter models in the next subsection. For general political trust – where stricter models are not feasible – the effects are significant only in Budapest and villages (Figure 6.1). In Budapest, the effect is particularly strong, with followers of the mayor trusting politicians 1.84 points more than non-followers with similar characteristics. In villages, this difference is smaller but still notable at 0.87 points.

Figure 6.1. The Effect of following the mayor's Facebook page on general political trust by municipality types



Regarding the effect of exposure to local politicians' content on general political trust, we observe smaller differences across municipality types; however, this relationship is significant only among residents of Budapest (Figure 6.2). For these individuals, the more frequently they are exposed to local politicians' content, the higher their trust in political actors. On a 7-point scale, each additional point of exposure increases trust in politicians by 0.25 points. This translates to an average difference of 1.5 points in political trust between those who are never exposed to local politicians' content and those who encounter it multiple times daily. The negative effect of group membership is not influenced by municipality type; it is a consistent relationship across all types of municipalities. However, a more detailed evaluation of this effect will be revisited in the context of stricter models related to trust in local institutions.

Figure 6.2. The effect of exposure to local politicians' content on Facebook on general political trust by municipality types



Local Facebook experiences and trust in local institutions: the stricter models

To gain a more precise understanding of the relationship between local social media experiences and trust in the mayor and local institutions, we extended the models by including the variable for general political trust, as well as whether the respondent voted for the mayor in the last election. Additionally, we incorporated interaction terms to examine the moderating effects of these variables. The results are presented in Table 6.2.

Table 6.2. Linear Regression models explaining local political trust, controlling for general political trust and voting for the mayor

	Trust in mayor	**Trust in mayor**	**Trust in local government**	**Trust in local government**
Predictors	*Estimates*	*Estimates*	*Estimates*	*Estimates*
(Intercept)	0.77 (0.73)	0.47 (0.72)	1.77 ** (0.66)	1.35 * (0.65)
Following mayor on FB	0.23 (0.25)	3.22 *** (0.69)	0.63 ** (0.22)	3.73 *** (0.61)
Exposure to local politicians on FB	0.06 (0.07)	0.04 (0.07)	0.02 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.06)
Local FB group membership	-0.34 (0.18)	-0.42 * (0.17)	-0.31 (0.16)	-0.38 * (0.16)
News consumption from media	-0.00 (0.08)	0.00 (0.07)	-0.03 (0.07)	-0.03 (0.07)
News consumption from FB	0.09 (0.05)	0.09 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)

General political trust	0.35 ***	0.42 ***	0.35 ***	0.41 ***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Voted for the mayor	1.57 ***	1.49 ***	1.42 ***	1.29 ***
	(0.17)	(0.19)	(0.15)	(0.17)
Follow national leaders on FB	0.06	0.09	0.08	0.10
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Exposure to national politicians on FB	0.73 **	0.75 **	0.49 *	0.48 *
	(0.24)	(0.23)	(0.21)	(0.21)
Populist attitudes	-0.05	-0.07	-0.12	-0.15
	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.11)	(0.11)
Talking about politics	-0.07	-0.05	-0.05	-0.03
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Homogeneity of personal context	0.05	0.06	0.05	0.03
	(0.18)	(0.17)	(0.16)	(0.16)
Interest in national politics	-0.48 **	-0.45 **	-0.39 *	-0.36 *
	(0.17)	(0.17)	(0.16)	(0.16)
Interest in local politics	0.83 ***	0.80 ***	0.81 ***	0.78 ***
	(0.16)	(0.16)	(0.15)	(0.14)
Age	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Education: secondary	-0.12	-0.16	-0.10	-0.12
	(0.19)	(0.19)	(0.17)	(0.17)
Education: higher	0.32	0.34	0.25	0.29
	(0.25)	(0.25)	(0.23)	(0.22)
Gender: female	0.13	0.10	-0.02	-0.05
	(0.17)	(0.17)	(0.15)	(0.15)
Domicile: city	0.12	0.43	-0.22	0.16
	(0.28)	(0.31)	(0.26)	(0.28)
Domicile: town	0.65 *	1.07 ***	0.37	0.82 **
	(0.26)	(0.29)	(0.23)	(0.26)
Domicile: village	0.88 **	1.13 ***	0.41	0.92 ***
	(0.27)	(0.30)	(0.24)	(0.27)
Following mayor * general political trust		-0.38 ***		-0.35 ***
		(0.09)		(0.08)
Following mayor * voted on mayor		0.16		0.26
		(0.43)		(0.38)
Following mayor * domicile: city		-1.55 *		-1.71 **
		(0.72)		(0.65)
Following mayor * domicile: town		-2.07 ***		-1.95 ***
		(0.57)		(0.51)

Following mayor * domicile: village		-1.05 (0.58)		-2.20 *** (0.52)
Observations	623	623	620	620
R^2 / R^2 adjusted	0.412 / 0.392	0.440 / 0.415	0.450 / 0.431	0.481 / 0.458

** p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001*

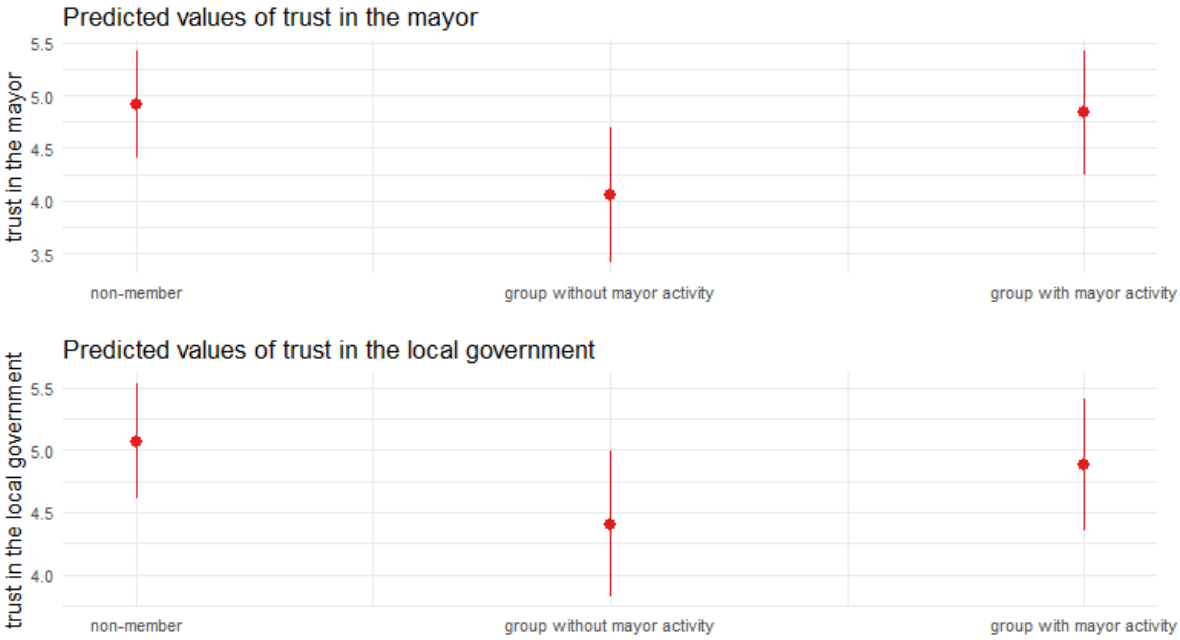
The models indicate that general trust in politicians and voting for the current mayor play significant roles in determining trust in both the mayor and the local government. The explanatory power of the models increased substantially, and both variables have a significant impact on the dependent variables. When these factors are accounted for, following the mayor is no longer significantly associated with trust in the mayor, although it still correlates with higher trust in the local government. On average, among respondents with otherwise identical characteristics, a non-follower of the mayor rates trust in the local government at 5 on a 10-point scale, while a follower rates it at 5.6, meaning that following the mayor increases trust in the local government by 0.6 points. Interestingly, only following the mayor is associated with trust in the local government. When the model includes following the local government's page, it does not have a significant effect (see Appendix, Table A1).

The p-value for local group membership is right at the 5 percent significance threshold, indicating that local group membership continues to be associated with reduced trust in both the mayor and the local government. A member of a local Facebook group trusts the mayor and the local government 0.3 points less on average than a non-member with otherwise identical characteristics.

To further disentangle this surprising effect, the model was rerun with local group members divided into two subgroups: those who encounter the mayor's posts in the group at least a few times per month, and those who are members of local groups but rarely or never see the mayor's content. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the nuanced relationship between group membership, exposure to mayoral content, and trust levels.

The alternative model (full models presented in the Appendix Table A2, with the effect of interest shown in Figure 6.3) clearly demonstrates that negative associations with trust in mayors are specifically tied to group membership where the mayor is not actively present. Active mayoral presence in a group does not increase trust in the mayor compared to non-membership in such groups. However, if someone is a member of a group but does not encounter the mayor's communication, they are less likely to trust the mayor.

Figure 6.3. Predicted values of trust in local institutions based on experiences in local Facebook groups



A similar trend is observed regarding trust in the local government. Compared to non-members, membership in groups without active mayoral presence is associated with significantly lower levels of trust in the local government. However, in groups characterized by active mayoral presence, there is a marginally significant improvement in trust levels relative to groups without such presence.

Turning to the interaction terms, it becomes clear that the trust-building effect of following the mayor does not function the same way for people who generally trust politicians compared to those who do not.

