

# Does Social Media Promote Civic Activism? A Field Experiment

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# The rise of social media activism

- Civic Activism often takes place and even originates online:
- Recent Example: Jeremy Corbyn's campaign for Labour leader took off on social media.
- In the representative system is failing, social media provides a tool to push an alternative.

# Our Project

- **Does social media attract activists or transform users into activists?**
  - Social media activists are different from the general population.
  - Why is this the case?
  - Only self-selection or do users who encounter political information on social media become more active?
- We test the self-selection and the activation hypotheses in a randomized field experiment embedded in a Bulgarian environmental campaign.

# Activation Hypothesis

## Social Media May Help Deal with Grievances

- Gutted elsewhere, politics spills into social media territory.
- Social media gives people the feeling that they are not alone - that there are others just like them.
- Social Media creates echo chambers: Sorting and pooling people is beneficial for civic causes.

# Selection Hypothesis

Social Media is mostly an organizing tool used by people who are already active - just an alternative means of activism.

# Unique Contribution

- Due to our unique research design, we can say something about the profile of people who join a social media campaign.
  - How do activists compare to the general facebook population?
    - Compare Activists to Facebook users.
    - Compare users who choose to follow the facebook campaign to users who do not choose to follow.
  - Other, within internet only, designs, cannot capture that.

# Research Design

## Our Case is Bulgaria

- A case of facade democracy:
  - with corrupt government;
  - oligarchic connections of business to the state;
  - manifested in unlawful management of public resources including nature.
- Facebook has been an active platform for protest:
  - 70 % are on the social network;
  - many groups are spontaneously formed;
  - e.g.: against illegal widening of ski runs, promoting the preservation of city parks, historic buildings.

# Research Design

We build our research design around the roll-out of a civic campaign for the preservation of the remaining 17 wild Black Sea coastal areas against recurring threats

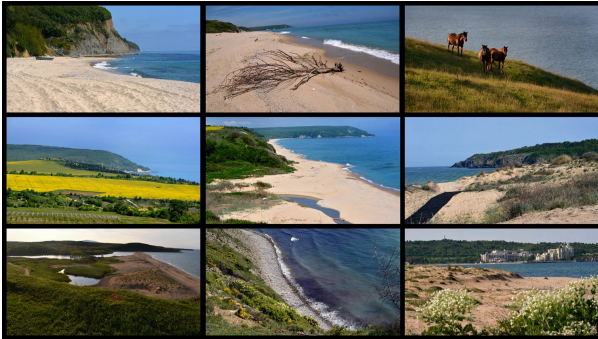


**Figure:** A recurring logo of Za Moreto maintains continuity



# Research Design

The campaign is about saving coast such as this stretch:



**Figure:** 17 beaches have survived the onslaught of former communist elite lead development

# Research Design

Civic campaigns often operate in a social media setting

- Organizers (citizens) have a choice over how to deploy a campaign, including at least:
  - via FB
  - via an email newsletter
  - the former allows participants to give feedback and to communicate, and puts them on a common network - the latter is a one-way flow of information to individuated participants

# Sampling

We chose to recruit subjects via two channels:

- Via polling agency: A representative sample of 3,332 Bulgarian facebook users in all towns with a population of over 50,000 is invited to participate in our study.
- Sample: Individuals who enrolled in an online panel and filled in the first wave: 730 subjects.
- We approached a self-selected sample of environmental activists on facebook who liked the page of an environmental umbrella organization: 357 subjects.

# Random Assignment und Outcome Measurement

- We then sent an online survey to all, and at the end of the survey used (blocked) simple random assignment to encourage subjects to enrol:
  - 1 in a FB campaign (via a FB page Za Moreto),
  - 2 in an email-newsletter campaign with the same content,
  - 3 no encouragement (control)
- After 8 weeks, via a follow-up online survey, we measured outcomes:
  - 1 attitudes towards the campaign to save the environment (chances of success, ability to make a difference)
  - 2 discussions about the environment (online and offline)
  - 3 knowledge and attitudes about protecting the seacoast

