

Bridging Activism and Party Politics: Mapping Frame Alignment Processes in Politicians' Use of Hashtags

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Emma Östin  and Simon Lindgren 

Abstract

The use of hashtags has become an effective tool for activists to mobilize public support. This study explores whether, and in what ways, such hashtags have been adopted by politicians in power. Conducting a systematic, cross-national analysis, we examine how politicians use, what we call, activism-related hashtags. Using data from the Twitter Parliamentarian Database, we analyze the hashtagging practices of politicians in 10 countries: Australia, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The analysis explores what types of hashtags politicians use, and to what extent these tags are activism-related. We also analyze what activist causes hashtags used by politicians are related to, to better understand what causes are the most palatable to politicians. We further analyze qualitatively how the activism-related hashtags are used by the politicians. Through a combination of thematic analysis and frame analysis, we find that, in relation to the wide range of hashtags that politicians use, activism-related hashtags constitute a limited share. Our analysis also indicates that although politicians do indeed use activism-related hashtags, this can be for many different reasons and purposes, beyond merely supporting the cause or position of the original activist initiative. We find that politicians may join in with the key contention behind the hashtag, renegotiate the meaning of the hashtag to be able to align party-political ideologies with it, or engage with it by questioning or subverting it.

Keywords

activism, frame alignment, hashtags, party politics, Twitter

Introduction

Our study takes its starting point in the fact that traditional understandings of activism have been contested in recent decades, as new forms of grassroots movements have emerged through social media (Tufecki, 2017). Platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have become important sites for mobilization and protest. Previous studies have shown that activism on these sites—often in the form of hashtag-driven campaigns and movements like #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and #FridaysForFuture—can command large-scale public attention, and shape, and play into political discussions far beyond the framework of the social media sites themselves (Jackson et al., 2020; Madison & Klang, 2020; Theocharis et al., 2015). But even though much research has been devoted to studying digital activism, and the workings of this new form of political mobilization, it remains less known how the key targets of the activism, that is, party politicians—the main link between the people and

the state (Dalton et al., 2011)—more concretely respond to these initiatives.

This article, set in the context of digital activism, therefore explores to what extent activism-related hashtags reach party politicians—and how politicians engage with these hashtags. Using the theoretical framework by Snow et al. (1986) on frame alignment processes, we analyze the ways in which politicians bridge, amplify, extend, and transform activism-related hashtags. Moving toward a better understanding of these issues, this article articulates a set of three research questions, where the first two are of a mapping, and explorative character while the third has an analytical focus; they read as follows:

Umeå University, Sweden

Corresponding Author:

Emma Östin, Department of Sociology, Umeå University, SE-901 87 Umeå, Sweden.
Email: emma.ostin@umu.se



- What hashtags do politicians use, and to what extent are they using activism-related hashtags?
- When politicians use activism-related hashtags, what causes are they related to?
- When politicians use activism-related hashtags, how do they use them, and what frame alignment processes are initiated as a result?

To respond to these questions, we introduce the concept of activism-related hashtags to refer to a wider scope of hashtags beyond what might traditionally be conceived as hashtag activism. We present an analysis of how politicians from 10 countries interact with activism-related hashtags, as well as a closer analysis of the ways in which they use these tags in relation to their own political agendas and discourses, and how this compares across countries. Empirically, the article uses a data set extracted from the Twitter Parliamentary Database (van Vliet et al., 2020). This manually validated and tagged database of parliamentarians across 26 countries aggregates Twitter data with metadata from a range of different databases, thereby enabling systematic and transnational analysis.

Previous Research

Scholarship on politicians' responsiveness to public opinion and civil society is extensive; however, we will in this section provide an overview of some of the key strands of this literature relevant to this article. The most central idea in this literature is that politicians, as representatives of the voters, must have some capacity to listen and be responsive to the wishes and preferences of the public (Mair, 2013). Inclusive approaches to decision-making, which advocate for the involvement of citizens, activists, social movements, and interest groups, have been emphasized for decades (Cohen, 1989; Elster, 1998; Habermas, 1996). It is argued, then, that such inclusion and involvement will result in more democratic and legitimate outcomes (Della Porta, 2020). But even though many researchers consider influence from the public to be a central part of policymaking, there is still a need for more knowledge about how activist initiatives might influence policy, not the least in the digital age.

The balancing act, by which politicians, and parties at large, position themselves in relation to various issues among the public to maximize their vote shares, and their influence on policy outcomes, is delicate. Listening to a specific group's concerns about a political issue could increase the politician's or party's appeal to the constituents of that group, but also risks repelling voters who disagree with that group's views (Røed, 2022). There is, therefore, more or less consensus within research that only politicians and thereby parties that align with the attitudes of the activists will be potential allies (Böhm, 2015). Some studies have suggested that responsiveness to public opinion depends on whether