Figure 6.4. Interaction effect between following the mayor and trust in politicians on trust in the mayor

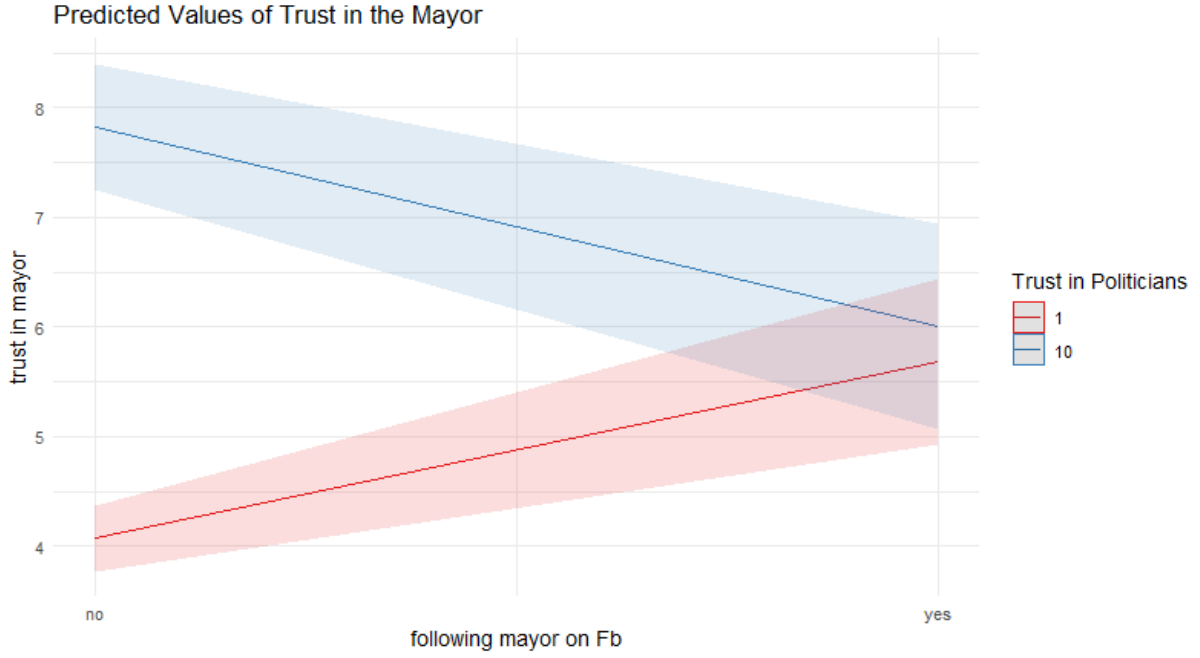
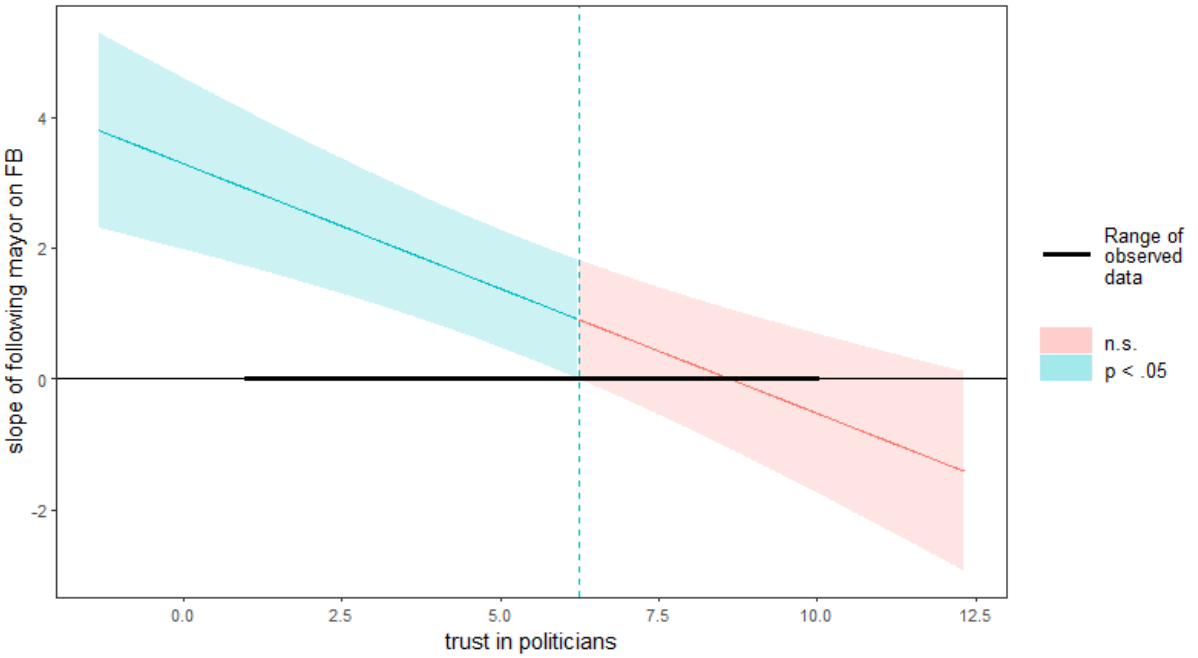


Figure 6.5. Johnson-Neyman plot for the interaction effect of following the mayor on Facebook and trust in politicians on trust in the mayor



From Figure 6.4, it is evident that among individuals who are highly distrustful of politicians, following the mayor on Facebook significantly increases trust in the mayor. In contrast, among voters who already exhibit high trust in politicians, following the mayor on Facebook slightly decreases their trust in the mayor. The Johnson-Neyman plot (Figure 6.5) further illustrates that this significantly positive relationship exists at trust levels between 0 and 6. At higher trust, there is no significant relationship, even if the relationship becomes negative at level 9 and 10. A very similar pattern is observed for trust in the local government. Here, the relationship remains significantly positive for general political trust levels between 0 and 8 and non-significant at higher level (see Appendix Figure A1 and A2).

Overall, our findings indicate that followers of mayors develop a similar level of trust in the mayor and the local government, regardless of their general trust in politicians. However, for those who do not follow the mayor, their general political trust level is projected onto their evaluation of local institutions. This suggests that following the mayor helps to decouple the evaluation of local institutions from general political impressions.

Given the low levels of political trust in Hungary, this is generally advantageous for local institutions. In Hungary, 85 percent of the population has a trust level between 0 and 8, and 98 percent has a trust level between 0 and 8. For these individuals, following the mayor increases trust in local institutions.

However, there is no interaction effect between voting for the mayor and following the mayor. The relationship between following the mayor and political trust is consistent across voters who supported or did not support the mayor in the elections.

Using the stricter models, we can more thoroughly evaluate the differences across municipality types in the relationship between following the mayor and trust in local institutions.

Figure 6.6. The Effect of following the mayor on Facebook on political trust in the mayor by municipality types

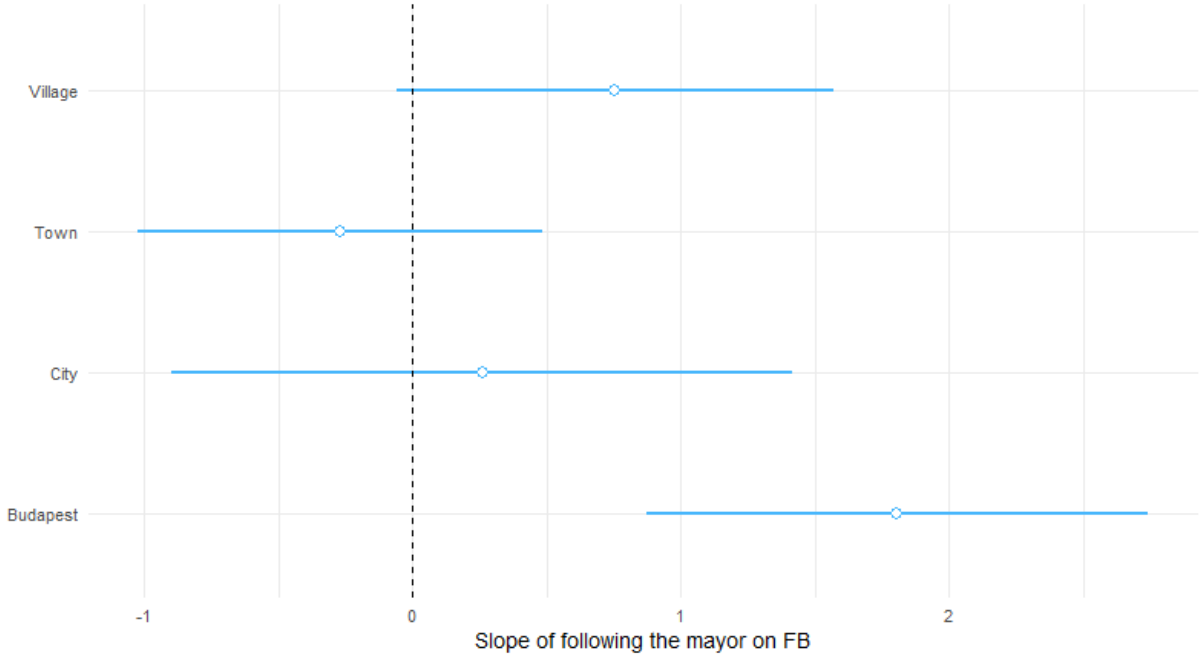
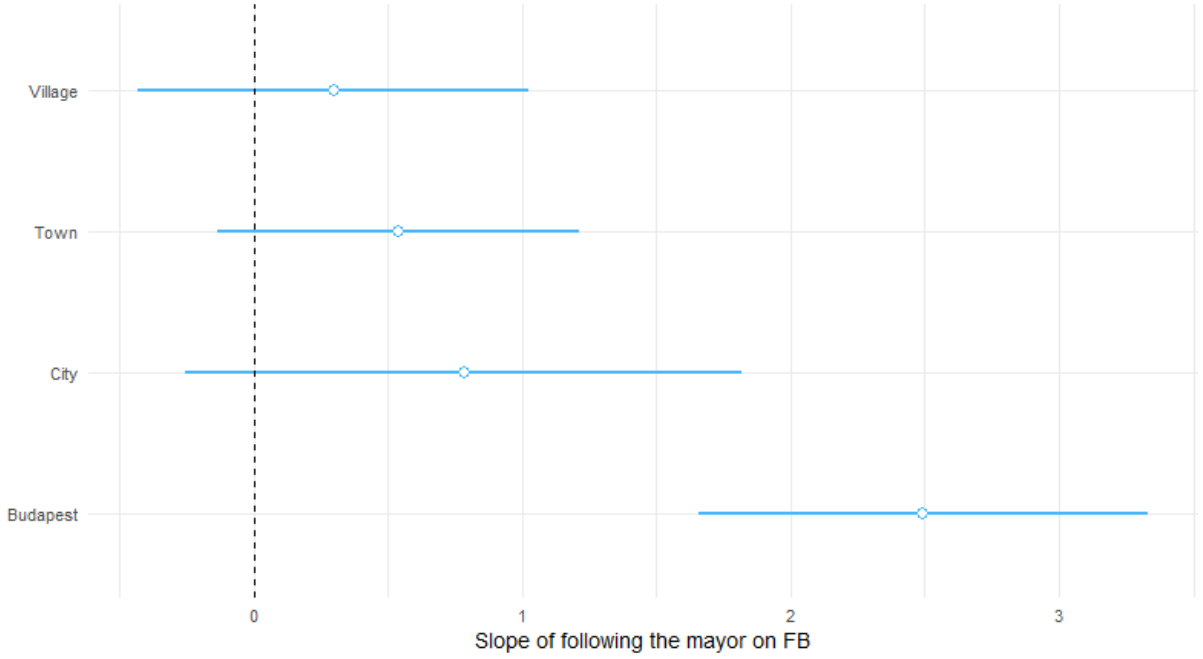


Figure 6.7. The Effect of following the mayor on Facebook on political trust in the local government by municipality types



For both trust in the mayor (Figure 6.6) and trust in the local government (Figure 6.7), the data show that following the mayor is associated with higher trust levels only among voters in the capital. Additionally, a marginally significant relationship is observed between following the mayor and trust in the mayor among residents of villages. In the capital, followers of the mayor trust their mayor 1.81 points more and their local government 2.49 points more, on average, than non-followers. Among village residents, followers view their mayor 0.76 points more positively than non-followers.

