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Political storytelling of Ekrem İmamoğlu on Instagram during 2019 Istanbul mayoral elections in Turkey

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This study aims to shed light on the visual aspect of digital storytelling during elections and its effects on a candidate's overall campaign narrative. Focusing on Turkey's 2019 mayoral elections, the study examines how Ekrem İmamoğlu from the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), who was elected mayor of Istanbul used visual imagery in terms of political storytelling on Instagram. The study utilises an image type analysis and reports findings from 261 Instagram posts shared on İmamoğlu's verified Instagram account during the last month of the initial election on 31 March 2019 (n = 167) and the rerun election on 23 June 2019 (n = 94). This approach reveals that İmamoğlu mostly adopted campaign works, contact with public, and positioning image types. Utilising these image types, he mainly pursued unifying and personal/biographical political storytelling narratives through visuals on Instagram. During the re-election period, he also pursued an incumbent strategy in addition to existing storytelling strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, information clusters surround people. To be visible in this bombardment, it is necessary to create consistent and strong stories. Such stories play a vital role in both politics and daily life. Storytelling has an important place in political communication to help politicians connect with the public, and help candidates create bonds with voters during election campaigns.

In this study, we examine a visual-centric platform, Instagram, and focus on the political story-telling of the opposition block during the 2019 Istanbul mayoral election cycles in Turkey. Following a successful election campaign, Ekrem İmamoğlu, candidate of the opposition secular social democrat Republican People's Party (CHP), was ultimately elected Istanbul

metropolitan mayor in both the initial election on 31 March and in rerun election on 23 June. Since then, he has rapidly become one of Turkey's most important political figures. In addition to the many political consequences, his success demonstrates how to plan and implement an effective election strategy even if the candidate was not a well-known politician beforehand. We focus on the visual dimension of İmamoğlu's political storytelling to analyse how the specific meanings that he created with his visual choices contributed to his overall campaign narrative. We investigate the visual imagery in terms of managing and projecting the desired image and the storytelling strategies that İmamoğlu pursued based on his image choices. In addition, we investigate whether his visual imagery choices and storytelling strategies changed between the initial election on 31 March 2019 and rerun election on 23 June 2019. Here, it is worth explaining the importance of this election. Firstly, the administration of the Istanbul Municipality was transferred from political Islamist parties to secular social democrats after 25 years. Secondly, the Supreme Election Council (YSK) annulled the initial election due to allegations of fraud by the ruling, political Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP), following İmamoğlu's victory. However, İmamoğlu won the rerun election with an even higher percentage of the votes. Thirdly, the results opened a new path for opposition groups to challenge the ruling AKP's political hegemony in Turkey's 'competitive authoritarian regime,' a term that refers to regimes that are neither 'democratic' nor 'authoritarian' (Bogaards 2009). According to Levitsky and Way (2010), such regimes have an unequally structured democratic playing field (e.g., misuse of state power, control and disciplining of opposition media) in conducting political campaigns and winning elections. The 2019 Istanbul mayoral election cycles are an exemplary case that can help further our knowledge about how opposition

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candidates can instrumentalise their visual political story-telling strategies in competitive authoritarian regimes and may even successfully challenge the incumbent parties. In Turkey, Istanbul's elections are seen as the 'ultimate rehearsal' for general elections and vital to predict what comes next in the Turkish politics (Dilekli, Anaz, and Da Paixão 2021, 78). In addition, by regaining control of municipal governments, such as Istanbul, Turkey's largest city and economic centre, the opposition gained the opportunity to access public and private resources that can help them challenge AKP and President Erdoğan in the 2023 general elections (Esen and Gumuscu 2019).

Storytelling practices have become more apparent in digital environments following the development of technology. According to Jenkins, Lashley, and Creech (2017), digital story telling comprises a wide range of different storytelling practices, including those established on non-digital platforms before being transferred to digital platforms and those that are 'born digital' (Jenkins, Lashley, and Creech 2017, 1061). Social media platforms provide suitable channels for these digital storytelling practices. In terms of political communication, stories enable potential voters can connect with abstract political ideas and political candidates (Mohamed 2019). However, few studies have examined the storytelling of political figures through their visual imagery in political communication.