the party in question is in government or opposition, as opposition parties tend to be more inclined to side with the public (Klüver & Spoon, 2016). Previous research has furthermore found that parties tend to be more likely to interact with activists in political matters where they have a strong foothold, and less so when it comes to matters where opposing parties are leading (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Robertson, 1976). In other words, parties will interact around issues where they have an advantage and are likely to be able to enhance their position (McAdam & Tarrow, 2010). In addition, there is the question of palatability. It will likely be more controversial, in the eyes of the public, for politicians to be associated with some movements than others. Even though political parties naturally tend to align with activists who share their interests, the situation may be more problematic if the strategies of the activists are controversial—for example, if questionable or disruptive methods are used to convey the message, this may instead result in repression rather than support (Tarrow, 2011). Previous studies have also concluded that politicians tend to distance themselves from possibly unsavory sources of content, and only electively engage with sensitive issues (Klinger et al., 2022). This may also include interacting through intermediary networks rather than interacting directly with activists. In conclusion, there are many mechanisms that might affect why and how politicians respond to the public. The knowledge we present by analyzing different frame alignment processes provides a way to empirically concretize the different ways by which politicians position themselves in relation to public opinion. We return to these processes in greater detail in the next section.

Early research on social media predicted that the low-cost, low-risk features of social media would revolutionize public participation, as its peer-to-peer, participatory architecture, would be positioned to give citizens direct access to politicians (Benkler, 2008; Jenkins, 2006). However, several subsequent studies have shown that politicians largely use their social media channels in the same manner that they use traditional media outlets, that is, as static and one-directional digital bulletin boards where they can inform the public about their current doings and opinions (Graham et al., 2013). Over the years, these findings have been contested. For example, Ausserhofer and Maireder (2013, p. 300) found in a study on Austrian political elites (which included politicians, journalists, and political experts) on Twitter that politicians “interact with each other intensely, addressing and retweeting, and thereby [refer] to the tweets and accounts of others.” Their study also found that a majority of the tweets by political elites included a reference to another Twitter user, indicating some level of interaction. So, although little is known about the actual extent and forms of how the public in general, and digital activists specifically, and politicians interact online, it is well established that social media have contributed in different ways to diversifying the flows of political information and debates. This has allowed—at least

potentially—the public to connect directly with the politicians and vice versa (Entman & Usher, 2018).

Another important idea in previous scholarship is that public pressure is important for activists or movements to gain success (Böhm, 2015). In the context of social media, this could mean getting a certain critical mass of people to use an activism-related hashtag, or to mass-share a particular post to try to gain the interest of decision-makers. Jackson et al. (2020) propose that hashtags have become “the default method to designate collective thoughts, ideas, arguments and experiences that might otherwise stand alone or be quickly subsumed” (p. xxviii). Hashtags may have both an agenda-setting function (Moscato, 2016) and a mobilizing function (Schneider, 2020).

When it comes to politicians’ use of hashtags, research is relatively scarce. A study of the Twitter habits of presidents and prime ministers of the European Union found that the leaders first and foremost used hashtags related to specific events such as summits and conferences, or locations (Drachenberg & Phillips, 2021). Another study of Norwegian politicians by Enli and Simonsen (2018) found that politicians commonly used hashtags to strategically try to connect with the public debate and to communicate with a network beyond voters who already follow them. The same study found that the politicians primarily used hashtags referring to the media sphere, rather than to the political sphere. This included references to specific media companies or popular radio and TV programs, which demonstrates that politicians used Twitter to interact with and comment on debates in mainstream media, rather than to interact directly with activists or other citizens. However, deeper knowledge of how politicians relate to and use different hashtags is still needed. Once again, focusing on frame alignment processes offers a way to theoretically conceptualize, and empirically identify, the various approaches through which politicians use hashtags. We will now move on to outlining this theoretical framework.

Conceptual Framework

In this study, we are interested in understanding how and in what context politicians use *activism-related hashtags*. We use this term to refer both to hashtags that relate to clearly delineated and well-known activist campaigns (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, #FridaysForFuture) and to hashtags that have a broader, more indirect, and less campaign-oriented—but still *activism-related*—character (e.g., #pride, #feminism, #humanrights). The notion of activism-related hashtags thus refers both to what has been more narrowly labeled as “hashtag activism” (Jackson et al., 2020; Rambukkana, 2015) and to a wider set of hashtags that are part of an activist repertoire that are pertinent to grassroots or nonparliamentary engagement.

To analyze the ways in which politicians use these hashtags, we use the theoretical framework of frame

alignment as formulated by Snow et al. (1986), which in turn draws on Goffman’s (1974) frame analytic perspective. Snow et al. offer a way of conceptualizing and identifying how the interests of individuals and social movement organizations are linked and congregated, or simply how individuals participate in, or align with, a movement. They describe four types of *frame alignment processes* (i.e., ways of participating in social movements, their campaigns, and activities). These are described in further detail below. Effectively seeing hashtags as frames provides us with a conceptual apparatus by which to analyze how politicians align themselves with online activist initiatives.

The first type of frame alignment is *frame bridging*, which is a practice where two or more “ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular issue or problem” (Snow et al., 1986, p. 467) are linked. This involves connecting the movement with individuals who share the grievances of the movement but who are not actively engaged in the matter, or those who lack the organizational base for expressing their discontent. An example of this might be the situation where an individual possessing an anti-racist sentiment sees a movement such as #BlackLivesMatter comes along and is thereby provided a way of channeling that sentiment. Frame bridging can thus occur when a movement succeeds in reaching a previously “non-activated” target group.