Evaluation of the findings

Overall, the findings suggest that following mayors on Facebook does not inherently increase local political trust but can facilitate higher trust under specific conditions. People with generally low trust in politicians, as well as voters in Budapest and, to a lesser extent, villages, exhibit higher trust in local institutions if they follow their mayor on Facebook (H6.1a and H6.1b are partly confirmed). Furthermore, following mayors is also associated with general political trust among respondents in Budapest and villages (H6.1c is partly confirmed). To a smaller extent, this is also true for exposure to content from local politicians among voters in the capital (H6.2c is partly confirmed, while H6.2a and H6.2b are rejected). However, membership in local Facebook groups negatively affects trust in local institutions, but only for those who do not regularly encounter posts from the mayor in these groups. This indicates an expectation for mayors to actively communicate within local groups, as their absence can harm perceptions of trust. Nonetheless, it seems that membership in local groups does not directly enhance political trust at any level (H6.3a-H6.3c are rejected).

It is important to acknowledge that these findings cannot definitively establish the causal direction of the observed relationships. However, there are strong arguments supporting the notion that the identified associations align with the predicted causal directions. While our theory posits that following the mayor leads to higher trust, the empirical results could also indicate reverse causality, where individuals with higher trust in the mayor or the political elite are more likely to follow them. There are two theoretical explanations for this reverse relationship. First, people with generally higher levels of political trust may be more inclined to follow political actors. Second, those who specifically sympathize with their mayor may be more likely to follow them.

The first explanation can largely be ruled out for trust in local institutions, as the stricter models control for general political trust. This ensures that the relationship observed is independent of broader political trust and pertains specifically to the mayor. However, for general political trust, we lack similarly robust controls. Still, the model explaining general political trust showed that it was only associated with following the mayor and not with following other political leaders or exposure to content from national politicians. If higher political trust led to greater following activity, we would expect this pattern to apply to other political actors as well, which is not the case.

The second explanation is weakened by additional evidence. First, the models control for whether respondents voted for the mayor, meaning any reverse causality would need to stem from trust independent of voting behavior. Second, the previous chapters demonstrated that following mayors is a highly heterogeneous activity, attracting a diverse group of local residents with varying characteristics.

Interaction effects further challenge the plausibility of reverse causality. For instance, theoretically, it is logical that following the mayor would increase trust among those with low general trust in politicians, while slightly decreasing trust among those with high general trust. For non-followers, general political trust levels are projected onto their evaluation of the mayor. However, following the mayor separates general trust from trust in the individual, potentially improving trust among those with low general trust and slightly (but not-significantly) diminishing it among those with high general trust. A reverse relationship would suggest that individuals with low general trust in politicians but high trust in their mayor are more likely to follow the mayor compared to those who already have high trust in both politicians and the mayor. Such a causal explanation would be difficult to justify.

The interaction with municipality types also supports the theoretical direction of causality. The stronger trust effect of following the mayor on trust in the mayor observed in the capital can be easily explained by the relatively passive nature of offline local public life in Budapest.

Residents there may rely heavily on information available through social media to stay informed about local events. In contrast, in other municipalities, residents may be more likely to follow the mayor's work through other sources as well, making social media less central to building trust. A reverse relationship, however, would struggle to explain why higher trust in the mayor would lead to greater following activity only in Budapest and not in other municipalities.
A reverse explanation is even less plausible for local Facebook group membership. It is difficult to argue that trust in the mayor or local government determines whether someone joins a general local group. Moreover, it is unclear why individuals with lower trust would be more likely to join such groups. A more plausible explanation is that local groups often host criticisms of local leadership. If the mayor is not actively present to defend their position, it could harm perceptions of trust.
While reverse causality cannot be entirely ruled out, the evidence more strongly supports our theory. It suggests that Facebook experiences contribute to higher trust levels under specific circumstances, both for local institutions and for general political trust.

6.5.2. Localized social media use and political satisfaction

Analytical approach

The impact of localized social media use on political satisfaction is analyzed using a similar approach to that employed for trust. First, for comparability with satisfaction with the national government, we use an identical set of variables to examine the effects on satisfaction with the mayor and satisfaction with the government. In the second step, however, we apply a stricter model to analyze satisfaction with the mayor. This model incorporates the variable of voting for the mayor and considers the interaction between following the mayor on social media and voting for them.
Local Facebook experiences and political satisfaction: the comparable models
The comparable models (Table 6.3) reveal that while satisfaction with the government is unaffected by any social media-related variables, satisfaction with the mayor is positively associated with following the mayor on social media and negatively associated with membership in local groups. Meanwhile, exposure to local politicians' content does not have a significant impact. On a 10-point scale, followers of the mayor are, on average, 0.75 points more satisfied with the mayor than non-followers with otherwise identical characteristics. Conversely, members of local groups are 0.44 points less satisfied with the mayor's work than non-members.
Apart from these variables, only political interest explains satisfaction with the mayor. Individuals with higher local political interest tend to be more satisfied with the mayor's performance, while those with lower interest are less satisfied.
Municipality type somewhat moderates the effect of following the mayor on satisfaction with the mayor. This relationship is significant only in the capital, similar to previous findings, and is worth revisiting in the stricter model. However, municipality type does not moderate the other effects.

Table 6.3. Linear regression models explaining satisfaction with the mayor and the government

	Satisfaction with the mayor	**Satisfaction with the mayor**	**Satisfaction with the government**	**Satisfaction with the government**
Predictors	*Estimates*	*Estimates*	*Estimates*	*Estimates*

(Intercept)	3.67 ***	3.75 ***	5.57 ***	5.51 ***
	(0.80)	(0.93)	(0.89)	(1.02)
Following mayor on FB	0.75 **	1.92 ***	-0.19	-0.03
	(0.28)	(0.58)	(0.31)	(0.65)
Exposure to local politicians on FB	-0.02	-0.08	0.09	0.08
	(0.08)	(0.15)	(0.09)	(0.16)
Local FB group membership	-0.44 *	-0.60	-0.17	0.02
	(0.20)	(0.47)	(0.22)	(0.52)
News consumption from media	0.09	0.11	0.03	0.02
	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.10)
News consumption from FB	-0.02	-0.03	-0.12	-0.14 *
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Follow national leaders on FB	0.14	0.14	-0.11	-0.09
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Exposure to national politicians on FB	0.48	0.48	0.39	0.34
	(0.27)	(0.27)	(0.30)	(0.30)
Populist attitudes	-0.02	-0.07	-0.39 **	-0.40 **
	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.15)	(0.15)
Talking about politics	-0.07	-0.06	-0.04	-0.02
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Homogeneity of personal context	0.14	0.12	-0.46 *	-0.46 *
	(0.20)	(0.20)	(0.22)	(0.22)
Interest in national politics	-0.42 *	-0.40 *	0.57 **	0.54 *
	(0.20)	(0.20)	(0.22)	(0.22)
Interest in local politics	0.85 ***	0.84 ***	0.19	0.23
	(0.19)	(0.19)	(0.20)	(0.21)
Age	-0.00	-0.00	-0.01	-0.00
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Education: secondary	-0.36	-0.40	-0.26	-0.29
	(0.22)	(0.22)	(0.24)	(0.24)
Education: higher	-0.10	-0.01	-0.02	0.03
	(0.29)	(0.29)	(0.31)	(0.32)
Gender: female	0.10	0.06	0.00	-0.03
	(0.19)	(0.19)	(0.21)	(0.21)
Domicile: city	0.27	0.70	-0.60	0.38
	(0.32)	(0.71)	(0.35)	(0.77)
Domicile: town	0.09	0.26	-0.49	-0.65
	(0.30)	(0.62)	(0.33)	(0.67)
Domicile: village	0.19	0.27	-0.54	-0.42
	(0.31)	(0.63)	(0.34)	(0.69)

Following mayor * domicile: city		-0.81 (0.88)		-0.11 (0.98)
Following mayor * domicile: town		-1.92 ** (0.72)		-0.31 (0.80)
Following mayor * domicile: village		-1.44 (0.74)		-0.24 (0.82)
Exposure to local politicians * domicile: city		-0.04 (0.18)		-0.23 (0.19)
Exposure to local politicians * domicile: town		0.15 (0.16)		0.16 (0.17)
Exposure to local politicians * domicile: village		-0.00 (0.17)		-0.08 (0.19)
FB group membership * domicile: city		0.01 (0.65)		-0.46 (0.72)
FB group membership * domicile: town		-0.32 (0.56)		-0.65 (0.63)
FB group membership * domicile: village		0.83 (0.59)		0.43 (0.66)
Observations	654	654	654	654
R^2 / R^2 adjusted	0.107 / 0.080	0.128 / 0.089	0.081 / 0.053	0.097 / 0.056

** p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001*

Local Facebook experiences and satisfaction with the mayor: the stricter models

The next model focuses exclusively on satisfaction with the mayor, while controlling for the effect of having previously voted for the current mayor. It is reasonable to assume that those who voted for the mayor in the most recent election are more likely to be satisfied with their performance. Additionally, the model examines whether the relationship between following the mayor and satisfaction differs between those who voted for the mayor and those who did not. Furthermore, we explore whether there are municipality-type differences in the relationship between following the mayor and satisfaction, which was found to be significant in the main model (Table 6.4).