While visuals have always had a place in political communication, their importance has gradually increased with the development of the Internet (Farkas and Bene 2020). As a visual-centric platform, Instagram has become an increasingly important medium for politicians' political communication, especially during election periods. In addition, Instagram provides politicians with opportunities to tell both their personal and political stories through its 'visual diary' feature (Liebhart and Bernhardt 2017, 19). However, most research into the use of social media platforms in election and non-election times has focused on text-based platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter (Towner 2013; Svensson and Larsson 2016; Melek 2017; Bode and Dalrymple 2016). In contrast, drawing on Grittmann and Ammann (2009, 2011), we use an image type analysis, a method based on Panofsky and Panofsky (1972) iconographical approach, which allows in-depth analysis of visual imagery by including both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Image type analysis consists of classifying visuals under image types based on their recurrent motifs, analysing their meanings within their context, and interpreting their 'inherent

cultural values and ideas' (Grittmann 2014, 137). This study contributes first by conducting an in-depth analysis of visual imagery to determine the digital storytelling of the political candidates. Furthermore, recent studies on the Instagram activities of political leaders have mainly focused on western democracies (e.g., Turnbull-Dugarte 2019; Lalancette and Raynauld 2019; Muñoz and Towner 2017). The case we consider also contributes by examining how political leaders develop their visual political story telling outside the context of western democracies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Media as a Tool for Political Communication

Since the early 2000s – especially Obama's 2008 campaign demonstrated the impact of social media platforms – social media platforms have gained importance for political communication and become a tool for candidates' election campaigns (Costa 2009; Filimonov, Russmann, and Svensson 2016; Kuyucu 2019; Muñoz and Towner 2017). Since then, many studies have examined how politicians instrumentalise social media and carry their political campaigns on these platforms. These studies mainly rely on text-based platforms, such as Facebook (Gerodimos and Justinussen 2015; Borah 2016) and Twitter (Enli and Skogerbo 2013; Goldbeck, Grimes, and Rogers 2010). However, Ekman and Widholm (2017, 16) note that Instagram differs from these text-based platforms: 'although Instagram allows for text as well as images and video, the platform leans on what we might call an "image first" logic.' That is, Instagram enables politicians to express themselves and their ideas visually. Visuals strongly attract the viewer's attention and can create persuasive arguments (Schill 2012). This has drawn the attention of political communication scholars to Instagram (e.g., Filimonov, Russmann, and Svensson 2016; Turnbull-Dugarte 2019; Lalancette and Raynauld 2019; Muñoz and Towner 2017; Uluçay and Melek *in press*).

Social media platforms can also enable opposition parties to increase their visibility than through mass media. As a result, opposition parties are increasingly using social media platforms in their campaigns to contact the public directly (Filimonov, Russmann, and Svensson 2016). Thus, during Turkey's 2019 mayoral elections, Ekrem İmamoğlu, the candidate of the main opposition party, CHP, used Instagram actively. With a high degree of press-party parallelism¹ (see Melek and İşeri 2021) in the newly formed executive

presidency, Turkey is a significantly under-studied political landscape in the literature. The few studies that have examined Turkish politicians' Instagram activities have focused on candidates' self-framing activities (e.g., Uluçay and Melek *in press*) rather than investigating the specific meanings and strategies that candidates convey through their visual imagery. Moreover, studies show that especially politicians of incumbent parties do not fully understand the dynamics of social media platforms in their political communication, and therefore cannot use them to their full capacity (Kutlu 2019). Studies across countries have reported similar findings suggesting that politicians apply their traditional media strategies directly to Instagram (e.g., Filimonov, Russmann, and Svensson 2016).

Instagram and Political Communication

Instagram is a photo-video sharing social media platform that has become one of the fastest-growing social media platforms. According to Digital Report 2020 of WeAreSocial and Hootsuite, the number of active users worldwide reached 1.15 billion in October 2020 (Kemp 2020).

Previous studies show that Instagram is becoming a significant platform for political campaigns during elections. Some studies focus on the strategic usage of Instagram for political parties during elections (Filimonov, Russmann, and Svensson 2016; Turnbull-Dugarte 2019) and the usage of Instagram by individual candidates during their political campaigns to convey a specific image of themselves and image engagement (Lalancette and Raynauld 2019) or for the candidate's self-framing (Muñoz and Towner 2017; Uluçay and Melek *in press*). Filimonov, Russmann, and Svensson (2016) investigated the strategic use of Instagram by Swedish parties during Sweden's 2014 election campaign. Their Instagram usage mainly focused on broadcasting rather than mobilisation. In addition, the top candidates were primarily presented in political or professional contexts. Muñoz and Towner (2017) explored the self-framing strategies of the top seven candidates in the 2016 US presidential primary season by analysing their Instagram images. They also applied Grabe and Bucy (2009) visual framing typology to examine the relationship between Instagram engagement and self-framing themes of ideal candidate and populist campaigner. Candidates mostly utilised the ideal candidate frame, which also attracted the most engagement.

According to Digital Report 2019 from WeAreSocial and Hootsuite, Instagram was the second most widely used social media platform in Turkey in 2019, with 38 million users (Kemp 2019). Thus, Turkish politicians began to realise its importance for representing themselves and promoting their ideas to the public. Scholars also drew attention to Instagram's importance for Turkish politicians and their political communication. These studies examined Instagram using various approaches, such as self-framing strategies (Uluçay and Melek *in press*), content analysis (Kutlu 2019), and visual and textual analysis to determine the populist usage of the medium (Uzunoğlu and Yılmaz 2019). However, to date, no studies have applied an image type analysis to examining candidates' digital political storytelling.