The second, and overlapping, type of frame alignment is *frame amplification*. This refers to processes where a frame is refined or reinvigorated (Eriksson Krutrök & Lindgren, 2018). This involves building on the existing values, beliefs, or opinions of people to persuade prospective allies. In the context of this study, such alignment might, for example, occur in cases where hashtags are successful in appealing to already existing core values among politicians, which would make them more likely to engage in social media discussions.

Third, *frame extension* explains how a given idea or topic that is covered by a frame is widened. When the ideas of the movement are not salient or immediately apparent to potential allies and supporters, a kind of extension of the ideas may be needed to clarify that the objectives of the movement are congruent with the values or interests of these potential allies (Snow et al., 1986). There is also the possibility to envision another kind of frame extension, whereby politicians employ hashtags in a broadened sense, to better fit with the party-political agenda.

The fourth and final form of alignment—highly similar to the previous one—is that of *frame transformation*, where “‘new layers,’ or ‘laminations’ . . . , of meaning are imposed upon the original meanings” (Eriksson Krutrök & Lindgren, 2018, p. 4). This could mean redefining a movement to make it relevant for potential allies and supporters. For the purpose of this article, this could mean redefining a hashtag or using it in another way than first intended.

Data and Method

The article draws on data extracted from the Twitter Parliamentary Database (van Vliet et al., 2020). This publicly available database contains all tweets from all parliamentarians in 26 primarily European countries from September 2017 until December 2021. For this study, we limited our sample to a total of 10 countries: Australia, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This selection was made because these are countries with a high adoption rate of Twitter among politicians. In the selected countries, an average of 80% of the parliamentarians have a Twitter account while the data set's overall average is 45% (van Vliet et al., 2020). These countries can, therefore, be considered comparable. The selection was also made for pragmatic reasons, as the languages spoken in these countries are the most accessible to the authors of this article. Furthermore, because of the nature of the analysis we deem it necessary to have sufficient awareness and understanding of the political environments in the countries studied, which we believe we have in these cases.

To respond to our first research question—on what types of hashtags politicians in different countries use, and to what extent those hashtags are activism-related—we extracted the top 100 hashtags per country, ranked by how many politicians have used them once or more, giving us a total of 1,000 hashtags (100 per country, with 10 countries). In the next step, to distinguish what types of hashtags these were, we carried out an inductive but systematic thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), where the hashtags were manually coded into relevant themes.¹ We allowed, here, for hashtags to appear in more than one theme depending on the context of their use. In practice, the inductive thematic analysis entailed assigning the hashtags to initial themes. Those were then continuously revised throughout the process of coding, and new themes were added or removed as we distinguished new relevant themes within the original themes. This process was repeated to respond to our second research question—on what causes the activism-related hashtags were associated with. We manually coded the activism-related hashtags (coded in the initial phase of our analysis) into relevant subthemes.

To respond to our third and final research question, on how politicians use activism-related hashtags, we used frame analysis based on the concepts developed by Snow et al. (1986). We carried out close readings of the tweets that contained the activism-related hashtags. Because of the large volume of data (approximately 23,000 tweets), the close readings were carried out according to a constant comparative approach with coding terminated at the point of saturation (Glaser, 1965). To mitigate the ethical implications associated with quoting social media content without consent from the creators, we adopted the reconstructive approach by Markham (2012). This entailed selecting

representative elements from the original tweets and creating new text which captures the original text's core meaning.

Politicians and Hashtag Use

Ten different distinguished themes emerged in the analysis of the hashtag use. These are presented in Table 1. These themes represent different topics which the hashtags are referring to. We begin by presenting the themes—then we discuss which of these themes can be considered to contain activism-related hashtags. We then examine the distribution of themes across the individual countries.

Activism-related hashtags were predominantly found within the theme of *citizen initiatives*. What characterizes the hashtags in this theme is that they all have their origin from a citizen, or grassroots movement, aiming for political change. This theme thus excludes more organized political groups such as parties and formal organizations. The hashtags in this theme were mostly related to activist campaigns, for example, #freenazanin (a British campaign to free charity worker Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe from imprisonment in Iran), #imaktenskorridorer (a Swedish spin-off to #metoo), and #wirsindmehr (a German activist campaign for civil rights and anti-racism), while others were connected to specific events arranged by activists, for example, #climategstike and #cphpride. A few of the hashtags were of the broader, more indirect, and less campaign-oriented character; examples of these are #feminismo and #humanrights. This theme only constitutes about 3% of the hashtags in the top 100 in the selected countries, indicating that the politicians do interact with this type of activism-related hashtags, but not to a great extent.

We also found that activism-related hashtags could be found in the theme of *NGOs/lobbying*. These hashtags followed an “activist style” with a call for action, for example, #standupforabortionrights (by Swedish NGO RFSU, working in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights) or #keepfamilies together (by American NGO Keep Families Together, working to keep children from being separated from their parents). At times, it was difficult to draw a boundary between these hashtags and those referring to *citizen initiatives*, as they often were designed to achieve the same goals as the citizen initiative hashtags, that is, to attract attention to their cause and create interest among the public, and by extension to impact politics. However, as explicated above, the hashtags in this theme were not the consequence of citizen initiatives but rather the result of a strategic and funded campaign of an NGO, an interest organization, or a lobbying corporation. In total, the hashtags in this theme constituted about 2% of the hashtags in the top 100 in the selected countries.