Table 6.4. Linear regression models explaining satisfaction with the mayor, controlling for voting for the mayor

	Satisfaction with the mayor	**Satisfaction with the mayor**
Predictors	*Estimates*	*Estimates*
(Intercept)	3.03 *** (0.76)	2.91 *** (0.77)
Following mayor on FB	0.44 (0.26)	1.02 (0.54)

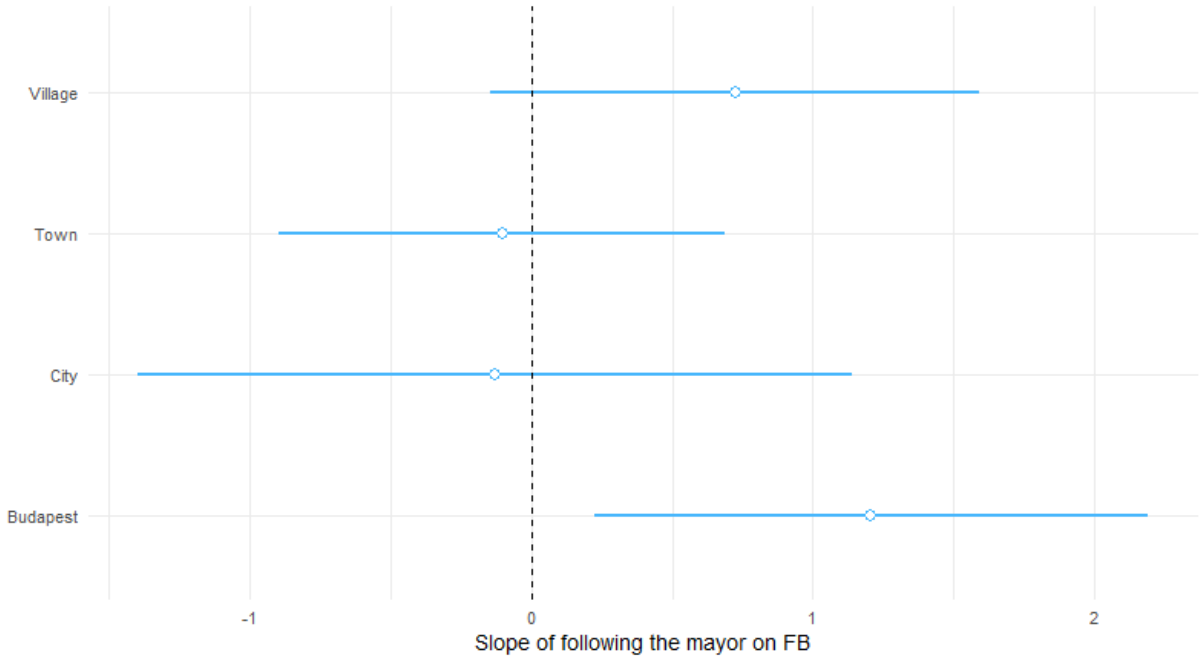
Exposure to local politicians on FB	0.01	0.00
	(0.08)	(0.08)
Local FB group membership	-0.32	-0.36
	(0.19)	(0.19)
Voted for the mayor	1.94 ***	1.86 ***
	(0.18)	(0.20)
News consumption from media	0.03	0.04
	(0.08)	(0.08)
News consumption from FB	0.01	0.00
	(0.05)	(0.05)
Follow national leaders on FB	0.11	0.11
	(0.07)	(0.07)
Exposure to national politicians on FB	0.55 *	0.58 *
	(0.25)	(0.25)
Populist attitudes	0.08	0.07
	(0.13)	(0.13)
Talking about politics	-0.06	-0.06
	(0.08)	(0.08)
Homogeneity of personal context	-0.14	-0.11
	(0.19)	(0.19)
Interest in national politics	-0.20	-0.14
	(0.18)	(0.19)
Interest in local politics	0.54 **	0.49 **
	(0.17)	(0.17)
Age	0.00	-0.00
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Education: secondary	-0.46 *	-0.46 *
	(0.20)	(0.20)
Education: higher	-0.17	-0.14
	(0.27)	(0.27)
Gender: female	0.12	0.10
	(0.18)	(0.18)
Domicile: city	-0.09	0.22
	(0.31)	(0.35)
Domicile: town	-0.16	0.19
	(0.28)	(0.33)
Domicile: village	-0.03	0.16
	(0.29)	(0.33)
Following mayor * domicile: village		0.43
		(0.46)

Following mayor * voted on mayor		-1.33 (0.79)
Following mayor * domicile: city		-1.31 * (0.62)
Following mayor * domicile: town		-0.48 (0.64)
Observations	613	613
R^2 / R^2 adjusted	0.257 / 0.231	0.264 / 0.234

** p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001*

Incorporating voting behavior significantly improved the explanatory power of the model, as satisfaction with the mayor is strongly influenced by whether the respondent voted for the mayor in the most recent election. Those who voted for the mayor are, on average, nearly two points more satisfied with their performance than those who did not. With this adjustment, the effect size of following the mayor was substantially reduced, indicating that much of its impact in the initial model was due to overlap between followers and voters. However, a marginally significant relationship remains (p = 0.095), with followers still being, on average, 0.44 points more satisfied with the mayor than non-followers, even after accounting for voting behavior.
Voting behavior does not interact with following the mayor, meaning the effect of following the mayor on satisfaction is similar for those who did and did not vote for the mayor. However, the interaction effect with municipality type is again significant, mirroring the findings for political trust (Figure 6.8). The results show that in the capital, followers of the mayor are significantly more satisfied with the mayor than non-followers, even when controlling for voting behavior. Moreover, the effect size is substantial: followers in Budapest are 1.21 points more satisfied with the mayor than non-followers.
In addition, there is a marginally significant effect (p = 0.1) for residents of villages, where following the mayor is associated with a 0.73-point increase in satisfaction. No significant relationship between following and satisfaction is observed for mayors in towns or cities. These findings highlight the nuanced and context-dependent nature of the relationship between following the mayor and satisfaction with their performance.

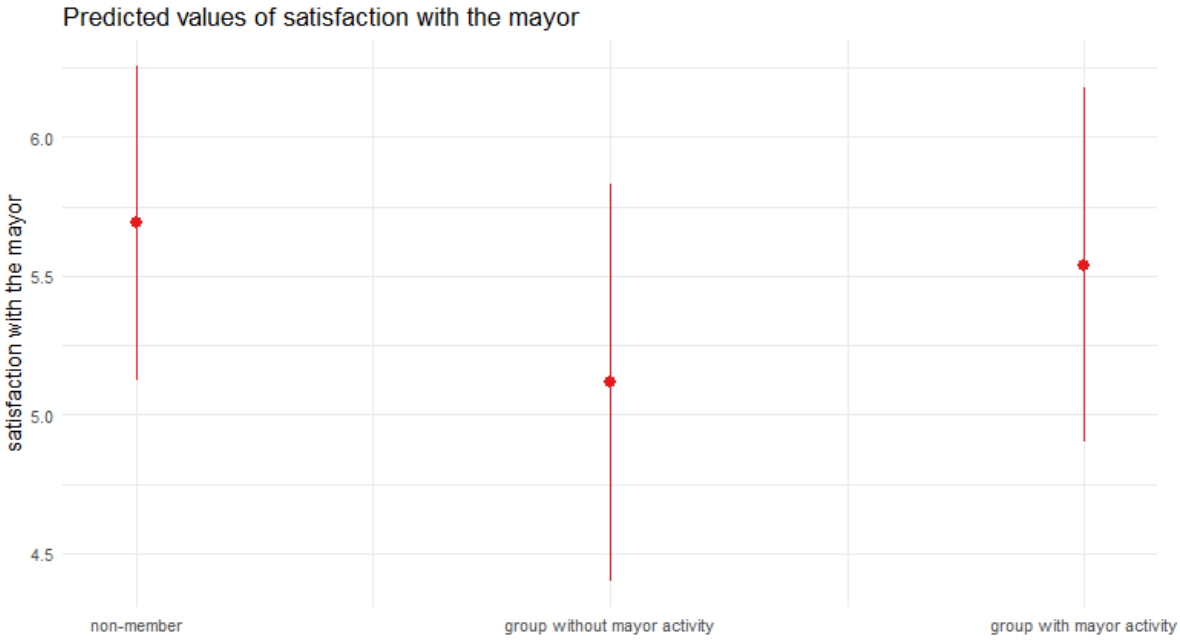
Figure 6.8. The effect of following the mayor on Facebook on satisfaction with the mayor by municipality types



The negative effect of group membership remains, albeit marginally significant ($p = 0.08$), even in the stricter model. When the three-category group membership variable used in earlier analyses is applied, a similar pattern emerges as with political trust: only those group members who do not see the mayor's activity within the group are less satisfied with the mayor (Table A3 in Appendix; Figure 6.9). These individuals are significantly less satisfied than non-members of local groups. However, there are no significant differences in satisfaction between members of groups with an active mayor and those who are not part of any group.

This finding further supports the idea that the mayor's activity in local groups serves as a tool for risk minimization: it does not necessarily increase satisfaction but helps prevent dissatisfaction among group members. Without visible mayoral activity in local groups, group members tend to view the mayor's work less favorably.

Figure 6.9. Predicted values of satisfaction with the mayor based on experiences in local Facebook groups



Evaluation of the findings

Overall, similar conclusions can be drawn as in the case of political trust. Following the mayor does not generally correlate with higher satisfaction but is associated with greater satisfaction among voters in the capital (and marginally significantly in villages). No such relationship exists for other municipality types (H6.4a partly confirmed). Importantly, this is not indicative of a general increase in political satisfaction, as no similar relationship is observed between satisfaction with the government and following mayors or even national political actors. Local politicians' content exposure does not influence satisfaction with the mayor, likely because such content may also include criticism of the mayor (H6.4b rejected). However, members of local Facebook groups where the mayor is inactive view their local leader more negatively than those who are not members of such groups or who belong to groups with active mayoral communication. Nevertheless, group membership itself does not have a positive impact on satisfaction with the mayor, even in the latter case (H6.4c rejected).

