

# Organisational and Actor-Centered Theoretical Approaches to Explaining Self-Determination and External Determination among Politicians in Election Campaigns

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ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Article history:</b>            Published: April 2026</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b>            Actor theory            Organizational theory            Political election campaigns</p>	<p>Politicians standing for election are role models for the party they represent in the campaign and figures of public interest to citizens. Campaigns also promote the individual by presenting them as a competent political figure representing the interests of the country and its citizens. The question, however, is to what extent the individual, as an independent actor, can position themselves and act autonomously during an election campaign. When considering politicians as actors, their responsibility towards the organisation is inevitably linked to this, which has a decisive influence on the actor's self-determination. This article examines the necessity of this link at a scientific level in analytical approaches to the actions of politicians during election campaigns and emphasises the need for a dual perspective on actor theory and organisational theory. The necessity of such a theoretical framework arises from the possibilities available to politicians to position themselves across various channels during an election campaign, some of which can be operated entirely autonomously. In this context, it is essential that, despite the existence of personally customisable communication channels, the analytical examination must always take into account both the actor and the organisation.</p>

## 1. Introduction

Election campaigns are among the most complex and dynamic forms of political communication. They require politicians to navigate the tension between individual agency and organisational constraint, between personal positioning and party loyalty, and between authentic self-presentation and strategic communication. In an era increasingly shaped by digital media and personalised communication channels, this tension has grown more pronounced than ever before. Politicians today have access to a wide range of platforms that allow them to communicate directly with citizens, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers. Social media, in particular, has fundamentally altered the landscape of political campaigning by enabling a degree of individual autonomy that was previously unattainable. Yet despite this apparent freedom, politicians remain deeply embedded in organisational structures, their parties, which continue to shape, constrain and, at times, enable their communicative actions. This raises a central question: to what extent can a politician, as an autonomous actor, position themselves independently during an election campaign, and where does organisational affiliation impose its boundaries? Existing research has tended to examine either the individual actor or the organisation in isolation. This article argues that such a one-dimensional perspective is insufficient to capture the full complexity of political campaign communication. Instead, a dual analytical framework, combining actor theory and organisational theory, is required to adequately address the interplay between individual agency and structural constraint. Drawing on the actor-structural dynamics proposed by Schimank (2000), the structural theory of Giddens (1995), and the systems-theoretical perspective of Luhmann (2000), this article develops a theoretical framework that situates the politician as both an autonomous actor and an organisational representative. It examines the three modalities of action, wanting, ought, and being able, as guiding principles for understanding how politicians navigate their dual role during election campaigns. The article proceeds as follows: the first section reviews actor-theoretical approaches and their relevance to political communication. The second section examines organisational theory and the structural conditions under which political actors operate. The concluding section integrates both perspectives and outlines the implications for the empirical analysis of political election campaigns.

## 2. Actor-theoretical approaches

In the social sciences, a distinction has long been made between the systems-theoretical and action-theoretical approaches, in which either society-wide or individual perspectives on actions, communication, etc. are adopted (Donges & Jarren, 2017). Critics of this dichotomous approach have moved away from it and sought an alternative in the actor-theoretical approach. This approach assumes that an action-theoretical approach alone is not sufficient, as an actor's actions are not entirely free in their decisions. They are interest-driven and pursue a clearly defined goal that is both geared towards their own success (electoral success) and closely linked to the goals, norms and values of the organisation or party to which they belong. The actor's capacity for action is linked to the competences and resources they possess and those that can be acquired. The resources that are not

inherently available are external factors that constrain the actor, as they are only made available to them under certain conditions (Wiesenthal, 2018). Consequently, the actor-theoretical approach differs from the behaviourist approach, as the latter assumes that a reaction occurs directly in response to a stimulus without taking other influencing factors into account (e.g. questions regarding direct consequences) (Watson, 1913; Wiesenthal, 2018). There are numerous rationalist approaches that rely on the principle of reason in action and carry out an indirect cost-benefit analysis of actions and their consequences (cf. Cottingham, 1984). This turns the actor into a strategist in their inter e communication, as they must incorporate various perspectives that can lead to different patterns of reaction (Schulz, 2015).