Digital Storytelling in Political Communication and Instagram

Storytelling is as old as human history. According to Henry Jenkins, digital storytelling differs from other types of storytelling in that it 'could include stories generated via digital tools, stories that involve various forms of networked participation or interactivity, stories that are distributed via digital platforms, or stories that are consumed on digital platforms' (Jenkins, Lashley, and Creech 2017, 1061). Both the political and personal narratives of politicians involve storytelling. These narratives help them engage with their voters and present a more specific appeal to the public. As Mohamed (2019, 355) notes, 'political rhetoric relies upon telling stories. Stories help potential voters to relate to rather abstract political ideas as well as political candidates.'

After research demonstrated the importance of Instagram as a political communication tool, other studies have shown how Instagram can provide an appropriate platform for candidates to convey their stories during elections (Liebhart and Bernhardt 2017; Mohamed 2019). Therefore, through suitable visual imagery, politicians can position and represent themselves with a strong meaning in the eyes of the public and potential voters. However, investigating political storytelling on Instagram is relatively new. Furthermore, research into political communication in Turkey has not examined the political storytelling of Turkish politicians.

Turkey's 2019 Mayoral Elections, Social Media, and Campaign Strategies

The mayoral elections in 2019 were highly symbolic for Turkey because the CHP's candidates in the three

largest cities (Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir) were all elected as metropolitan mayors against the well-known AKP candidates. The results ended their rule in the capital Ankara and Turkey's economic centre, Istanbul. However, following AKP's legally unjustified objections, the Supreme Election Board (YSK) cancelled Istanbul's election results and ordered a re-run on 23 June 2019. After bitter political discord between the incumbent and opposition parties along with many events, Ekrem İmamoğlu increased his winning margin in the rerun election from 22,000 to 806,014 votes (YSK 2019). Both the 31 March and 23 June elections were historic and symbolic as secular social democrats took over to end 25 years of rule by political Islamist parties. Moreover, mayoral elections in Turkey are crucial events in the country's political, economic, and social landscape. Local governments are important as a 'genuine springboard to national politics' for successful leaders (Bozlagan 2013, 4). They also play an important role in national elections and can affect the country's current competitive authoritarian regime. From a global perspective, this case can help us better understand how opposition political candidates in competitive authoritarian regimes can use their personal Instagram accounts to implement visual campaigning techniques. Kemahloğlu and Özdemir (2018) showed that the spending and public services of AKP-led local governments have helped increase the party's vote nationally. Thus, municipal governments are an essential part of parties' 'electoral hegemony' through their access to public and private resources (Esen and Gumuscu 2019, 319). The opposition was encouraged by their victories because they demonstrated how to succeed against AKP and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, thereby demonstrating the weaknesses in Turkey's competitive authoritarian regime (Esen and Gumuscu 2019). Esen and Gumuscu (2019) argue that municipal governments can provide an alternative platform for the opposition to reduce AKP's disproportionate access to both public and private resources. By taking control of municipal governments, CHP can now access public and private resources, which may help them challenge AKP and Erdoğan in the 2023 general elections (Esen and Gumuscu 2019). Finally, gaining control of Istanbul municipality has a symbolic meaning in Turkey's political landscape and offers a sign of what will happen next in Turkish politics. For example, before cofounding AKP, Erdoğan entered politics as the mayor of Istanbul.

The results also have implications for social media, specifically Instagram campaigning, as İmamoğlu was a frequent and active user of Instagram during his successful campaign period. Therefore, this study

focuses on his strategic usage of Instagram to explore the kind of visual strategy he embraced in terms of digital storytelling in his political communication. We propose to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How did Ekrem İmamoğlu use visual imagery for his political storytelling on his Instagram account during the 2019 mayoral elections?

RQ2: Did Ekrem İmamoğlu's choices of visual imagery and political storytelling strategies change between the initial election and rerun election?

DATA COLLECTION, SAMPLE, AND METHOD

We collected data from İmamoğlu's verified Instagram account (@ekremimamoglu) after both elections were finished. The time period covered the last month of both election campaigns up to each election day (1–31 March 2019 and 23 May–23 June 2019). Complete data from both elections were collected manually from smartphones, yielding 261 posts in total (167 from March and 94 from June). The last month of each campaign was chosen because it is the most intensive period. The unit of analysis was single Instagram post photos, whether they included texts, captions, and hashtags.