The causal nature of these statistical relationships can be debated similarly to the case of political trust. While the theory posits that Facebook experiences lead to higher satisfaction with the mayor among capital residents, the empirical results also allow for the possibility of reverse causality, where respondents who are more satisfied with the mayor are more likely to follow them. However, controlling for the effect of voting for the mayor reduces the likelihood of this reverse relationship. A reverse causality would suggest that satisfaction, independent of voting behavior, drives following. In this scenario, satisfied voters and satisfied non-voters are more likely to follow the mayor compared to dissatisfied voters and dissatisfied non-voters. This is a less plausible explanation compared to the idea that following the mayor increases satisfaction for both voters and non-voters alike.

The interaction with municipality type also supports the argument for the proposed causal direction. While it is reasonable to argue that Facebook experiences are more important for evaluating mayors in the capital, leading to increased satisfaction, it is harder to explain why more satisfied respondents would follow the mayor only in Budapest and not in other municipality types. Lastly, the reverse causality explanation is even less convincing for the

effect of group membership. It seems implausible that respondents who are less satisfied with the mayor would be more likely to join groups where the mayor is inactive.

6.5.3. Localized social media use and political participation

Analytical approach

We follow a similar analytical strategy to the previous sections to investigate the effects of localized social media use on local and national political participation. In the first step, we aim for comparability by testing local political participation, national political participation, and participation in 2021 national political activities using the same set of variables. In the second step, however, we use a stricter model to more thoroughly examine the effects on local political participation, specifically by controlling for the level of national political participation. Since the dependent variables in these models are binary, we apply logistic regression models and present the odds ratios in the tables. Values above 1 indicate a positive association, while values below 1 indicate a negative association.

Local Facebook experiences and political participation: the comparable models

The models examining political participation (Table 6.5) reveal that following the mayor and exposure to local politicians' content are positively associated with local political participation, while local group membership shows no such relationship. For respondents with average values across all other examined factors, those who do not follow the mayor have a 7.7 percent probability of engaging in some form of local political activity in the past year, compared to a 17 percent probability among followers. Similarly, respondents who never encounter local politicians' content have a 5 percent probability of participating in local political activities, whereas those exposed to such content multiple times daily have a 22 percent probability.
Regarding control variables, it is noteworthy that local political interest does not significantly influence participation, while national political interest has a marginally significant effect. Additionally, older individuals, those with higher education levels, and non-residents of Budapest – particularly those living in villages – are more active at the local level. This latter finding aligns with our earlier argument that Facebook experiences have a greater impact in the capital because local public life activity levels are lower there. Consequently, residents of Budapest are less likely to acquire insights into local public life from sources outside social media compared to residents of other municipality types.
For both dimensions of national political activity, we observe similar effects. Local political activities are not associated with these dimensions, as national political interest and following political leaders are the key factors influencing national political participation. Higher age and tertiary education, which are also relevant for local political participation, play a role as well. However, exposure to local political actors is marginally significant in both cases ($p = 0.07$).
It is notable that, despite mayors' mobilization efforts (see Chapter 5), following mayors did not play a role in mobilizing participation in the political activities of autumn 2021. The marginally significant effect of exposure to local politicians' content suggests that those who never encountered such content had only a 20 percent probability of engaging in these activities, compared to a 38 percent probability for those exposed to this content multiple times daily. While this is a notable association, its marginal significance should be considered.
Municipality type does not moderate the relationship between local Facebook activities and political participation. These associations are consistent across all municipality types.

Table 6.5. Logistic regression models explaining local and national political participation

	Local participation	**Local participation**	**National participation (general)**	**National participation (general)**	**National participation (2021 fall)**	**National participation (2021 fall)**
Predictors	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*
(Intercept)	0.00 ***	0.00 ***	0.01 ***	0.01 ***	0.01 ***	0.01 ***
following mayor on FB	2.44 **	1.63	0.93	1.39	0.96	1.88
Exposure to local politicians on FB	1.32 **	1.40	1.16	1.18	1.16	1.11
Local FB group membership	1.33	1.39	1.39	0.71	1.42	0.82
News consumption from media	1.03	1.03	0.85	0.85	0.84	0.84
News consumption from FB	0.91	0.92	1.04	1.02	1.07	1.05
Follow national leaders on FB	0.80 *	0.79 *	0.97	0.95	0.98	0.98
Exposure to national politicians on FB	1.46	1.40	2.44 ***	2.65 ***	2.08 **	2.20 **
Populist attitudes	0.85	0.82	1.30	1.31	1.19	1.18
Talking about politics	1.22	1.24	1.07	1.06	1.03	1.03
Homogeneity of personal context	0.71	0.72	0.97	1.00	1.11	1.12
Interest in national politics	1.86 *	1.92 *	3.43 ***	3.56 ***	3.32 ***	3.38 ***
Interest in local politics	1.07	1.04	0.72	0.72	0.71	0.71
Age	1.02	1.01	1.02 *	1.01	1.01	1.01

Education: secondary	1.72	1.61	1.58	1.60 *	1.46	1.48
Education: higher	3.08 **	3.17 **	2.25 **	2.23 **	1.83 *	1.86 *
Gender: female	0.91	0.91	0.75	0.75	0.80	0.79
Domicile: city	3.44 *	1.53	0.75	0.88	0.74	0.85
Domicile: town	3.71 **	5.19	0.94	0.63	1.01	0.68
Domicile: village	11.78 ***	13.40	1.07	1.07	1.15	1.05
Following mayor * domicile: city		2.94		0.31		0.38
Following mayor * domicile: town		0.88		0.48		0.38
Following mayor * domicile: village		1.89		1.16		0.57
Exposure to local politicians * domicile: city		1.00		1.00		1.02
Exposure to local politicians * domicile: town		0.98		1.03		1.08
Exposure to local politicians * domicile: village		0.91		0.89		1.01
FB group membership * domicile: city		2.20		1.27		1.14
FB group membership * domicile: town		0.57		3.02		2.63

FB group membership * domicile: village		0.99		2.36		1.77
Observations	673	673	673	673	670	670
R^2 Tjur	0.211	0.225	0.267	0.281	0.231	0.239

** p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001*

Local Facebook experiences and local political participation: the stricter models

In the next models, we examine the impact of localized social media use on local political participation while controlling for whether the individual engaged in any national-level political activity in the preceding 12 months (Table 6.6). This control is essential, as it is reasonable to assume that general participation levels are an important determinant of local political activity as well.

The effects of following the mayor and exposure to local politicians' content remain significant in this model as well. Respondents who do not follow the mayor have, on average, a 4 percent probability of engaging in local political activities, compared to 11 percent for followers. Similarly, those who never encounter local politicians' content have a 2.7 percent probability of being active locally, while those who are exposed to such content have a 13.8 percent probability of local political participation. Group membership, however, remains irrelevant, and the effects show no variation across municipality types.

Table 6.6. Logistic regression models explaining local and national political participation

	Local participation	**Local participation**	**National participation (general)**	**National participation (general)**	**National participation (2021 fall)**	**National participation (2021 fall)**
Predictors	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*
(Intercept)	0.00 ***	0.00 ***	0.01 ***	0.01 ***	0.01 ***	0.01 ***
Following mayor on FB	2.44 **	1.63	0.93	1.39	0.96	1.88
exposure to local politicians on FB	1.32 **	1.40	1.16	1.18	1.16	1.11
Local FB group membership	1.33	1.39	1.39	0.71	1.42	0.82
News consumption from media	1.03	1.03	0.85	0.85	0.84	0.84
News consumption from FB	0.91	0.92	1.04	1.02	1.07	1.05

Follow national leaders on FB	0.80 *	0.79 *	0.97	0.95	0.98	0.98
Exposure to national politicians on FB	1.46	1.40	2.44 ***	2.65 ***	2.08 **	2.20 **
Populist attitudes	0.85	0.82	1.30	1.31	1.19	1.18
Talking about politics	1.22	1.24	1.07	1.06	1.03	1.03
Homogeneity of personal context	0.71	0.72	0.97	1.00	1.11	1.12
Interest in national politics	1.86 *	1.92 *	3.43 ***	3.56 ***	3.32 ***	3.38 ***
Interest in local politics	1.07	1.04	0.72	0.72	0.71	0.71
Age	1.02	1.01	1.02 *	1.01	1.01	1.01
Education: secondary	1.72	1.61	1.58	1.60 *	1.46	1.48
Education: higher	3.08 **	3.17 **	2.25 **	2.23 **	1.83 *	1.86 *
Gender: female	0.91	0.91	0.75	0.75	0.80	0.79
Domicile: city	3.44 *	1.53	0.75	0.88	0.74	0.85
domicile: town	3.71 **	5.19	0.94	0.63	1.01	0.68
Domicile: village	11.78 ***	13.40	1.07	1.07	1.15	1.05
Following mayor * domicile: city		2.94		0.31		0.38
Following mayor * domicile: town		0.88		0.48		0.38
Following mayor *		1.89		1.16		0.57

domicile: village						
Exposure to local politicians * Domicile: city		1.00		1.00		1.02
Exposure to local politicians * Domicile: town		0.98		1.03		1.08
Exposure to local politicians * Domicile: village		0.91		0.89		1.01
FB group membership * domicile: city		2.20		1.27		1.14
FB group membership * domicile: town		0.57		3.02		2.63
FB group membership * domicile: village		0.99		2.36		1.77
Observations	673	673	673	673	670	670
R^2 Tjur	0.211	0.225	0.267	0.281	0.231	0.239

** p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001*

Evaluation of the findings

Overall, the findings suggest that following local politicians and being exposed to their content are associated with local political participation, with similar effects across all municipality types (H6.5a and H6.5b are supported). However, group membership does not have a mobilizing effect (H6.5c is rejected).