Consequently, action is oriented towards other individuals and organisations and loses its absolute individuality and freedom. Action is thus guided by three horizons of orientation.

- Belonging to a social subsystem
- Belonging to institutional orders
- Belonging to constellations of actors (Schimank, 1988)

These ‘dependencies’ or ‘ties’ of actors to organisations and their norms give rise to a distinction between ‘wanting’, ‘oughting’ and ‘being able’. Within a model, horizons of orientation combine with the three modalities of action as follows.

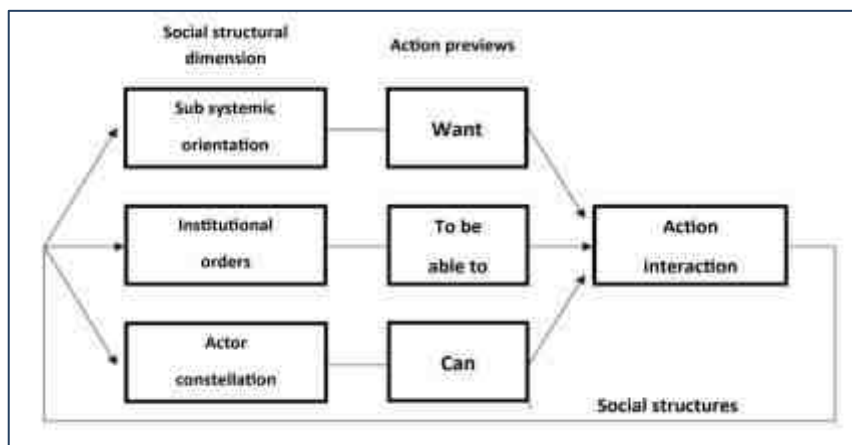


Figure 1: Actor-structure dynamics according to Schimank (2000), Source: Donges & Jarren, 2017

In the model based on Schimank’s findings, it is evident that the subsystemic horizons of orientation are linked to the actor’s ‘willingness’. These horizons of orientation are connected to societal subsystems. For political actors, these include their own party and the organisations that ideologically follow or are affiliated with it. An actor who finds themselves in such a position and environment also seeks political power within the party and/or an important position. To realise their individual ‘will’, the actor requires structured organisations in order to attain such a prominent position. To this end, an actor is also bound by the interests, opinions, values and norms of this social subsystem, which is also passively followed by supporters and thus voters (Schimank, 2006). In the second aspect, the actor’s ‘ought’ orientation is closely tied to institutional orders. These institutional orders form part of the value system and the actor’s own norms, which are passed on in a representative capacity. The actors are such representatives and are also bound to these systems of order, which they pass on and represent to the outside world (Schimank, 1992). Consequently, the ‘wanting’ orientation of action is not possible without the constraints of ‘ought’. A third factor is the connection between the social structural dimension of ‘actor constellations’ and the individual ‘capabilities’ of a political actor. Here, it is important for an actor pursuing a specific political goal to ascertain which other actors, both internal and external, might hinder or even prevent these ambitions (Dongens & Jarren, 2017). Consequently, an actor must align with the action-oriented ‘shoulds’ of the ‘ ’ in such a way that a ‘can’ can be realised and that internal actors, as direct competitors, show their approval (Gerhards, 1994).

Only a balanced interplay of these three factors can ultimately help the actor to realise their self-set goals, but only in harmony with the organisation’s expectations and the expectations of the electorate. This explains the strategy of communication, which never corresponds to a purely individual character, but rather turns communication into a method and/or an instrument.