Activism-related hashtags could also be found within the theme of *political days/weeks/months* since many of the commemorated days, weeks, and months are related to

Table 1. Themes in Hashtags Used by Politicians.

Theme	Definition	Examples	Share of the coded hashtags
National politics	These are hashtags related to politics in a specific national context at a national, regional, or local level. The hashtags, therefore, exhibit a variety of characteristics and vary from simple labels for different political areas, to more specific references to bills, proposals, and laws.	#healthcare, #budget17, #taxcutsandjobsact	47%
Geographical	Hashtags simply referring to cities, regions, and countries. Often functioning as a way of indicating where an issue is relevant.	#bruxelles, #madrid, #syria	9%
Party	These are hashtags specific to the political parties within the parliament, including certain activities, for example, party conventions/conferences, members of the parties, and coalitions of parties.	#M5S, #arbeiderpartiet, #conservatives	8%
Media	Hashtags related to news media, for example, newspapers, podcasts, journalists, and political TV shows.	#9news, #dkmedier, #bourdindirect	8%
Election	Hashtags related to electoral campaigns. National, regional, and local elections, as well as EU elections in the concerned nations	#elezioni2018, #votelabour, #ausvote2019	5%
Political days/ weeks/months	Internationally relevant holidays for remembrance, or bringing attention to a minority or discriminated group	#labourday, #naidoc, #blackhistorymonth	4%
International politics	Hashtags related to foreign policy or politics in other nations. Also including references to international agreements, and supranational unions, for example, the UN and the EU. In general, hashtags related to politics beyond national-level politics	#eupol, #agenda2030, #parisagreement	4%
Citizen initiatives	Hashtags related to different forms of grassroots social media campaigns and causes.	#metoo, #fridaysforfuture, #wirsindmehr	3%
NGOs/ Lobbying	Hashtags created by corporations, NGOs, or other businesses trying to influence politics.	#scrapthecap, #thetimeisnow, #wearitpink	2%
Military	Hashtags related to military, armed forces, and victims of war.	#lestweforget, #veterans, #neveragain	1%
Other	Hashtags irrelevant to any of the abovementioned themes, related to, for example, sports and entertainment.	#worldcup, #paris2024, #royalwedding	8%

activism. For example, #labourday—Labor Day is the result of the labor movement however it is now acknowledged as a public holiday in all sampled countries. Other similar examples include hashtags related to International Women’s Day and Pride Month. All hashtags in this theme could, however, not be considered as activism-related, as they were rather associated with commercial interests. The hashtags in this theme constituted about 4% of the hashtags in the top 100 in the selected countries. In summary, we can state that several of our coded themes included hashtags that were part of or the result of an activist repertoire, thus to be considered as activism-related. The three themes (as accounted for above), which we considered, could include activism-related hashtags and together constitute approximately 8% of the top 100 hashtags. However, as previously mentioned, the theme most distinctly representative of activism-related hashtags was *citizen initiatives*, accounting for only 3% of the top 100 most used hashtags. Therefore, we decided to concentrate on this theme in the following analysis.

When it comes to the distribution of all the themes in the different countries, Figure 1 shows how most of the countries follow the same general pattern when it comes to the largest theme, which in all countries, except Germany, was that of *national politics*. In the case of Germany, we note that the

theme *party* stands out as the largest theme. An interesting pattern also emerges in Italy and Norway, where *national politics* was not the only dominating theme in these contexts, as the theme *party* was almost equal in size in Italy, and *media* in Norway, confirming Enli and Simonsen’s (2018) findings. *Military* hashtags were used by politicians in Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. This trend was especially noticeable in the United States where four out of the 10 most used hashtags fall under this theme. Another pattern identified was that *geographical* and *party* hashtags were used to a higher degree in Germany, Spain, and Italy. Other themes have a similarly low level of use in most of the countries.

Citizen initiative hashtags had the biggest impact among politicians in Germany, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom as these were the countries where *citizen initiative* hashtags were most widely used in relation to other hashtags, as indicated in Figure 2 which shows the percentages of hashtag themes across countries. Other countries where the use of *citizen initiative* hashtags was prevalent were Denmark and Spain. In other countries, we found similar (low) levels of use. The only country where no citizen initiative hashtags were found within the top 100 was Italy. The use of hashtags related to *NGOs/Lobbying* was most frequent in the United