It is important to emphasize that while the theory assumes a mobilizing effect – where Facebook experiences encourage individuals to become active – the empirical models also allow for the possibility of a reverse relationship. This means that more locally active respondents might be more likely to follow local politicians and be exposed to their content. Nevertheless, if local-level participation also mobilized local-level Facebook activity, it would be surprising not to find a relationship with local group membership, as such activity would presumably also manifest in group participation. How is it possible that individuals with higher levels of local political participation are more likely to follow local politicians and engage with their content, but do not appear with greater probability in local groups? The reverse explanation offers a

more plausible interpretation: as discussed in Chapter 2, politicians actively work to mobilize users, whereas local groups are far more content-diverse. While politics and local politicians are present in these groups, they represent only a small portion of the overall experience. This diversity of content seems insufficient to facilitate increased political participation. Overall, this inconsistency raises doubts about the reverse causality explanation and strengthens the argument that the identified associations reflect the causal relationships predicted by the theory. Specifically, following mayors and being exposed to local politicians' content appear to have a mobilizing effect at the local level.

At the national level, however, local experiences do not have a significant impact on political participation. Only exposure to local politicians shows a marginally significant effect. Voters do not become more engaged in national politics through their localized social media involvement, even during periods when local political actors attempt to steer them in that direction (H6.6a, H6.6b, and H6.6c are rejected).

6.6. Conclusion

Our findings bring us closer to understanding the catalytic role localized social media use might play at both local and national political levels, though the picture is far from straightforward. At the local level, there are indications of a catalytic effect, albeit not universally present across all groups and contexts. For instance, individuals who follow their mayor are more active in local politics, and in Budapest, they also exhibit greater trust in local institutions and higher satisfaction with the city's leadership. This mobilization effect extends to exposure to politicians' content, and following the mayor can even boost trust in local institutions among individuals with lower levels of political trust. More intensive connections with the mayor in the social media sphere appear to enhance local political capital to some extent, making voters more active and, in specific groups and locations, more trusting toward local political elites. However, the effects on trust and satisfaction are limited.

Exposure to local political actors' content has an even narrower impact, primarily supporting participation rather than trust or satisfaction. Membership in local Facebook groups does not act as a catalyst; in fact, in cases where the mayor is not actively present in these groups, it can diminish trust in local elites and satisfaction with the mayor's performance. This finding underscores the political risks mayors face when they leave discussions about local issues in Facebook groups largely to the public and their opponents. These risks can be mitigated, however, if mayors actively engage in these spaces and address local concerns.

At the national level, the catalytic role of local political participation is minimal. Experiences in local settings have little impact on political behavior at the national level. That said, following the mayor strengthens general trust in politicians among users in Budapest and villages, and exposure to local politicians' content has a similar effect in Budapest. However, these local experiences do not translate into greater national political participation, even during the highly mobilized political events of autumn 2021. This suggests that voters perceive a sharper divide between local and national politics, and even under favorable conditions, localized social media experiences generate positive attitudes and increased activity that do not significantly influence their views or behavior regarding national politics. Trust-related spillover effects are only evident in Budapest and villages.

An intriguing and consistent aspect of our results is the heightened importance of localized social media experiences in Budapest compared to other municipality types. Possible explanations, such as a richer content supply or weaker offline local activity levels, have been noted, but these findings warrant further exploration, especially in different contexts.

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7. Conclusion

Abstract

The concluding chapter synthesizes key findings from our nationwide study exploring social media's impact on local public spheres in Hungary, highlighting Facebook's critical role in sustaining and revitalizing community engagement. We argue that social media provides essential communication infrastructure, allowing local and national political discourse to coexist within an integrated digital public sphere. The study demonstrates that local digital publics are significantly shaped by national political dynamics, with national parties influencing local political engagement, particularly through mayoral communication during strategic mobilization periods.

Despite its extensive community-building potential, the digital public sphere faces notable challenges, including socio-demographic disparities, algorithmic constraints limiting local content exposure, and reliance on a single platform – Facebook – that is gradually declining in significance. The chapter emphasizes the importance of political actors' strategic use of social media, noting their cautious navigation of national political content to maintain local audience engagement.

Finally, the authors call for further research to examine the evolving dynamics of digital local publics, particularly their adaptability to shifting platform landscapes and deeper exploration into content and participatory characteristics. The chapter concludes by underscoring the necessity of continued attention to the intersection of local politics, digital infrastructures, and community engagement in political communication research.

7.1. Introduction

Social media can undoubtedly be held responsible for numerous detrimental contemporary social and political phenomena. However, our nationwide study, which draws on multiple data sources, reveals that Facebook, at the very least, plays a significant role in sustaining or even revitalizing local communities. Specifically, we find that Facebook provides an infrastructure for the emergence of local public spheres, which a significant portion of citizens actively use to stay informed about their communities. While our research does not allow us to determine whether the local public spheres created by social media are more active or extensive than those of the past, the prominence of discussions on the decline and disappearance of local communities in social science discourse over recent decades (e.g. Hayes and Lawless, 2021; Putnam, 2001; Sennett, 1992) suggests that social media has filled a preexisting void. It seems that by providing an easily accessible, locally focused communication infrastructure, social media has contributed to the revitalization of local communities through the creation of a broad, shared public discourse. In general, our findings seem to broadly support the assertion made by Hampton and colleagues (2011) cited in the introduction: place has not disappeared in the digital world; rather, place-based networks have been reinforced and made persistent. However, our results offer important refinements and nuances to this conclusion.

7.2. The Infrastructure of the social media-based local publics

In this study, we primarily focused on the infrastructure of the local public sphere as it emerges on social media and the ways in which citizens navigate this space. Our findings indicate that local civic life is an integral part of citizens' political experience on Facebook. When users encounter political experiences on Facebook, these are almost equally likely to involve local political exposure and activity as they are to involve national political matters. This blending of

national and local experiences is a direct consequence of social media, where individuals simultaneously connect with subnational and national storytelling agents on the same communicative platform. This aligns with Hampton et al.'s (2011) glocalization thesis, which posits that information and communication technologies (ICTs) can simultaneously support both global (in this case, national) and local connections, without necessarily creating a sharp distinction between them. This is crucial because outside social media, storytelling agents tend to be more clearly separated: national media platforms primarily present national events, while local platforms primarily cover local public affairs. The integrated experiential space facilitated by social media helps keep the local level at the forefront of users' experiences and prevents a stark separation between national and local public affairs. This, in turn, can foster the maintenance of community identity (Lindell, 2016).

This observation necessitates a reevaluation of how we conceptualize the political role of social media in general. A substantial body of literature examines citizens' political exposure and engagement on social media. However, these studies have predominantly equated "politics" with national politics. In light of our findings, this approach requires fundamental revision, as political experience encompasses local political experiences just as much as national ones. At the same time, local politics operates significantly differently than national politics (Oliver, 2012), as demonstrated by our analysis of mayoral communication. Consequently, if we base our theoretical expectations regarding the mechanisms and effects of social media's political experiential space solely on the characteristics of national politics, we risk making a fundamental error. The most prudent course of action, in light of these findings, would be to clearly differentiate between national and local political experiences in both theoretical frameworks and empirical measurements. This distinction could provide insights that significantly refine and deepen our understanding of social media's political role. Thus, these results serve as a strong call for greater attention to local political experiences in social media politics research.

Our findings also reveal that even in the majority of the smallest settlements, some form of Facebook-based infrastructure exists. This suggests that an arena-type public sphere emerges in most localities through Facebook, where public spaces shaped by various meso-level storytelling agents and intensely utilized by micro-level agents serve as venues for the generation, circulation, and contestation of local information, opinions, and knowledge (Neidhardt, 1993). This study did not examine whether these spaces conform to normative conceptions of the public sphere. Further research, sensitive to the substantive details and participatory dynamics of these spaces, is needed to address this question. However, the existing scattered findings do not suggest that these arenas fulfill the normative expectations of rational deliberation (e.g. Burai et al., 2024; Thorson et al., 2020). Nevertheless, irrespective of normative considerations, the shared narratives facilitated by the communicative infrastructure formed through the interaction of meso- and micro-level storytelling agents can contribute to community-building and local identity formation (Anderson, 2016; Baines, 2012). Additionally, they can enhance the accountability of local political elites (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

In the Facebook-based local communication infrastructure, the most prominent local group, the mayor's page, and the local government's page play a key role. These agents, reaching a significant portion of the population directly, have the capacity to focus public attention and function as integrative resources within the local digital public sphere. This is a crucial community-building asset in the social media space, where high fragmentation characterizes different public spheres (Bruns, 2023). Notably, these pages are already widely present in settlements with populations over 1,000 (and mayoral pages especially in settlements over 5,000), positioning them as early adopters that facilitate the development of local public spheres. Other Facebook pages primarily contribute to the diversity of the local public sphere.

In larger settlements, the population's attention is distributed across a larger number of pages, allowing for the representation of a wider range of voices. Unsurprisingly, the larger the settlement, the more complex and diverse the Facebook-based communication infrastructure. However, in smaller settlements, these storytelling agents tend to reach a larger proportion of the population. This holds even for cases where the number of available agents does not differ, such as for mayors – every locality has only one mayor, but in smaller settlements, the mayor's page reaches a significantly higher percentage of the population than in larger ones.

It is also crucial to acknowledge the limitations of Facebook-based digital public spheres. Despite their broad reach, they do not include everyone. Twenty-six percent of the population does not use Facebook at all, and even among users, one-third completely avoids local public affairs on the platform. This means that approximately half of citizens do not participate in their locality's Facebook public sphere.

Among users, the primary barrier to exposure to local content is general political disengagement. Individuals who typically avoid political engagement are also less likely to encounter local content. Furthermore, there is a strong correlation between exposure to national political content and exposure to local content. However, given that local storytelling agents are particularly effective in engaging politically less active residents and attracting a follower base with diverse levels of political engagement, it strongly suggests that Facebook's content-filtering algorithm plays a role in this phenomenon. The platform appears to treat national and local political engagement similarly, potentially filtering out local public affairs content from users who are less engaged with national politics. Thus, while Facebook can have beneficial effects on local public spheres, its algorithm may also hinder local engagement by linking it to national political activity. This means that the platform could be systematically excluding broad user groups from the local communication infrastructure, even if they have subscribed to local content. This dynamic underscores the necessity of considering the powerful shaping role of technology when evaluating digital public spheres (boyd, 2010).