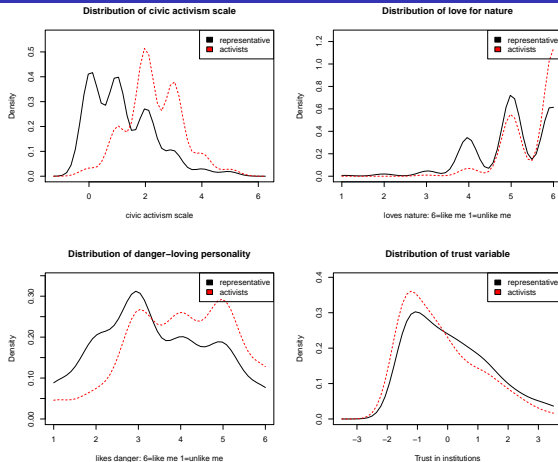
# Facebook Treatment

We run the Za Moreto Social Media Campaign:

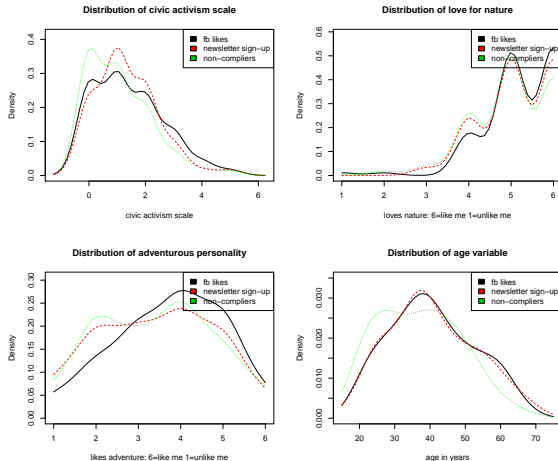
- For several weeks participants who accept our invitation to like a facebook page get:
  - 1 posts with pictures of a coastal area;
  - 2 with brief information on habitats, value, beauty, threats;
  - 3 “signature message” is thinking of remaining undeveloped coast as one area
- Subjects who sign up to the email newsletter receive the same information but without possibilities of interacting with others.

The screenshot shows the Facebook interface for the '3a Mopeto' community. The top navigation bar includes the Facebook logo, the page name '3a Mopeto', and navigation links for Page, Activity, Insights, and Settings. The main content area features a post by Nina Havelwaert, dated December 17, 2017, with a photo of a beach and text in Bulgarian. The right sidebar displays statistics for the week: 5 Page Likes, 2,022 Post Reach, 11 Notifications, and 0 Messages. The left sidebar includes a 'Promote Your Page' section and a 'People' section with 604 likes.