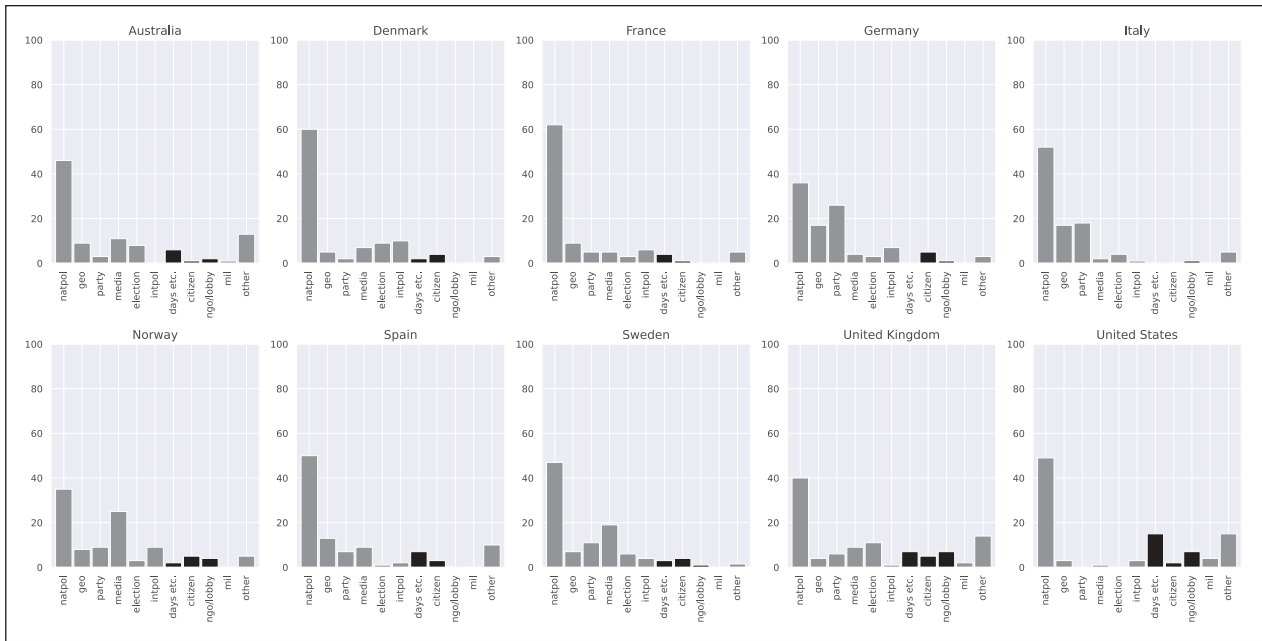


Figure 1. Distribution of the themes among politicians in each country.

Themes containing activism-related hashtags shown in darker color.

Percentages reflect the share of hashtags posted by politicians that fall into each theme, and where each politician’s use of a given hashtag is counted only once.

	Australia	Denmark	France	Germany	Italy	Norway	Spain	Sweden	United Kingdom	United States	
natpol	10.34	10.55	10.56	10.36	9.46	7.60	10.27	10.19	10.40	10.28	100
geo	9.91	6.63	14.23	14.86	12.05	7.07	13.89	6.06	9.92	5.37	100
party	5.24	3.76	16.18	17.89	15.86	7.12	13.35	7.79	12.16	0.65	100
media	12.08	10.68	11.48	9.45	5.83	12.45	11.52	9.79	10.43	6.29	100
election	13.30	12.68	18.29	14.92	6.14	3.69	5.10	10.14	15.75	0.00	100
intpol	2.47	10.63	15.19	15.54	8.53	5.78	9.23	7.19	13.99	11.47	100
mil	14.39	1.63	2.13	19.25	1.00	0.00	1.08	3.33	24.16	33.03	100
other	11.62	6.25	13.11	11.76	9.14	5.54	10.84	3.96	13.87	13.92	100
days etc	11.73	4.56	16.18	8.62	2.21	2.75	13.06	4.94	17.77	18.18	100
citizen	4.18	8.37	18.08	18.13	4.98	6.96	10.33	5.43	13.59	9.95	100
ngo/lobby	14.40	1.95	2.47	12.32	7.43	7.35	0.83	1.91	24.06	27.28	100
ACTIVISM RELATED	10.10	4.96	12.24	13.02	4.87	5.69	8.07	4.09	18.47	18.47	100

Figure 2. Percentages of hashtag themes across countries.

States and the United Kingdom, and somewhat lower but still noticeable in Australia and Norway, while none were found among politicians in Denmark, France, and Spain. Hashtags relating to *political days/weeks/months* were most widespread among politicians in the United States, but also

quite considerable in the United Kingdom, Australia, and Spain, while politicians in France, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden also use these hashtags but not to the same extent. No hashtags relating to *political days/weeks/months* were found in Germany and Italy.

These findings indicate that there was a low level of use of activism-related hashtags among politicians in comparison with hashtags related to national politics. However, as noted above, politicians do not tend to use any sort of hashtags outside the realm of national politics to a great extent. As shown in Figure 2, when aggregating the themes containing activism-related hashtags, the United Kingdom and the United States are the countries where activism-related hashtags have the most impact among politicians, yet it should be noted that the citizen initiative hashtags contribute the least to this.

Activist Causes

Now focusing exclusively on the activism-related hashtags in the theme *citizen initiatives*, we identify six distinctive activist causes with which politicians engage: feminism, anti-racism, human rights/democracy, climate activism, LGBTQI rights, and gun violence. This indicates that these are the activist causes with the widest appeal among politicians, in other words, the most palatable ones.

