Strategic Political Communication in an Age of Polarization and Backlash

Call for Abstracts: Preconference at the ICA Annual Meeting in Glasgow 2027 | Thursday, 3 June | University of Glasgow

PURPOSE

This call invites submissions to an ICA preconference on strategic political communication in times of strong ideological and political polarization. From an organisations' point of view, the political context has become deeply polarized and hostile to ideas that once seemed to have broader legitimacy, ie., the once majoritarian now minoritarian, once favourable now unfavourable, political context in which organisations communicate. We argue that strategic communication research has under-theorised this condition, even as political science, management studies, and business ethics have begun to address it, and that the field is well placed to lead an interdisciplinary conversation about voice, silence, and manoeuvre under backlash. This preconference invites theoretical, empirical (quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, computational) and critical contributions that regard the political context as a constitutive condition, not merely the setting, of strategic political communication research, and that broaden the empirical lens beyond the United States and other Western democracies.

RATIONALE

Extremist political movements have moved from the margins to majority governments in the United States, Italy, Argentina, India and elsewhere, while illiberal repertoires diffuse transnationally (Štětka & Mihelj, 2024). For companies, public-sector organisations, civil society, political parties, and journalism, the political context is no longer a background variable but a constitutive condition of strategic communication: their strategic communication becomes strategic *political* communication. Adjacent fields describe these dynamics through an overlapping vocabulary — democratic backsliding (Nord et al., 2024), the crisis of the liberal international order (Goddard et al., 2024), backlash politics (Alter & Zürn, 2020), cultural and policy backlash (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Patashnik, 2019), anti-gender campaigns (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017), the greenlash (Conti & Seele, 2025), and anti-"woke capitalism" (Rhodes, 2021). With that in mind, we invite submissions that work in any of these "adverse political settings," while taking the conceptual choice itself as part of the contribution.

Communication science has been slower than these neighbours to theorise the strategic implications of the shift (with exceptions: Bennett & Kneuer, 2024; Waymer & Heath, 2023; Rundell & Winkler, 2026). Yet the questions are inherently communicative: how do organisations re-frame, voice, hush, or silence themselves when previously non-mainstream positions occupy state power? How do public-sector organisations, parties, and journalists adjust when political pressure becomes structural? Which actors communicatively profit from adverse settings through partisan re-positioning, moral reframing, narrative recalibration, or corporate political activity? And how can strategic communication contribute to a fully functioning society when it is necessarily political (Heath, 2006)?

THREE THEMES

A. Coping. How do organisations and institutions cope with adverse political settings? — strategic silence, resistance, narrative recalibration, greenhushing; responses by public-sector and scientific institutions facing defunding or politicised control.

B. Strategic use. How do organisations and institutions strategically use adverse political settings? — communication strategies of (newly) empowered actors, Big Tech lobbying, fossil-fuel and defence sectors, accommodation and normalisation, moral reframing, nostalgia narratives, and the question of how "new" these patterns really are.

C. Manoeuvring. How do organisations and institutions manoeuvre adverse political settings? — agonistic and polyphonic responses to cross-jurisdictional stakeholder pressure, hedging, civil-society and NGO contestation of illiberal public spheres, and communicative resilience of the judiciary, universities, and regulators.

AIMS

(1) Establish the political context as a constitutive condition of strategic communication; (2) connect strategic communication scholarship to debates on democratic erosion, illiberal public spheres, norm contestation, and corporate political activity in adjacent fields, and offer strategic-communication insight back to them; (3) sharpen the field's conceptual and empirical vocabulary for analysing adverse political settings; (4) diversify the empirical base beyond the United States and Western Europe.

FORMAT AND TIMELINE

Format and venue: One-day, Thursday, 3 June, ahead of the ICA Annual Meeting 2027 in Glasgow at the University of Glasgow. Preconference registration fee: $75 incl. two coffee breaks and lunch buffet.

Abstracts: 800-word abstracts (excl. references) until February 15, 2027 to: strategicpoliticalcomm@gmail.com; Submissions must include the theme and aim (e.g., B.2) they intend to contribute to.

While we welcome all topic relevant submissions, we encourage submissions from scholars based in or working on non-WEIRD contexts to diversify the empirical base of scholarship beyond U.S. and Western European environments. Additionally, as a means to cultivate the next generation of scholars working in this this arena, we encourage student-only contributions (all authors must be students), which should be marked as such upon submission.

Supported off-site preconference by the Public Relations and the Political Communication Divisions of the ICA.

PUBLICATION OPPORTUNITIES

Outstanding contributions to the preconference will be invited to a special issue in the *International Journal of Strategic Communication* (deadline: November 1, 2027).

ORGANIZERS

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KEY REFERENCES

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