# Selection on observables - Comparing activist and facebook samples

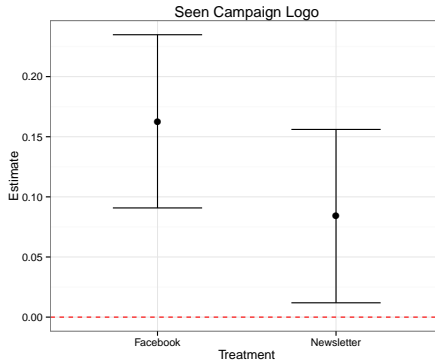


# Selection on observables - who takes the encouragement?

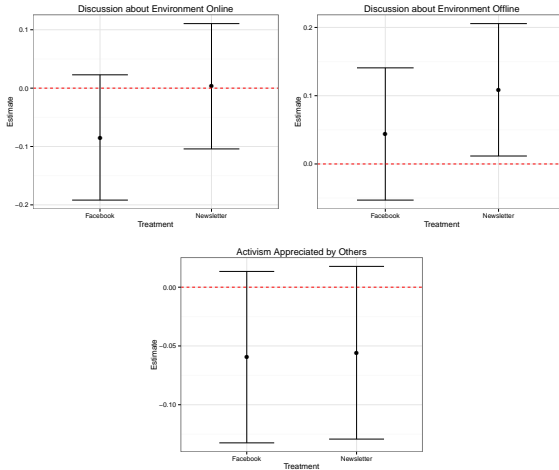




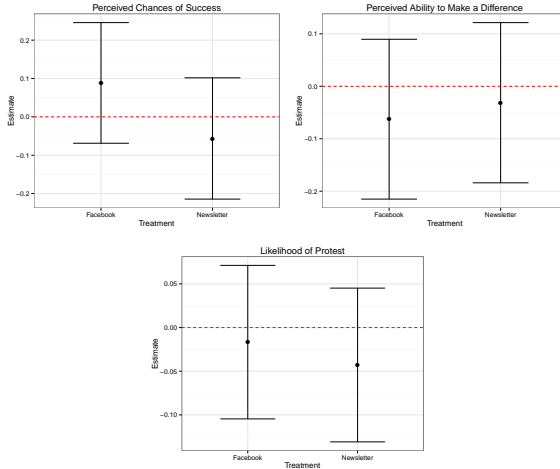
# Manipulation Check - Have you seen the logo of the environmental campaign?



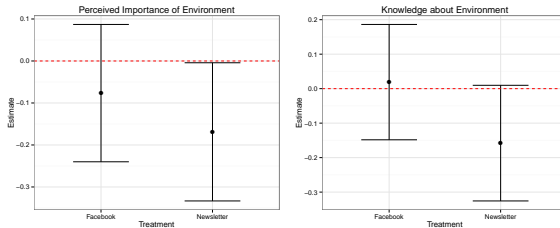
# Results: Social Interactions Online and Offline



# Results: Perceptions towards Campaign and Activism



# Results: Knowledge and Environmental Attitudes



# Findings

We find little support for the "transformation hypothesis". The facebook campaign had little effect on subjects' attitudes towards civic action or towards the subject of activism.

- In particular:
  - people in FB campaign are no more likely to discuss about the environment with friends online or offline
  - people in FB campaign are no more likely to say that they will take part in future protests or that they think they can make a difference.
- Moreover:
  - people in FB campaign do not change preferences, such as starting to love nature more

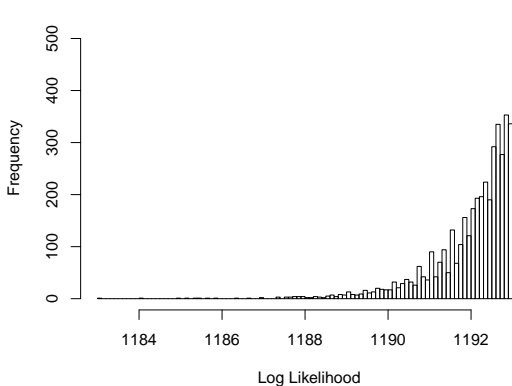
# Conclusion

Individuals with typical attributes of activists seem to self-select into online campaigns: support for selection hypothesis.

- Online communities attract activists and provide a means to organize, and this is why they work.
- We find evidence that online environmental communities are highly selective on psychological variables (love of danger and adventure) and on prior activism. Knowledge plays a limited role.
- Results are in line with work that has shown that publicly (but not privately) posted messages on Twitter were ineffective at affecting online behavior (Coppock, Guess and Ternovski, 2015).

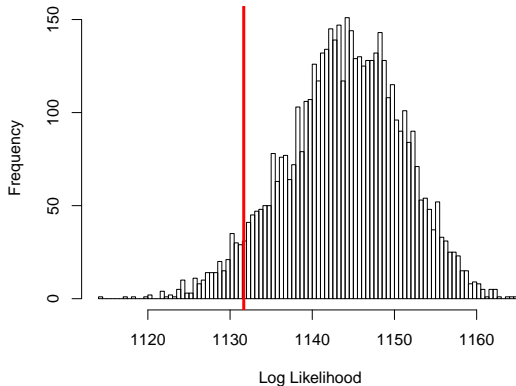
# Attrition Check

Sampling distribution of simulated log likelihoods



# Balance Check

**Sampling distribution of simulated log likelihoods**





# Non-interference between units

Those assigned to FB group are no longer independent relative to each other

- Given substantive focus, this is welcome;
- This is equivalent to a real-world setting where some subjects join social media communities with other, minimally-related to them ex-ante subjects.
- Part of the studied effect here is interaction among subjects in one of the groups

# Non-interference among units

- Big threat is if some respondents find their way to FB content they should not. Strategies: (a) monitor FB page for non-compliers; (b) ask respondents if they recall seeing logo of campaign in FB - manipulation check (c) initial collection of sample should ensure minimal connection among users, persisting during limited time-horizon of experiment