‘According to the concept of the duality of structure, the structural elements of social systems are both the medium and the result of the practices that organise them recursively. Structure is not ‘external’ to the individual: in the form of traces of memory and as realised in social practices, it is, in a certain sense, rather ‘internal’ to their activities [...] Structure must not be equated with coercion: it not only restricts action, but also enables it.’ (Giddens, 1995). This theoretical approach is therefore central to the analysis of politicians’ participation as actors in digital social media. It is important to highlight what ‘desire’ drives politicians to choose this channel of communication. At the same time, the question of the limitations on one’s own capacity for action imposed by ‘ought’ must also be raised, as strategic elements come into play here that are reflected in the presentation and the statements. The realm of ‘ability’ must also be taken into account, as it is here that the successes or failures of such a campaign can be foreseen.

“The advantage of Schimank and Giddens’ approaches lies in the fact that, through the reciprocal relationship between action and structures, both dimensions are brought into focus. At the same time, they make systems-theoretical analyses applicable to empirical research by enabling subsystems to be described as ‘constraints’ or as regular practices, whilst allowing hypotheses about the actions of actors within these structures to be formulated and tested.” (Dongens & Jarren, 2017)

### 3. Organizational theory approaches

Since, in the actor-theoretical orientation of actions, the organisation and also social structures repeatedly represent an important factor that can either promote or constrain the actions of the actor, it is necessary to take organisational theory into account.

Organisations are artificial constructs that help societies to introduce structures into communities with many participants. Organisations have been appointed or see it as their inherent duty to establish an organisational framework with norms, values and laws that is intended to serve as, or does serve as, a consensus among all members of a community. At the same time, an organisation with such structure-creating capabilities also possesses an inherent controlling function that safeguards the systems. The extent of an organisation's powers depends on the remit assigned to it by the community. Consequently, organisations have both a function that promotes action and one that inhibits it (Dongens & Jarren, 2017). As also addressed in actor-theoretical approaches, organisations are likewise subject to a rational framework, which is complemented by naturalness and openness (Scott, 2003). Organisations derive their rationality from the high degree of formality and the goals inherent in their members, which they seek to achieve through the organisation. The factor of the natural system is rooted in the fact that an organisation brings together members who find the greatest possible alignment in their opinions, values and norms and therefore unite. Whilst there may be slight differences in tendencies within the organisation, the unifying core values are aligned. This fundamental orientation, which is universally accepted within the organisation, forms the core that members regard as worth preserving. To underpin this value of preservation, organisations project this fundamental orientation outwards in the form of values and norms. They engage in communication with their surrounding environment and seek to foster conviction or consensus among those who are not—or not yet—members of the organisation and its values (Luhmann, 1997).

An organisation's openness is partly rooted in its naturalness, as different tendencies may emerge within an organisation that otherwise appears uniform. Added to this is the openness stemming from the fact that organisations are always part of a complex network of direct and indirect connections with their environment, as they draw both affirmation and criticism from it, which can lead to transformations or reforms. (For a detailed discussion of these three framework conditions, see Scott, 2003). This communication, as discussed by Luhmann, is also part of the organisation's self-preservation, which comes into play in decision-making. On the one hand, this is an internal process, in which decisions are used to attempt to validate the organisation from within. On the other hand, it is in contact with the environment through communication and attempts, through validation in decision-making (choices), to establish itself as a systemically relevant factor (Luhmann, 2000). Organisations are therefore a grouping of individuals who represent one of many social attitudes and project their specific attitude outwards through the organisation. If a person wishes to take the helm of an organisation, then, according to actor-theoretical approaches, they would have to adapt to the principles of action: 'wanting', 'ought' and 'being able'. The question here is whether it is the individuals or their intentions that determine an organisation. Since organisations possess an internal structure and organisational rules, actions are bound by consensus before they can be communicated to the outside world. This obliges the members, and the actors amongst them, to submit to the principle of communication, as decisions regarding action without consensus would disrupt the organisation as a system. Schimank therefore rightly emphasises:

"An organisation is capable of collective action to the extent that the actions of its individual members form a constructively ordered whole, that is, they interlock not merely occasionally but systematically, so that an overarching objective is pursued in place of individual interests" (Schimank 2002).