Significant socio-demographic inequalities are also present in Facebook-based public spheres. While these disparities do not manifest at the individual level – where age, education, or gender do not appear to play a decisive role in shaping local Facebook experiences – there are substantial differences between settlements in terms of the expansion and development of Facebook-based communication infrastructure. In line with the concept of performative public (Lünenborg and Raetzsch, 2017), affordance alone does not lead to the formation of a local public sphere; it must be built and actively maintained. If local actors and residents do not demonstrate openness to this process, the local digital public sphere remains underdeveloped, limited, or may not exist at all. Fundamentally, smaller and poorer settlements exhibit significantly lower levels of Facebook-based infrastructure. Consequently, residents of these areas have more limited access to local storytelling, an essential resource for community-building. In some small settlements, a complete "news desert" can even emerge, at least in terms of subscribable storytelling agents.

However, our findings also indicate that this situation can be reversed relatively easily. With minimal effort, individuals can create and maintain locally focused pages and groups in any settlement. In fact, our results suggest that such initiatives can achieve substantial reach in the smallest communities relative to their population size. A single user can rapidly establish a functioning local public sphere by leveraging Facebook's infrastructure. This process may emerge as a grassroots initiative, but political actors, who according to our findings tend to be highly reserved in small settlements, could play a significant role in initiating local public discourse. While tighter personal networks and the relatively limited volume of substantive information may reduce the perceived necessity of such a digital public sphere in smaller communities, the popularity of the few available local platforms suggests that, once created, there is strong demand for them. Future research should investigate how digital public spheres

function specifically in these small settlements and whether their emergence transforms community life.
Another critical limitation of the digital public sphere is that its presence is almost exclusively traceable on Facebook. This became evident in our analysis of citizens' social media experiences and has been confirmed by studies employing different methodologies and perspectives (Burai et al., 2024; Thorson et al., 2020; Usher, 2023a). One key reason for this can be that the creation of local digital public groups is primarily associated with Facebook, while such practices are uncommon on Instagram, TikTok, or X. Additionally, most other platforms favor one-way following rather than the reciprocal personal connections characteristic of Facebook, which enables the development of local networks. The strong emphasis on visual content on Instagram and especially TikTok also does not favor local public actors, who are often constrained by limited resources. Beyond these affordances, platform norms likely also contribute to the relatively weak presence of local public spheres outside Facebook.
This poses a serious challenge for local digital public spheres, as Facebook is gradually losing its significance within the social media landscape (Newman et al., 2023). Increasingly, users are shifting away from Facebook toward other platforms, which threatens the existence and impact of local digital public spheres, potentially leading to their contraction. Moving forward, it will be essential to closely monitor how local public spheres respond to this shift: Will they adapt by establishing communication infrastructure on other platforms, creating a more multi-platform digital public sphere to replace the previous Facebook-dominated model? Or will the digital public sphere become more segregated, narrowing down to a socio-demographically distinct group of residents who continue to engage with Facebook? Alternatively, could the once-thriving digital public sphere simply fade away? Any of these scenarios is conceivable, and the behavior of key local actors will undoubtedly play a decisive role in shaping these outcomes. Future research should pay close attention to these developments.

7.3. Nationalization and politicization as a driver of social media-based local publics

Another key finding of our research is that we have demonstrated the significant role that political considerations play in the emergence and functioning of social media-based local publics. In many respects, this influence stems from the presence of national political dynamics, which implicitly permeate local public life. As a result, national political considerations become a crucial driving force in shaping and energizing local public spheres.
At the citizen level, we have already discussed how national political engagement strongly influences individuals' exposure to local public affairs content on their social media feeds. However, national politics also plays a critical role at the supply level. Our findings clearly indicate that the presence of national parties has a tangible impact on the structure and activity of local Facebook-based communication infrastructures. Local politicians supported by national parties are more likely to invest in their online presence, establish pages, and maintain them with higher levels of engagement and broader reach. Moreover, councilors themselves report that their parties explicitly expect them to promote national political goals at the local level. The influence of national political actors, however, extends beyond the activity of individual politicians. In municipalities where a mayor is supported by a national party – indicating significant national political influence – a more expansive local Facebook public sphere develops, as the infrastructure shaped by meso-level storytelling agents is more effective in attracting residents into local public discourse.
While our research did not extensively examine the mechanisms of this attraction, future studies should address this issue. The most pressing question in this regard is whether the increased activity resulting from national party involvement leads to the importation of national political

cleavages and conflicts into the local level, or whether local discourse retains its thematic autonomy, integrating national actors into an already established local agenda. Our analysis of mayoral communication supports the latter hypothesis. Even when mayors are backed by national parties, they tend to avoid national political topics, and if they do address them, they do so in a less polarizing and more neutral manner. Their primary focus consistently remains on local issues. However, mayors represent only one component of the broader public sphere. A crucial question remains whether public spheres energized by national political actors operate differently from those where such actors have a more limited presence. More broadly, future research should investigate the specific mechanisms through which national political forces contribute to the dynamization of local public spheres. Understanding these dynamics is essential for assessing how national political structures shape local discourse and whether they ultimately enhance or constrain the autonomy of local digital publics.

It is evident that national political actors view local public spheres as key battlegrounds and seek to leverage them for national political support. This became most apparent in our research through the analysis of mayoral communication, which also revealed that political parties exercise significant restraint in pursuing this strategy, guided by their own well-calculated interests. Local Facebook-based public spheres hold considerable political value: they provide access to voters who are otherwise difficult to reach – those who are less politically engaged or committed – by tapping into their interest in their local community and engaging them through familiar, locally embedded figures. However, this value can only be sustained if local interest continues to be satisfied and if aversion to national politics does not set in due to overly partisan content. This explains the temporally national-focused approach adopted by mayors, who only leverage their prominent position in the local public sphere to cautiously promote national political issues during key periods of national political mobilization. Thus, local politics operates under distinct logics and maintains a degree of agenda autonomy from national politics, even when national political considerations are present. This positioning represents an in-between stance within the autonomy-nationalization/politicization debate outlined in the introduction. It also demonstrates that national political forces recognize the disadvantages of disrupting the inherent logic and character of local public spheres at the communicative level.

At the same time, our findings indicate that despite these efforts, we could not identify a definitive spillover effect from local politics to national political engagement. While local political activity can generate political capital under certain conditions – leading to increased trust, satisfaction, and participation at the local level – there was no evidence that this effect extends to national politics. Experiences with local governance do not appear to enhance general political trust or increase participation in national political activities. However, this issue warrants further investigation using different methodological approaches, additional variables, and diverse contextual frameworks.

Given these dynamics, political communication and campaign research should place greater emphasis on the localized communication strategies of national political actors. Empirical knowledge on this subject is scarce (but see, Karlsen and Skogerbø, 2015), despite our findings demonstrating its significance even in highly centralized political systems. This undoubtedly elevates the strategic importance of local politics in national political planning: securing a mayoral position can serve as a crucial political resource by providing a key access point to important voter groups.

7.4. Final thoughts

We have learned a great deal about the role of social media in shaping local public spheres throughout our research journey. As the first nation-wide systematic mapping of the digital local public sphere, we hope that our study has contributed insights that challenge and refine existing

knowledge on local politics, digital publics, and political communication. The key takeaway is that these arenas must be considered when analyzing the functioning of local communities, the political role of social media, or the strategic dimensions of political communication.

Despite our extensive efforts, however, our understanding of social media-based local publics remains inevitably fragmented. There are numerous aspects we could not explore due to various reasons, even though they are crucial to comprehending these online spaces. Throughout the conclusion, we have already pointed to several potential directions for future research. Additionally, it is important to emphasize that our study primarily focused on the infrastructural aspects of digital local publics, but a deeper understanding requires an examination of how these infrastructures are populated with content and what forms of communication characterize micro- and meso-level storytelling agents. Further, in our analysis, we focused primarily on political actors among these agents. However, it is also evident that, alongside mayors, local groups play a crucial role in shaping the functioning of the local public sphere. Future research should therefore scrutinize these groups more closely. Although we have referenced a few studies that have begun to explore this area (e.g. Meulenaere et al., 2021; Robaeyst et al., 2022), such inquiries remain scarce in the literature.

Additionally, as with any country-specific study, it is essential to emphasize that confirming or refining our theoretical insights requires similar investigations in other national contexts. Our research represents a significant step forward by expanding beyond earlier studies that were often confined to single municipalities or specific actor types. However, it was not within our scope to extend beyond national borders. We hope that our work provides inspiration and both theoretical and empirical foundations for similar studies in other countries, allowing for broader, generalizable conclusions about the functioning of digital local publics.

Finally, it is important to recognize that we are analyzing a moving target within a rapidly evolving technological and social landscape. This underscores the need for ongoing research to track these transformations over time. Nonetheless, we believe that some of our theoretical conclusions may prove durable, highlighting operational characteristics that remain relevant even amid gradual technological and societal changes. For those findings that may not withstand the test of time, they can still serve as historical reference points, helping future research contextualize the evolution of digital local publics.