For image type analysis, it is crucial to analyse and interpret the visuals within their context. Therefore, defining the image types correctly is critical. Highfield and Leaver (2016, 49) state that working on visuals requires researchers to 'broaden and diversify the way social media is examined and addressed' in order to give the meaning to the polysemic structure of visuals 'in concert with textual'. Accordingly, when the visuals alone could not precisely convey the idea behind them, we referred to the captions to confirm it. Instagram Stories were not included in the analysis. This is because sampling was done after the election and Instagram Stories only remain available for 24 hours. We also excluded users' comments or likes because the goal of the study was to examine how İmamoğlu represents himself and conveys storytelling strategies through his images.

Drawing on Grittmann and Ammann (2009, 2011), we adopted an image type analysis to examine İmamoğlu's Instagram posts to understand the specific meanings that he conveyed and his storytelling strategies to intentionally select and distribute visuals relevant to his campaign story. Image type analysis allows visual content to be classified into specific image types according to their motifs (Liebhart and Bernhardt 2017). This method consists of a two-step approach.

First, using a quantitative approach, visuals are classified under specific image types based on their motif and context. Second, using a qualitative approach, the meanings and symbols of these image types are analysed within their context (Liebhart and Bernhardt 2017; Mohamed 2019). According to Pentzold, Brantner, and Fölsche (2018), image type analysis allows in-depth classification and quantification of image types. To classify visuals into specific image types, the image types must first be identified. Grittmann and Ammann (as cited in Liebhart and Bernhardt 2017) suggest that describing image types requires in-depth knowledge of the selected visual content and is therefore oriented around Panofsky and Panofsky (1972) iconographical approach. Grittmann and Ammann (as cited in Ehrlén and Villi 2020) propose that image types emerge when an overarching idea repeatedly appears in visuals. Therefore, to develop image types, recurring motifs must be described and quantitative variables for the image types should be introduced to interpret the meanings transmitted by intentionally selected and distributed visual imagery.

We first examined the full sample to identify the distinct motifs repeating in the visuals, such as the relationship between the candidate and the media, the candidate's personal life, giving a speech at party rallies, or hugging/talking with citizens. Based on these motifs, we created a codebook with specific image types. Then, we quantitatively tabulated and analysed the data to measure the occurrence of these image types. For example, giving a speech at party rallies is one of the components of the variable 'campaign work' because it establishes the candidate's campaign-related activities. Another example is that the demonstration of love to İmamoğlu by citizens (e.g., hugging) is a component of the variable 'contact with public.' Each visual was coded under one image type based on its dominant portrayal; when there was uncertainty, captions were used to understand the image type. We obtained an acceptable level of intercoder reliability between two coders by using Krippendorff's alpha ($\alpha = 0.85$). Finally, using a qualitative approach, we interpreted the meanings of the image types to reveal the candidate's storytelling strategies.

Our codebook included the following eight specific image types:

Campaign work includes visual imagery that shows the candidate's actions related to the campaign and distribution of information about the campaign, such as upcoming events and information. It includes images of the candidate during campaign-related activities, such

as delivering speeches at party rallies or visiting unions, universities, chambers of artisans, etc. The visuals of İmamoğlu's speeches to the public in squares, the interviews he attended at universities, and the statements he gave to many associations and institutions were gathered under this image type. They show that he carried out an energetic and productive campaign.

Call to action comprises visual imagery that invites users and citizens to participate in public events or cast their votes, as well as İmamoğlu's invitations to not leave the voting centres until the results are announced. These visuals mostly included texts that could appear in the picture or outside it. These reinforced the meaning provided by the visual. The focus of these visuals was to mobilise people to support İmamoğlu's campaign in various ways.

Contact with public represents the candidate interacting with people from various segments of the population (different ages, ethnicities, religions, etc.) in various places (mosques, churches, streets, etc.). These visuals show him in conversations with people, taking selfies with them, or shaking hands or hugging citizens. Other common images showed endorsement from a member of the public and people showing him affection. These strategically selected visuals conveyed the meaning that İmamoğlu is close to the public and receives their support.

Media work includes images of the candidate in media interviews, panels, and press conferences. It also includes photo materials of İmamoğlu's appearances on media channels (news programmes, radio programmes, etc.). The most common characteristics of these photo materials were studio settings, cameras and microphones, and talking with journalists.

Family comprises images of the candidate with his family in semi-private moments, for example having breakfast with his family or showing İmamoğlu's family members. It also includes images of İmamoğlu and his wife together when thanking supporters or sending their love to citizens. The visuals, including family photos, present İmamoğlu as a suitable candidate who cares about the concept of the family, which provides a sense of 'normality' in many societies.

Meeting politicians shows the candidate together with other politicians, mayors, party leaders, and rival party candidates, such as images of İmamoğlu conversing with other politicians or shaking hands. Because the other politicians appearing with İmamoğlu are mainly Istanbul district mayors, this indicates how İmamoğlu coordinates with these local politicians.