Consequently, the organisation's goals are determinative of an actor's actions, as it is on this basis that the individual's views are perceived and evaluated. Furthermore, the actor must also draw upon the organisation's resources, as they rarely manage to do so using their own means alone. This makes it clear that approaches based on organisational theory and actor theory cannot be applied entirely separately.

From all this, it can be concluded that an actor's communication within an organisation is also determined by the organisation and its communication structures. This encompasses not only content but must also be viewed at the communicative meta-level, i.e. how one communicates about communication. In this context, the channels through which a particular type of communication takes place are also examined and determined (Theis-Berglmaier, 2003). Dongens has identified five key dimensions relating to this connection between communication and organisations, which are modelled and depicted in their interrelationships in the diagram below.

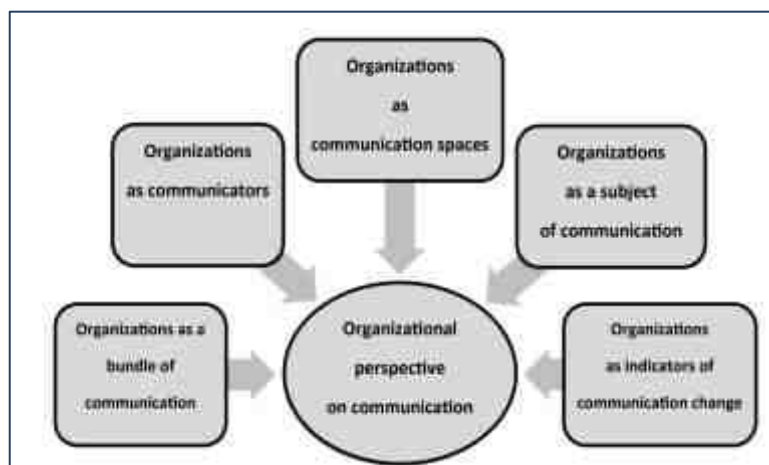


Figure 2: Five dimensions of the organisational perspective on communication according to Dongens (2011) Source: Dongens, 2011.

If we consider the dimension ‘Organisation as a bundle of communication’, it follows that communication brings about decisions based on the greatest possible consensus. This results in a self-referential system that confirms itself through the decision and secures its own existence.

‘Organisations as communicators’ arises from the fact that organisations convey their content (norms, values, opinions, etc.) to the external environment. To this end, they appoint a spokesperson from their ranks who acts as a representative and thus becomes the ‘face’ of the organisation. These representatives may subsequently develop into the key decision-makers who are considered for selection when decisions are made.

The communication of content is linked to one or more objectives that are congruent with the organisation. To this end, a wide variety of channels are selected through which to communicate with the environment. Strategies are also developed here regarding which communication strategy (meta-level) is to be applied. The actors must/should/can/wish to comply with this and adapt their individual style of communication to the largely determining principles so that success can be generated for the organisation.

It follows from these principles that ‘organisations serve as spaces and structures of communication’. The logic stems from the fact that organisations determine the content and strategies for their own communication and distinguish and set themselves apart from other organisations. This presents recipients with different perspectives and opinions, which they are free to endorse.

Through this presentation and the content put forward for discussion by the organisations, ‘organisations are the subject of communication’, as they are reported on across various media channels. Furthermore, they are the subject of private communication among non-organised individuals who discuss the organisation’s content. Based on this public and private communication about the organisations, the latter recognise their own success or failure in terms of their ability to achieve and implement their objectives.