Feminism

We found that feminist activism was the most promoted activist cause by the politicians. Our analysis found five unique hashtags in this area: #MeToo, #imaktenskorridorer, #niunamenos, #askhertostand, and #feminismo. These are found in five of the sampled countries. Compared with the hashtags in the LGBTQ subtheme, these hashtags are to a larger extent connected to specific campaigns. The most prevalent hashtag in this subtheme is #MeToo which was found in all Scandinavian countries (Sweden, Norway, and Denmark). In Sweden, we also find #imaktenskorridorer, which is an industry-related hashtag focused on sexual harassment within politics. Two hashtags related to feminism were used by Spanish politicians. First, of a more open character and not related to any specific campaign, we find #feminismo. Second, we find #niunamenos, a grassroots feminist movement that originated in Argentina, campaigning against gender-based violence. Finally, in the United Kingdom we find the hashtag #askhertostand, a movement campaigning for equal representation between men and women in the British parliament. By engaging with hashtags such as #MeToo, the politicians contribute to and become part of the *performative publics* (Clark-Parsons, 2021) surrounding #MeToo. By doing so, the politicians are effectively involved in increasing the visibility of the movement.

Anti-Racism

The second activist cause found in our data is anti-racism. In this subtheme, we find four hashtags; these are #wirsindmehr, #unteilbar, #noafd, and #defendDACA. With only two of the countries represented in this theme, Germany and the

United States, this cause does not seem to be palatable to politicians in a broader perspective. #defendDACA was used by the US politicians, a hashtag related to migration politics, and the rights of immigrants, specific to the American context. The German politicians used the hashtags #wirsindmehr and #unteilbar which are both examples of specific campaigns related to immigration, social, and racial justice that received widespread support from international NGOs, parties, and media (Galaski, 2018). The German politicians also used the hashtag #noafd, a hashtag used more generally to express criticism toward radical right and anti-immigration party Alternative for Germany. As previously stated by Jackson et al. (2020), the visibility of issues related to anti-racism is often dependent on support from mainstream celebrities, journalists, and politicians.

Human Rights/Democracy

Next, we identified a subtheme of hashtags related to human rights and democracy. Here, we found four hashtags, namely, #humanrights, #freenazanin, #moreincommon, and #recuperemelsen, among politicians in Denmark, Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom. The hashtag #humanrights was used by politicians in Denmark and Germany, while #recuperemelsen was used by politicians in Spain, and #freenazanin, and #moreincommon in the United Kingdom. The latter one especially is an example of a campaign that received widespread support among the public, which generated coverage in the mainstream media and thereafter also action from the government.

Climate Activism

Two distinct hashtags related to climate activism were identified: #fridaysforfuture in Sweden and Germany, referring to the movement founded by activist Greta Thunberg, and #climatestrike in Australia, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, which is associated with the weekly climate strike, also central to the Fridays for Future movement. The fact that politicians are referencing these hashtags is not unexpected given the global significance of the climate crisis. As one of the explicit goals of Fridays for Future is to push politicians to act (Berker & Pollex, 2021), the widespread use of these hashtags can be viewed as a success for the movement in terms of agenda-setting.

Gun Violence

Regarding gun violence, we found two hashtags: #marchfourlives, used by Norwegian politicians, and #endgunviolence, used by politicians in the United States. Both hashtags originated in the United States and are used by activists and others advocating for stricter gun laws. Given the long-standing and contentious nature of the gun control debate in the United States, it is expected to see American politicians

utilizing these hashtags. In Europe, by contrast, the issue of gun violence has not received the same degree of attention in public discourse, potentially because gun legislation is already comparatively strict in most European countries, including Norway. Consequently, the appearance of #march-fourlives in the Norwegian context is likely to be a gesture of solidarity rather than indicative of an ongoing legislative debate. This hashtag emerged in response to the 2018 school shooting in Parkland, Florida.

LGBTQI

In this subtheme, we find two unique hashtags; these were #pride and #cphpride. We find these two hashtags being used by politicians in six of the sampled countries, #cphpride in Denmark, and #pride in Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. These two hashtags are not specifically connected to a campaign; however, they are events typically coordinated by LGBTQI activists. These are countries with widespread social acceptance of LGBTQI (Flores, 2021), where politicians themselves are often seen participating in pride parades. This could explain the palatability of these hashtags among the politicians. Being affiliated with these causes could also be a strategic advantage for the politicians. The politicians' widespread use of hashtags related to this cause could furthermore be seen as an expression of them assuming the role of what McCarthy and Zald (1977) call "conscience adherents." This is a concept used to explain the behaviors of those who participate in movement activities without necessarily benefiting from the success of the movement. As reported by Wahlström et al. (2018), the motivation for participation by these conscience adherents might be different from LGBTQI participants but can still contribute to attracting more non-LGBTQI allies.

Other

Beyond the subthemes discussed above, we have identified two additional hashtags that did not fit into any of the above listed themes: #Hvororderenvoksen in Denmark—related to child care, and #Giletsjaunes in France—the movement that originally protested the tax increases on gas, but later grew into a bigger protest movement calling for various political reforms. The movement is therefore difficult to fit into any of the themes.