Personal stories includes images of the candidate in semi-private moments. These help position him as a person rather than a political figure, and present the candidate in a biographical context (e.g., showing him somewhere related to his personal life or his roots, such as a family house). They also emphasise his personal attributes and hobbies. Other visuals in this category highlight his ordinariness in doing daily activities, such as taking a walk or spending time with young people.

Positioning comprises images that position the candidate on both political and cultural issues, such as photos that show his views on issues that are important to the public. In addition, images of İmamoğlu as a candidate who respects the country and society's traditional, religious, and national values provide an opportunity to position himself on these issues in the eyes of the public. For example, İmamoğlu positioned himself as a successful and productive candidate through visuals covering his inaugurations of day-care centres while photos of him celebrating or commemorating national events convey his position on social issues.

The salience of specific image types allows the 'underlying visual strategies' to be identified (Liebhart and Bernhardt 2017, 23). We therefore examined the most frequent image types and interpreted their meanings to understand how they contributed to İmamoğlu's overall political campaign narrative. The salience of these specific image types guided us to reveal visual storytelling strategies pursued through İmamoğlu's visual imagery. After identifying the eight image types above, we determined the visual storytelling strategies that İmamoğlu emphasised through his visual imagery by looking at the meanings and ideas that they drive. From this, we could identify the storytelling strategies based on these image types in line with previous studies (e.g., Liebhart and Bernhardt 2017; Mohamed 2019).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the frequency of specific image types out of 261 posts on Ekrem İmamoğlu's Instagram account. The first research question addressed how İmamoğlu used visual images for his political storytelling on Instagram. The intentionally selected and distributed routines were mostly included in *campaign work*, *contact with public*, and *positioning* image types. Through his choice of visual imagery, İmamoğlu created an image during the campaign that he was close to the public and actively working. He also clearly positioned himself on both political and traditional

TABLE 1. Quantification of image types on Ekrem İmamoğlu's Instagram account

Image Type	March	June	Total
Campaign Works	77 (46.1%)	35 (37.2%)	112 (42.9%)
Call to Action	3 (1.8%)	4 (4.3%)	7 (2.7%)
Contact with Public	49 (29.3%)	25 (26.6%)	74 (28.3%)
Family	4 (2.4%)	5 (5.3%)	9 (3.5%)
Media Work	11 (6.6%)	8 (8.5%)	19 (7.3%)
Meeting Politicians	7 (4.2%)	3 (3.2%)	10 (3.8%)
Personal Stories	1 (0.6%)	6 (6.4%)	7 (2.7%)
Positioning	15 (9%)	8 (8.5%)	23 (8.8%)
Total	167 (100%)	94 (100%)	261 (100%)

issues through expressing his ideas about those that citizens expect an incumbent to have a clear stance on. The second research question addressed whether İmamoğlu's choices of visual imagery and storytelling strategies on his Instagram account changed between the two elections. We found that they did not change, although there were more *call to action*, *family*, and *personal stories* image types in the rerun election (see Table 1).

Because the research was conducted during the most intense phase in both elections, İmamoğlu's visual imagery heavily relied on *campaign work* (e.g., Figures 1 and 2), which is important in showing that the candidate is actively campaigning. Table 1 indicates that İmamoğlu's strategy was to be in close contact with the public during the election campaign so he frequently used images of *contact with public* ($n = 74$, 28.3%) (see Table 1 and Figures 3 and 4) to counter AKP's populist polarisation strategy. For many years, AKP have used a polarisation strategy of attacking CHP as 'western-oriented elites who are disconnected from the ideals of regular people,' and claiming that CHP imposes this 'foreign' lifestyle against the people's will (Aytaç and Elçi 2019). However, through images showing him with citizens in markets, squares, and shops, İmamoğlu emphasised that he is a politician who deals with the problems of the ordinary people and is accessible to the public. This is also reflected in images of the support he receives from the public, such as gifts and *iftar* meals. Another important image type was *positioning* to reflect his position regarding political, traditional, and social events. The *media work* image type was important to show the media's continuing interest in the candidate. However, there were fewer of these images during the rerun election, perhaps because he became more well-known and attracted more media attention. Visuals of *family* (e.g., Figures 5 and 6) and *personal stories* (e.g., Figure 7) were the least frequent image types, although they increased for the rerun election. This may be because political recognition of İmamoğlu increased, so



FIGURE 1. Ekrem İmamoğlu delivering a speech at a party rally, posted on 17 June 2019, exemplifying campaign works image type. Dear people of Kucukcekmece! Never lose your enthusiasm, we will do more. After everyone goes to the polls on Sunday, we will start working together for a fair İstanbul. #EverythingWillBeVeryGood.

his private life became a point of interest and curiosity. Accordingly, the visual imagery started to emphasise this side of İmamoğlu. One of the least frequent image types was *meeting politicians*, even though he occasionally appeared next to well-known politicians. This could be he wanted to represent himself as closer to the public by moving away from the political elites. Being seen with other politicians can transmit their credibility and social prestige to the candidate. However, it is highly likely in Turkey's polarised political landscape that avoiding this can prevent the candidate from engaging in political disputes and being mentioned and polarised by any party. It also ensured that İmamoğlu was recognised from his own stance

rather than major political identities and ideologies. This interpretation is supported by the fact that images in this category mostly showed İmamoğlu with İstanbul district mayors. That is, he appears to be close to the city's problems and far from political polarisation.