In the final point, ‘the organisation as an indicator of communication change’, opinions about the organisation initiated from outside are often evident. This means that in the event of failure, the organisation, should it not disband, will embark on new strategic paths. These may be changes in fundamental attitudes (e.g. liberalisation or radicalisation), but also changes among the key players, who establish their own values, norms, etc. as a new foundation and receive strong support for this within the organisation. This alters the nature of the organisation’s communication with its environment by reaching out to groups that previously were never a target audience.

On the other hand, the expansion of media channels can also lead to a rethink in communication, which was particularly the case with the digitalisation of the media.

With the emergence of new channels, organisations and their stakeholders had to consider whether, and if so, how they should participate in these channels, as the digitalisation of communication altered participation in communication for all members of society. The consumer is increasingly becoming a well-informed recipient who forms their opinion on the basis of broader and deeper information (Hegelich, 2017). As a result, the previous information advantage has been partially eroded, and organisations are increasingly communicating ‘on equal terms’ with their interlocutors, particularly on social media platforms, which has also led to increased vulnerability for organisations. For the more communication there is, the more opportunities for attack arise. This vulnerability is exacerbated by the organisation’s stakeholders, as they use a wide variety of media channels to share and publish content that may deviate from the organisation’s standards. This occurs when personal statements are made by individuals that cast a negative light on the entire organisation. In such cases, the organisation may distance itself from the individual, and the individual may lose their role as a representative. However, personal opinions reflect individual perceptions of problematic issues and simultaneously serve as an indication that other forms of communication are subject to strategic considerations.

As the media serve as a significant barometer for the content of organisations, they fulfil an important function for society by reporting objectively on actors, organisations and their actions. That is, or would be, the ideal. However, media organisations are organisations in their own right and are therefore, to a certain extent, equally bound by the principles they uphold. The values of media organisations vary, and certain media organisations tend towards a particular socio-political direction (Mauler et al., 2017). Consequently, in their preference for communicating via media channels, organisations are more inclined to provide information and content to media organisations whose goodwill they can be certain of. This applies above all to the mass media in the fields of newspapers, television and radio, but breaks down when one enters the realm of digital media, as these are globally operating companies whose interests are primarily economic and not guided by specific value orientations or norms. The openness of the internet requires organisations to take the initiative in presenting themselves without being able to rely on any ‘moral backing’. Consequently, the study of organisation-led actors within the digital media spectrum is crucial for research in order to understand their intentions and thereby create a ‘barometer of understanding’ for the audience. One example is ‘fake news’, which can be identified more quickly as such through greater scientific reflection and analysis, and which helps to curb populism. This would simultaneously require complete trust in the system, something that is currently being called into question more and more. This implies:

‘Trust in the system here means the absolutely necessary trust in complex systems regarding what Luhmann understands by communication media: truth, power, money. The assessment of an organisation or institution (including the media) is governed by public accountability, moral integrity and a helpful function – the more powerful an institution is, the less pronounced the trust in it.’ (Mauler et al., 2017)

This conclusion regarding the lower degree of trustworthiness should not be regarded as a general criterion, as it would amount to a sweeping generalisation. Rather, the individual recipient of information must consider which source they use to obtain their information. At the same time, from a reflexive perspective, it is or would always be a good approach to use alternative sources in order to extract the essence of the facts from any embellishments or partial facts.

#### 4. Necessary link between the two theoretical approaches

The consideration of the actor is incapable of acting in isolation from the organisation. The reason lies in the actor's objectives within the organisation. Political parties are defined as organisations under the law and possess the legitimacy to represent those eligible to vote. The latter may vote for the party by virtue of this legal legitimacy. In Germany, this involves the direct election of a representative (personalised) and the second vote for the election of a party.

Actors from political parties therefore stand for election as individuals and hold their own opinions or views on a given issue. Furthermore, as elected representatives, they are accountable only to their own conscience (which may also run counter to the majority view of the party).

In such a case, however, due to the actor's dependence on the party's support, the role as an actor is decisive in determining whether a person with such a strongly divergent opinion would be sent into an election campaign as a representative. This leads to an examination of the interaction between actor and party, which are interdependent.