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Appendix

Table A1. Linear regression models explaining trust in local government, controlling for general political trust and voting for the mayor (with the variable of following local government on Facebook)

	Trust in local government	**Trust in local government**
Predictors	*Estimates*	*Estimates*
(Intercept)	1.60 *	1.77 **
	(0.66)	(0.66)
Following local governement on FB	0.22	-0.09
	(0.21)	(0.24)
Following mayor on FB		0.67 **
		(0.26)
Exposure to local politicians on FB	0.04	0.03
	(0.06)	(0.06)
Local FB group membership	-0.29	-0.30
	(0.16)	(0.16)
News consumption from media	-0.04	-0.03
	(0.07)	(0.07)
News consumption from FB	0.06	0.05
	(0.05)	(0.05)
General political trust	0.36 ***	0.35 ***
	(0.04)	(0.04)
Voted for the mayor	1.44 ***	1.42 ***
	(0.15)	(0.15)
Follow national leaders on FB	0.07	0.08
	(0.06)	(0.06)
Exposure to national politicians on FB	0.63 **	0.51 *
	(0.21)	(0.22)
Populist attitudes	-0.09	-0.12
	(0.11)	(0.11)
Talking about politics	-0.04	-0.05
	(0.07)	(0.07)
Homogeneity of personal context	0.02	0.05
	(0.16)	(0.16)
Interest in national politics	-0.40 *	-0.39 *
	(0.16)	(0.16)
Interest in local politics	0.83 ***	0.81 ***
	(0.15)	(0.15)
Age	0.00	0.00
	(0.01)	(0.01)

Education: secondary	-0.08 (0.17)	-0.10 (0.17)
Education: higher	0.25 (0.23)	0.25 (0.23)
Gender: female	-0.03 (0.15)	-0.01 (0.15)
Domicile: city	-0.28 (0.26)	-0.22 (0.26)
Domicile: town	0.35 (0.23)	0.36 (0.23)
Domicile: village	0.39 (0.24)	0.40 (0.24)
Observations	620	620
R^2 / R^2 adjusted	0.444 / 0.424	0.450 / 0.430

** p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001*

Table A2. Linear regression models explaining local political trust, controlling for general political trust and voting for the mayor (with different local Facebook group experiences)

	Trust in mayor	**Trust in local government**
Predictors	*Estimates*	*Estimates*
(Intercept)	0.86 (0.73)	1.60 * (0.66)
Following mayor on FB	3.03 *** (0.69)	3.62 *** (0.62)
Exposure to local politicians on FB	0.02 (0.07)	-0.02 (0.06)
Local FB group member: without mayor activity	-0.86 *** (0.23)	-0.66 ** (0.21)
Local FB group member: with mayor activity	-0.07 (0.21)	-0.18 (0.19)
News consumption from media	-0.00 (0.07)	-0.03 (0.07)
News consumption from FB	0.08 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)
General political trust	0.41 *** (0.04)	0.40 *** (0.04)
Voted for the mayor	1.47 *** (0.19)	1.27 *** (0.17)
Follow national leaders on FB	0.10 (0.07)	0.11 (0.06)
Exposure to national politicians on FB	0.70 ** (0.23)	0.46 * (0.21)
Populist attitudes	-0.09 (0.12)	-0.16 (0.11)
Talking about politics	-0.07 (0.07)	-0.04 (0.07)
Homogeneity of personal context	0.05 (0.17)	0.03 (0.16)
Interest in national politics	-0.43 * (0.17)	-0.35 * (0.16)
Interest in local politics	0.76 *** (0.16)	0.76 *** (0.14)
Age	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Education: secondary	-0.17 (0.19)	-0.12 (0.17)

Education: higher	0.35 (0.25)	0.30 (0.22)
Gender: female	0.14 (0.17)	-0.04 (0.15)
Domicile: city	0.43 (0.31)	0.16 (0.28)
Domicile: town	1.07 *** (0.29)	0.83 ** (0.26)
Domicile: village	1.11 *** (0.30)	0.89 *** (0.27)
Following mayor * general political trust	-0.37 *** (0.09)	-0.34 *** (0.08)
Following mayor * voted on mayor	0.14 (0.42)	0.25 (0.38)
Following mayor * domicile: city	-1.41 (0.72)	-1.64 * (0.65)
Following mayor * domicile: town	-2.04 *** (0.56)	-1.94 *** (0.50)
Following mayor * domicile: village	-1.00 (0.58)	-2.16 *** (0.52)
Observations	621	618
R^2 / R^2 adjusted	0.447 / 0.422	0.485 / 0.461

** p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001*

Figure A1. Interaction effect between following the mayor and trust in politicians on trust in the local government

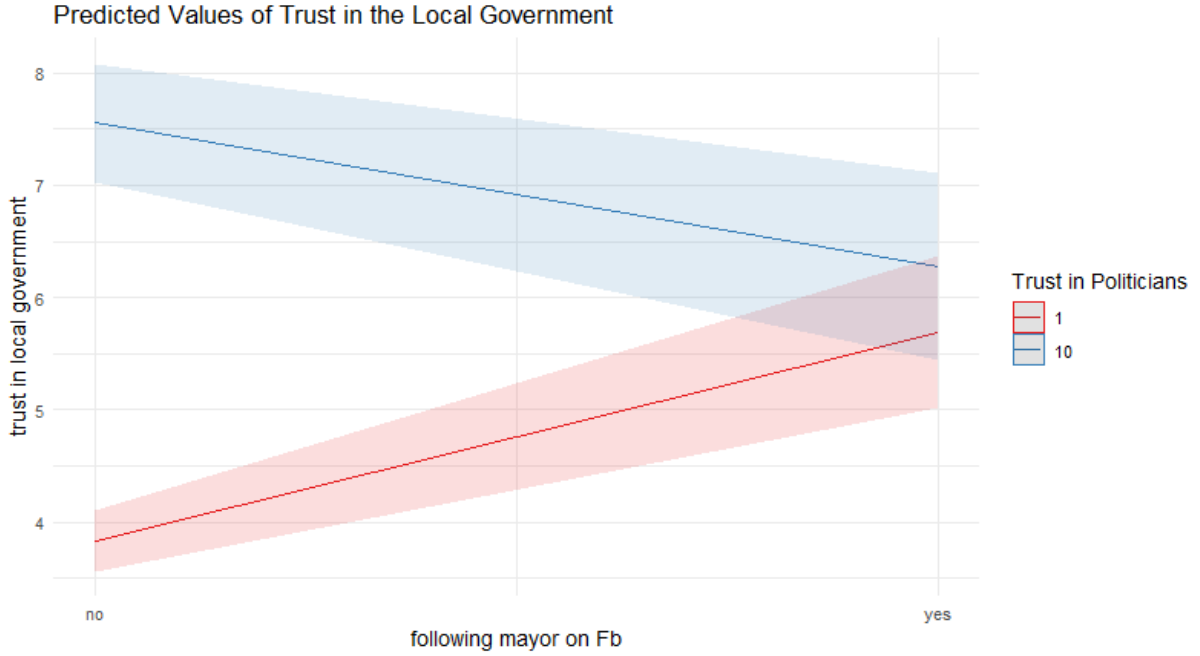

Figure A2. Johnson-Neyman plot for the interaction effect of following the mayor on Facebook and trust in politicians on trust in local government

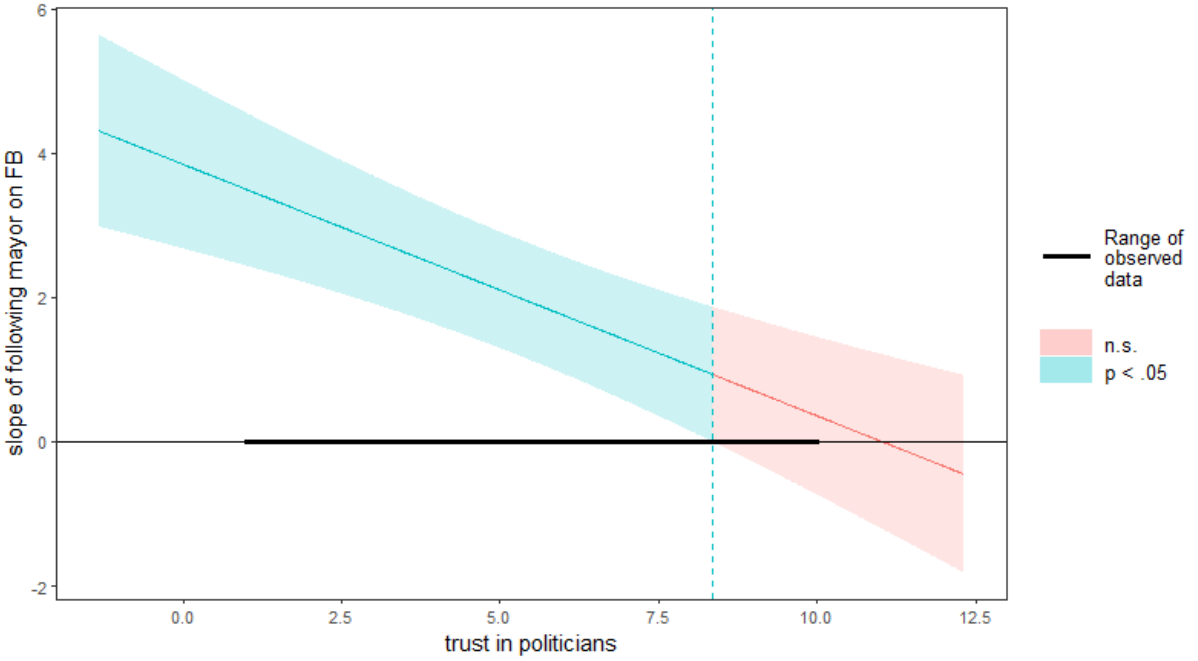

Table A3. Linear regression models explaining satisfaction with the mayor, controlling for voting for the mayor (with different local Facebook group experiences)

	Trust in mayor
Predictors	*Estimates*
(Intercept)	3.23 ***
	(0.77)
Following mayor on FB	0.40
	(0.27)
Exposure to local politicians on FB	-0.00
	(0.08)
Local FB group member: without mayor activity	-0.58 *
	(0.26)
Local FB group member: with mayor activity	-0.15
	(0.23)
News consumption from media	0.03
	(0.08)
News consumption from FB	0.01
	(0.05)
Voted for the mayor	1.93 ***
	(0.18)
Follow national leaders on FB	0.12
	(0.07)
Exposure to national politicians on FB	0.54 *
	(0.25)
Populist attitudes	0.06
	(0.13)
Talking about politics	-0.08
	(0.08)
Homogeneity of personal context	-0.13
	(0.19)
Interest in national politics	-0.19
	(0.18)
Interest in local politics	0.52 **
	(0.17)
Age	0.00
	(0.01)
Education: secondary	-0.47 *
	(0.20)
Education: higher	-0.17
	(0.27)

Gender: female	0.14 (0.18)
Domicile: city	-0.08 (0.31)
Domicile: town	-0.14 (0.28)
Domicile: village	-0.04 (0.29)
Observations	610
R^2 / R^2 adjusted	0.261 / 0.235

** p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001*