One of the less frequent image types was *call to action*. The images mostly concerned inviting the public to vote and participate in events. The majority of Turkey's conventional media channels are strictly controlled by AKP, which is a typical feature of competitive authoritarian regimes (Andı, Aytaç, and Çarkoğlu 2020). Since 2002, pro-government businesses have purchased many mainstream media organisations,



FIGURE 2. Ekrem İmamoğlu delivering a speech during a visit to the chamber of taxi workers, posted on 23 March 2019, exemplifying campaign works image type. We met with the managers of the chambers of workers in Istanbul. We will work at the same table with all our tradespeople, from market tradespeople to taxi tradespeople, and we will solve the problems together. Our common goal is to make our citizens happy. #IfThereIsImamoğluThereIsaSolution.

giving AKP a significant media influence (Çarkoğlu, Baruh, and Yıldırım 2014; Andı, Aytaç, and Çarkoğlu 2020). This led Freedom House (2014) to downgrade Turkey's press freedom status from 'partly free' to 'not free,' citing government censorship. Similarly, Reporters without Borders' 2020 World Press Freedom Index (Reporters without Borders 2020) ranked Turkey 154th out of 180 nations. Press-party parallelism dynamics have also shifted in AKP's favour, increasing its visibility and making it the sole political party receiving positive coverage (Yıldırım, Baruh, and Çarkoğlu 2020). The way press-party parallelism dynamics unfold in the Turkish media system 'primarily reinforces the continuation of the incumbent AKP's tenure and limits the opposition parties' chances to challenge its incumbency' (Yıldırım, Baruh, and Çarkoğlu 2020, 18). Given this context, social media

provides a freer space for opposition candidates and parties to reach the public. This can be seen in İmamoğlu's appeal to the public via social media to support his campaign. Examples include invitations to events (e.g., Figure 8) and calling on people to vote.

Regarding *positioning*, İmamoğlu used photo-text combinations to share his views on political issues, the problems of the city and its citizens, and to suggest solutions. He also positioned himself in terms of traditional, national, and religious values that are the cultural norms in Turkish society. This included photos of himself with families of martyrs, posts about Muslims killed in a mosque attack in New Zealand, and posts commemorating national days (e.g., Çanakkale Martyrs' Memorial Day). This image type was crucial to show his political stance as a mayor. During the election



FIGURE 3. A citizen holding a supporting banner ('We will make you the mayor'), posted on 12 June 2019, exemplifying contact with public image type. Tuzla, you are so beautiful. We will work together for the happiness of our 16 million citizens living in this city and rest assured we will win. #EverythingWillBeVeryGood.

campaign, İmamoğlu avoided positioning himself within any political ideology. Instead, he emphasised that he would be a mayor who would only address the needs of Istanbul and the wishes of its citizens. Thus, the images presented İmamoğlu as a mayoral candidate who has internalised the traditions of the society, respects Istanbul's history, and can fulfil the duties of the mayor.

Strategic selection and presentation of visual imagery are crucial factors to help a candidate create and convey political and personal stories. The intentionally selected and distributed routines that İmamoğlu used in his Instagram posts allowed us to classify the visual contents under specific image types. The salience of these specific image types on his visual imagery helps reconstruct the storytelling strategies that he used on

Instagram during the campaign. These storytelling strategies were shaped by the interpretation of the meanings of the image types. These can be described as *unifying strategy*, *incumbent strategy*, and *personal biographical strategy*. To answer the second research question as to whether İmamoğlu's political storytelling strategies on Instagram changed between the two elections, these political storytelling strategies must firstly be defined.