Patterns in Politicians' Use of Activism-Related Hashtags

The frame analysis of the tweets containing activism-related hashtags showed that there were many ways in which politicians use activism-related hashtags. We did, however, find a few recurring patterns. First, we found examples of politicians using the hashtag to directly participate in the activism. These tweets often included selfies or other photos of the

politician in question at demonstrations, encouraging others to join. The tweets cited below are examples of this pattern:

Today I will be joining the young people taking the lead in the #climatestrike. We must act now to tackle the climate emergency. Join your nearest strike. (Australia—Greens)

Enough is enough. It's my body, not yours. Today I signed the petition #imaktenskorridorer #MeToo. (Sweden—Greens)

By using the activism-related hashtags in this manner, and taking the same action as the protesters, politicians were effectively using the "action frame" (cf. Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) provided by the hashtag and thus aligning with the movement. However, we also found several cases where the politicians used activism-related hashtags to articulate support for the activist causes, but at the same time also distinctly separated themselves from the activists. In these examples, we thus see the politicians supporting the contention expressed by the activists, and contributing to spreading the hashtags in question, but while also standing aside the activist subjectivity itself. Such strategies are exemplified in the tweets below:

The young people in Michigan have certainly inspired me. They and other young people across the globe are taking action to protect our planet #climatestrike. (United States—Democrats)

This use of activism-related hashtags among politicians could be interpreted as a "safer" strategy which shifts the main burden of the issue onto the activists rather than imposing it on oneself—while at the same time scoring some points among the activists by expressing support. This could also be a form of frame amplification as the politicians seemingly share the ideas of the activists and contribute to amplifying their message. But rather than amplifying the ideas of the activist, the activism-related hashtag is used to amplify the individual politician in their allyship with the hashtag movement. These findings indicate that if a hashtag is speaking to an already existing value among politicians, it may be successful in reaching them. However, this will not necessarily translate to the activists achieving their desired political changes since the use of a hashtag in many instances is symbolic actions.

In contrast to the supportive uses of activism-related hashtags, we also found examples of the opposite, that is, politicians opposing the hashtag. For example, as in the following tweet:

Is this really climate activism? I would rather call it a sect-like psychosis. Our youth has been misled and instrumentalized. #ClimateStrike #FridaysForFuture. (Germany—Alternative for Germany)

There are recurring examples of this kind of response where the politicians ridicule the protesters to undermine

their grievances. This form of hashtag use is a clear example of frame transformation, as the politicians—especially in the case of climate protests—post content that redefined the activists as young, naive, and easily manipulated. This strategy may be used by politicians to discard the movement and reinforce their resistance toward the ideas of the movement, in this case, the Fridays for Future-movement.

We found several examples where activism-related hashtags were used in combination with a reference to an article or social media post by mass media. In these cases, the politicians did not directly engage with the activism, but rather with news stories about the activism. One such example follows below:

Sharon da Silva recently posted a great article in @newmatilda on the possibilities unlocked by #MeToo. (Australia—Labour)

This pattern aligns with the findings of Enli and Simonsen (2018), who indicated that the Norwegian politicians in their study mainly used hashtags referring to the media sphere, to comment on debates in mainstream media rather than to interact directly with activists and citizens. This is also in line with the view of Klinger et al. (2022) that politicians tend to distance themselves from issues that may be contested or controversial to support. This way of using activism-related hashtags could be a strategy to be able to talk about an issue without having to be directly associated with it at “street level.” This may, however, also mean that the original meanings and formulations by the activists were washed out as priority was given to the mediated perspective of journalists. This use of activism-related hashtags could, therefore, also be seen as a form of frame transformation since the politicians did not use the hashtags as was likely intended by the activists.

Along the same lines, we also found politicians using activism-related hashtags without making any clear connection to the original activist sentiment. We found these to be examples of an appropriation of the hashtags, as the hashtags were added to tweets without any clear ideological alignment or structural connection. In these cases, the activism-related hashtags were often used to promote events, or politicians themselves, for example, giving speeches or attending conferences where topics related to the activism were addressed to varying degrees. An illustrative example of this is the following:

I am delighted to join fellow MPs and colleagues to place a wreath at Emmeline Pankhurst’s statue for her birthday. Especially in a year as important as this #votesforwomen #5050Parliament #AskHerToStand. (United Kingdom—Conservative)

This is an illustrative example of frame bridging, where the politicians and activists to some extent seem to agree on the importance of a topic, but besides the use of the activism-related hashtag, express these ideas very differently. In these cases, the activism-related hashtags were used to, despite

these differences, create a bridge between the politician and the public. The activism-related hashtags were also used by politicians to promote or refer to ongoing work within the party or parliament. In these cases, we found that the hashtags were largely used to win “political points,” such as in the following tweet:

#MeToo has proved there is a strong need for the Equal Rights Amendment. I am optimistic that Virginia will join, and that the ERA will be ratified. (United States—Democrats)

This could be seen as a form of frame bridging, just like the previous example, but also as a form of frame transformation, as the politicians appear to attempt to ride the wave of online attention created by the activism to create interest in their political agenda. In these cases, hashtags were often used to create an illusion that by supporting their party you also support the direct cause of the activist initiative in question. This could, in fact, also be seen as a form of frame extension as the activist frame is extended to include the politicians’ or the party’s work, at the same time losing its grassroots edge. Finally, aside from using the hashtags to promote themselves or the party, politicians also use activism-related hashtags to point out failures of political opponents—often to highlight their inability to listen to the concerns expressed by the activists. The following tweets are examples of this strategy:

It has been a year since millions of people walked the streets in the #MarchForOurLives demonstrations to command gun reform. The Republicans haven’t done anything. After the #Christchurch shooting it only took New Zealand 6 days to act against guns. Americans have the right to better legislation. (United States—Democrats)

It is truly appalling how Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe is being treated in her imprisonment in Iran. I wonder if Boris Johnson will ever show some character and intervene? I’ve signed @TulipSiddiq’s letter urging our government to act. #FreeNazanin. (United Kingdom—Labour)

As shown throughout the above discussion, our analysis brings into light the diverse ways in which hashtags can be used by politicians to achieve various political purposes. By drawing on the conceptual lens of frame alignment we see how politicians bridge, amplify, extend, and transform the meanings of the activist-related hashtags. These diverse ways by which politicians build on, intervene in, or subvert these hashtags will contribute in various ways to shaping online activist discourses.

Conclusions

This study has provided a cross-national exploration of politicians’ use of hashtags, particularly focusing on their use of activism-related hashtags. More precisely, our aim was to

analyze the frame alignment processes by which politicians engage with and around these hashtags. The results presented in this article study thus give knowledge about to what extent, and according to what patterns and strategies, politicians use activism-related hashtags. Our results show that, in relation to the wide range of hashtags that politicians use, their use of activism-related hashtags constitutes a limited share. The analysis showed that politicians, in our case parliamentarians, mostly use hashtags related to the realm of national politics. This is an interesting finding in relation to previous research on top-level political leaders, which has found that they primarily use hashtags related to political events and summits (Drachenberg & Phillips, 2021). Our study, therefore, contributes to expanding the knowledge on what hashtags politicians in a wider perspective use, and highlights that there are observable differences in the uses of hashtags between politicians at different levels. This study has also highlighted cross-national differences in hashtag use among politicians, which future studies might build upon to analyze further. Variations across parties could also be an important issue for future research since the attention given to this was limited in our study.

Regarding what activist causes are most palatable to politicians, we found that feminism, anti-racism, human rights/democracy, climate activism, LGBTQI, and gun violence were the most prevalent ones. However, we did note that the politicians were selective in their use of hashtags, as the hashtags representing these causes, were mainly those with a significant national or global impact, such as #metoo, #FridaysForFuture, and #pride. This finding is consistent with that of Tarrow (2011), and Klinger et al. (2022), suggesting a common inclination among politicians to avoid potentially sensitive issues. The tendency could also be reflected in their use of activism-related hashtags in the themes *political days/weeks/months*, and *NGOs/Lobbying*, which we argue could be seen as a way of approaching contended issues, without being associated with potentially unpredictable citizen movements, and therefore being less controversial.

The analysis also indicates that although politicians do indeed use activism-related hashtags, there could be many alternative motives and purposes for using these hashtags, beyond supporting the cause or position of the original activism. Our findings suggest that there is an awareness among politicians that where there is engagement there are voters to win. Harnessing the engagement from an impactful hashtag means tapping into its visibility and potential virality, which can motivate politicians to find various ways to join in with the key contention of the hashtag, renegotiate the meaning of the hashtag to be able to align party-political ideologies with it, or engage with it by questioning or subverting it.

In conclusion, the results of this study have provided an empirically grounded understanding of the hashtag practices of politicians and expanded the knowledge on whether, and

in what ways the politicians use activism-related hashtags. The conceptual framework by Snow et al. (1986) provided us with a terminology for distinguishing and understanding such different patterns of politicians' alignment, negotiation or subversion of activism-related hashtags. We argue that politicians' use of activism-related hashtags as stepping stones to expose the hashtags' audiences to other topics or political positions can be conceptualized in terms of *frame bridging*, in line with what is proposed by Snow et al. Furthermore, while *frame amplification* according to Snow et al. (1986) happens when activists succeed in exaggerating certain aspects of the movement to appeal to the values of a specific target group, we argue that this concept is also fitting for referring to those cases where politicians use activism-related hashtags to exaggerate—or stretch—certain aspects of the initial frame of the hashtag, their own political views, actions, and goals, or both, to be able to appeal to potential voters offered up by the “hashtag public” (Rambukkana, 2015). Similarly, we found politicians to be engaging in processes of *frame extension*, where the scope of the activism was widened to include legislative work, proposals, and more in the parties and parliaments. Finally, we found that processes of *frame transformation* were the most prevalent form of frame alignment in politicians' use of activism-related hashtags as they recurrently used the activism-related hashtags in ways other than what the activists intended.

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ORCID iDs

Emma Östin  <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-7482-1698>

Simon Lindgren  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6289-9427>

Note

1. National variations of the hashtags have been translated to English. For example, #klimastrejke and #klimastreik are examples of Danish and Norwegian hashtags that have been translated and merged with the English hashtag #climatestrike.

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Author Biographies

Emma Östin (M.A. Umeå University) is a PhD candidate of Sociology at Umeå University. Her research interests include digital activism, political parties, and their interplay in the context of social media.

Simon Lindgren (PhD Umeå University) is Professor of Sociology at Umeå University. His research is about the transformative role of digital communication technologies, and the sociopolitical consequences of artificial intelligence (AI), datafication, and algorithms, with a particular focus on politics and power relations.