If, in a theory-led approach, the analysis were based solely on actor theory, this would result in a distortion of the communication intentions towards citizens. This is based on the fundamental hypothesis that communication between an actor and a citizen cannot be equated with a private conversation, but rather that this type of communication takes place on a purely factual level, to which different communication parameters apply than in private conversations.

The communication platform is also a decisive factor here, as the two individuals conversing on a factual level 'meet' on a platform designated for this purpose, which the actor consciously enters. This results in a one-sided situation of intention.

However, as the organisation's (party's) claim to represent its members weighs decisively upon the actor, the potential for individuality is in fact present (one can communicate whatever seems appropriate from an individual perspective), this individuality is restricted by instrumentalisation, on the one hand to secure the organisation as a source of support, and on the other to convey the adapted stance to the citizen(s) and secure a vote in favour of the actor and the organisation.

A comprehensive analysis of intentions can therefore only be achieved by combining the theoretical foundations of actor theory and organisational theory. In the analysis, care must therefore be taken to distinguish the individual parameters from the organisation-oriented ones in order to obtain a complete picture of the actor's intentions.

Viewed individually, actors act according to the following criteria, as illustrated in the model.

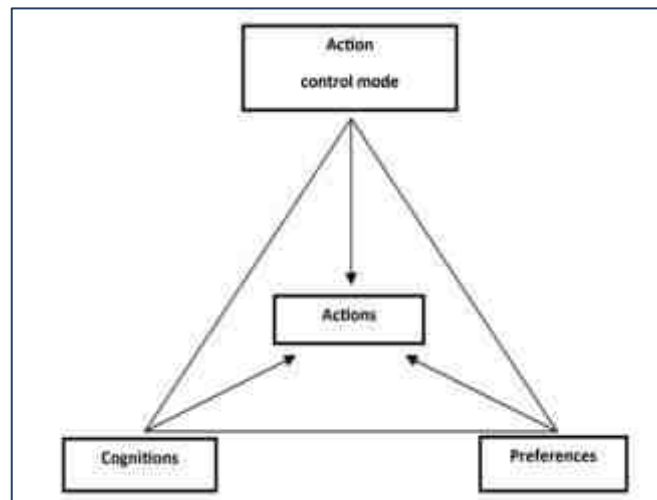


Figure 3: A general actor model of methodological individualism, Source: Wiesenthal, 2018.

Accordingly, actions are determined by cognitions (interpretations, orientations, knowledge) and by personal premises (values, desires, aspirations). All the elements mentioned are therefore personally shaped and individual. The mode of action control constitutes an influencing factor here, which, however, significantly influences freedom. Three action orientations apply here, which ultimately determine the action. This may be a rational choice determined by a cost-benefit factor. There may also be a process-oriented approach, in which one weighs up the possible outcomes of an action and how the current mood will receive it. Thirdly, however, the action may also be geared towards an expressive orientation, which is to be understood as 'self-expression'. Here, the intention is either to be controversial or to conform to the prevailing opinion (Wiesenthal, 2018). The three aforementioned orientations of action are not always parallel or separate from one another, but may intermingle, thereby determining the final action.

However, actors in the political arena are not absolute individualists when they act as representatives of an organisation. Here, environmental factors come into play that influence their actions. These are also referred to as 'environmental uncertainties' (Wiesenthal, 2018). These are characterised as either internal – that is, between the organisation and the actor – or external – that is, as perceived by third parties. Consequently, action must be aligned with both internal and external environmental factors. Absolute individuality cannot therefore exist, and when analysing actor actions that also originate from the actor, it is necessary to include organisational determinants and to distinguish these in an in-depth analysis.

The end result of this theoretical integration is a portfolio that can be divided into individual approaches and organisational approaches. Individual uncertainties must also be taken into account, although these are perceived individually by the individual actors (Wiesenthal, 2018).

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