The *unifying strategy* highlighted how İmamoğlu would address all segments of the population as one. During the campaign, he emphasised that he would work for all Istanbul's citizens and govern together with them, regardless of identities and ideologies. His Instagram posts supported this strategy. Through visuals showing him with people from various segments of the



FIGURE 4. Ekrem İmamoğlu in conversation with a citizen, posted on 6 March 2019, exemplifying contact with public image type. We started our visit to Kasımpaşa with our Beyoğlu Mayor Candidate Alper Taş by meeting our shopkeepers and citizens. It was very nice to be greeted with the sincere interest and love of the people of Kasımpaşa.

population, and receiving support and love from citizens, he emphasised his close communication and emotional bond with them. This reinforced his narrative of being a unifying mayor that would govern Istanbul together with the public. His campaign was positive campaign, following an embracing strategy with calm and peaceful language (Çakır 2019). Instead of engaging with the 'populist political style'² and responding to the polarisation strategy of AKP figures (e.g., attacking opposition politicians, journalists, a specific segment of the public, etc.), İmamoğlu's campaign appealed to all Istanbulites, regardless of political cleavages and without discriminating against any citizens. The depolarised strategy was reflected in his political storytelling on Instagram. In particular, through the choice of visual images on Instagram, he successfully continued his campaign narrative that 'We are working for the 16 million; I will be the mayor of the 16 million' (referring to all Istanbul's citizens).

Incumbent strategy refers to presenting İmamoğlu as a legitimate mayor. İmamoğlu positioned himself on political and administrative issues during both elections. He attended openings and provided a preview of what he planned to accomplish when he took office. His choice of visual imagery indicated that he would be a good manager (e.g., photos of the candidate while he inaugurates institutions or day care centres). The visual choices on his Instagram aligned with the main focus of his election campaign strategy, which was to avoid general political polemics and focus solely on the problems of the city and its citizens (Yavuzylmaz 2021). The visual storytelling strategy also supported the emphasis on his election strategy of highlighting 'macroeconomic deterioration and its effects on people's daily lives' and his solutions (Yavuzylmaz 2021, 630). Furthermore, during the rerun election, he adopted a determined stance on the basis that he fairly won the initial election, emphasising that the public's



FIGURE 5. Ekrem İmamoglu having breakfast with his family, posted on 31 March 2019, exemplifying family image type. We had our breakfast as a family; we will go to vote soon. Please vote too and smile at everyone you see.

democratic decision should be respected. For example, he posted images of his 'never give up' speech on the night that his first victory was revoked.

Personal/biographical strategy refers to highlighting aspects of the candidate's personality and personal life. Thus, İmamoglu emphasised his personal identity and aspects other than his political personality by posting photos with his family, other people and important environments in his life, and photos of his hobbies and activities. However, even in some of these photos, he emphasised that he would work to solve problems and

meet the desires of the city and its people. That is, even in photos of personal contexts, he provided insights and messages about what he would do as mayor.

Our analysis indicates that İmamoglu pursued both *unifying* and *personal/biographical* strategies in both elections through his choice of visual imagery in his Instagram account. During the second campaign, he also added the *incumbent strategy*. Jenkins, Lashley, and Creech (2017) argues that every media contributes significantly influences our overall experience of storytelling. Building on previous studies (cf., Liebhart



FIGURE 6. Ekrem İmamoğlu and his wife sending their love to the citizens of Istanbul, posted on 30 March 2019, exemplifying family image type.
I send my love to all my fellow citizens of Istanbul. Elections are a festival of democracy; they should go on with common sense and like a festival. I wish the elections bring a happy and beautiful spring to our country. #WeWillWinTogether.

and Bernhardt 2017; Grittmann and Ammann 2009, 2011), our case shows what Instagram can add to this spectrum. In order for these visual storytelling strategies to reinforce his overall campaign strategy and narration, İmamoğlu's visual imagery and the visual dimension of political storytelling extended his campaign's stories to reveal his qualifications for the mayorship, political standpoint, and aspects of his personality that he could not otherwise express verbally or in writing. Consequently, an in-depth understanding of the strategic visual imagery in a politician's Instagram feed can increase our knowledge about political communication. This is because the emphasis on specific image types reveals both how a candidate wants to be seen and which policies she/he wants to support, as Liebhart and Bernhardt (2017) also argue.

McNair (2016, 509) suggests that 'in social networking ... political actors must be able to use the tools efficiently, conveying an up-to-date, tech-savvy image'. Our study reveals that İmamoğlu managed to operationalise his Instagram account in this way. In addition, his campaign was presented as a *visual diary* with chronological entries, similar to the Van der Bellen case (Liebhart and Bernhardt 2017). These included announcements of events, following issues after his mandate was revoked, unifying political statements and his projects after he took office, a hybrid campaign strategy referring to other campaign channels, announcements of his mass media appearances, and calling for support from voters. Finally, İmamoğlu also employed several strategies noted by Filimonov, Russmann, and Svensson (2016), such as broadcasting



FIGURE 7. Ekrem İmamoğlu on a walk, posted on 10 March 2019, exemplifying personal stories image type.

We started the day with a morning walk in Belgrade Forest. The more that green areas in Istanbul increase, more sporting areas will be created. The 15 new Life Valleys that we will build will meet the city's need for both green and sporting spaces. #IfThereIsImamoğluThereIsSolution

campaign messages, mobilisation, managing image, and hybridity.

CONCLUSION

Visuals have become more prominent in political communication studies in recent years, with scholars suggesting that they are crucial for politicians to connect with the public (Veneti, Jackson, and Lilleker 2019). Strategically used visual imagery enables politicians to convey specific, intended meanings and shape their own image. As mentioned earlier, storytelling in politics relies on strategies that allow candidates to shape personal and political narratives. This study examined Ekrem İmamoğlu's storytelling strategies through his selected visual imagery on

Instagram during the 2019 Istanbul mayoral election cycles. Using image type analysis (Grittmann and Ammann 2009, 2011), we examined the salient image types İmamoğlu used and the political narratives he created. This method enables both in-depth analysis of visuals and interpretation of underlying strategies.

One of the important points that this study focused on is whether selection and projection of image types and political storytelling strategies changed between the two elections. Our data indicates that the specific image types did not change, although the proportion of visuals shared under these image types varied slightly. İmamoğlu's choice of visual imagery mainly fell into the *campaign work*, *contact with public*, and *positioning* image types. Because the data was close to the election days, there are fewer visuals shared for other image



FIGURE 8. Inviting citizens to an upcoming public event, posted on 9 June 2019, exemplifying call to action image type. We are in Esenyurt on Monday, 10 June.

types, such as *family* or *personal stories*, which contribute to personal narratives and highlight the personality of the candidate rather than the political image.

We found that İmamoğlu utilised *unifying*, *incumbent*, and *personal/biographical* storytelling strategies. In particular, the *incumbent strategy* became more evident during the rerun election period. According to Liebhart and Bernhardt (2017, 22), 'selection routines provide important information about the relevance of an image type for the candidate and the overall campaign narrative'. Therefore, intentionally selected and

projected routines help candidates shape their image in the eyes of the public and help the public to connect with candidates' ideas, mission, and vision. The central narrative of İmamoğlu's election campaign, which can be summarised as 'I will be the president of 16 million', was supported through political storytelling strategies – especially the *unifying strategy* – realised through images on his Instagram account.

In addition, through these visual choices, İmamoğlu's visual strategies were consistent with his overall campaign narrative, based on his claim to become the mayor of all Istanbulites regardless of their ideological,

ethnic, religious, and other identities, and to govern together with all citizens. Our study revealed how the visual side of this digital storytelling helped maintain and reinforce ideas emphasising his political communication during elections.

We acknowledge that Ekrem İmamoğlu's victory cannot be considered independently of Turkey's economic problems and many other important domestic and foreign policy issues (see Esen and Gumuscu 2019). Nevertheless, the successful election campaign of İmamoğlu and his team, and the strategies they adopted played a significant role. This opposition victory in the 2019 Istanbul mayoral elections is undoubtedly symbolic. By adopting a unifying language and avoiding discussions, İmamoğlu countered AKP's 'populist political style' (Moffitt and Tormey 2014), based on marginalising a segment of the public and creating political discord. Whether this will change the political strategies adopted by Turkey's ruling and opposition parties in the country is an important topic for future studies.

From a global perspective, Turkey is a significantly under-studied political landscape. It has a high degree of press-party parallelism dynamics that have recently shifted to only favour the incumbent AKP (see Yıldırım, Baruh, and Çarkoğlu 2020) due to the new executive presidency. Consequently, this case can help us better understand how opposition parties can use visual storytelling on Instagram to successfully challenge ruling parties in competitive authoritarian regimes beyond the context of western democracies. Further studies could investigate how candidates use political storytelling on various platforms and under different regime types to compare their political communication strategies. In addition, our study focused on the most intense phase of the election campaign. Future studies should also explore longer periods to determine whether image types and/or political storytelling strategies differ over time. In addition, future studies could also examine videos and stories on Instagram. Despite certain limitations, this study offers a baseline to understand political candidates' digital storytelling patterns and activities on visual social media platforms.

NOTES

[1] The term press-party parallelism was first coined by Seymour-Ure (1974) to explain the degree of partisanship in the media. Later, Hallin and Mancini (2004) identified press-party parallelism as one of the most important elements in their typology of media systems, alongside the development of the newspaper industry, professionalisation of journalism,

and the involvement of the state. New research on the Turkish media indicates deepening polarisation in news coverage, with news outlets clustering into distinct socio-political camps (see Melek and İşeri 2021).

[2] Populism has been used to describe various ideologies (e.g., left-wing, right-wing, progressive, authoritarian) in various geographies and settings. Moffitt and Tormey (2014) criticise popular definitions of populism, such as ideology, logic, discourse, and strategy/organisation. Instead, they propose the idea of 'political style' as a new way of thinking about the concept. They claim that this new category captures a key aspect of populism that other approaches overlook. By emphasising populism's performative elements, they present an inductive model of populism as a political style and contextualise it within the increasingly stylised and mediated environment of modern politics [see Moffitt and Tormey (2014)].

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