

PHD SUMMARY

Crafting Campaigns, Messages, and Identities

Belgian Parties in a Digitalised Political Arena

Lucas Kins¹

Abstract

Digital media have reshaped the way in which party organizations communicate with the public. Yet, digital partisan communication still reflects established patterns of interparty competition. The dissertation examines two distinct but related aspects of political parties' uptake of digital media for communication purposes. First, building on the literature on party digitalization and digital campaigning, it seeks to determine the extent to which political parties – as strategic but constrained actors – embrace or reject digital media for partisan communication, and how this is shaped by intra-organizational dynamics. Second, it investigates the content of their digital communication, by examining patterns of strategic political messaging across the political spectrum, and how these are shaped by parties' inherited attributes, but also by the broader institutional framework in which they operate. Thanks to an in-depth case study of Belgium and its fragmented, duplicated party system, the dissertation unravels how organizational- and system-level characteristics shape parties' diverse approaches to digital communication, but also their messaging strategies regarding negative campaigning, issue ownership, and group cues. Overall, findings indicate that Belgian political parties' adoption and use of digital media reflect the country's unique institutional context.

Keywords: Political parties, Digital political communication, Social media

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¹ Lucas Kins, Université libre de Bruxelles (Cevipol), lucas.kins@ulb.be

In recent years, the digital dimension of political parties has become increasingly pronounced. Accordingly, the rapidly expanding scholarship on party digitalisation has largely focused on communication, which some have come to describe as parties' most digitalised organizational 'pillar' (Fitzpatrick, 2021; Gibson, 2020; Sandri et al., 2024). Political parties are generally seen as strategic, goal-oriented actors (Downs, 1957; Müller & Strøm, 1999), who use digital media to advance their communication goals (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2014). However, both their integration and use of digital media are shaped by internal and external constraints. Internally, parties' ideological legacy, organizational dynamics, and place in political competition affect how they implement and use digital media for external communication purposes. Externally, the broader institutional framework and patterns of interparty competition impose additional constraints that shape their approach to digital communication, but also the tone and content of their messages. Yet, knowledge of how these various dynamics affect political parties' digital communication strategies remains limited, with a clear lack of interdisciplinary perspectives on political communication strategies' organisational and institutional embeddedness.

To tackle these shortcomings, this dissertation dissects the interplay between parties' strategic digital media use and the constraints on their communication strategies. To do so, it leverages the singularity of the Belgian case (i.e., its consociational setting, party system fragmentation, and linguistic duality) and combines two empirical approaches to reveal how various constraints shape partisan communication. First, it delves into how digital communication strategies are managed within party organisations, through semi-directed interviews with the political staff in charge of parties' digital communication. The research question seeks to determine how party staff embrace or reject digital communication tools, and the practices that are associated with their use (e.g., micro-targeting, paid advertising). An inductive analysis of the interviews reveals that attitudes range from enthusiastic acceptance in a few parties, to cautious use of and scepticism towards digital media in most of them. Incumbent party respondents felt more vulnerable and cautious about the broader political impact of digital media, while those seeing greater potential benefits adopted them more readily.

Then, the attention shifts to Belgian party actors' day-to-day digital communication and their strategic mobilisation of two key rhetorical devices of political communication: negative campaigning and group cues. The dissertation proceeds with a large-scale content analysis of 30,377 manually coded posts on X, both during and outside of election times. First, it draws attention to character-based and issue-based negative campaigning. Second, it considers the strategic mobilisation of group ties. Existing scholarship suggests that consociational democracies – which rely heavily on heterogeneous multi-party coalitions and encourage negotiation between 'moderate' elites – would mitigate personal attacks among party actors that have a

stake in the consociational arrangement (Bogaards et al., 2019). The results reveal important nuances, both supporting and challenging existing theories of negative campaigning. In line with existing research, issue-based attacks are predominant, and character-based attacks rare (Van der Goot et al., 2024). However, some findings on character-based attacks challenge existing scholarship. For instance, when they resort to character-based attacks, coalition allies are more likely to attack one another, which goes against the assumption that power-sharing tends to dampen such attacks (Haselmayer & Jenny, 2018). While these strategies can be efficient at generating attention, they may simultaneously erode parties' capacity for compromise.

The dissertation then looks at issue-based negative campaigning and unpacks whether party actors attack on issues associated with (or 'owned' by) the party or instead seek to undermine the issue ownership of their competitor. A central finding is that contests over ownership of the issues that are being talked about in parties' online messages drive negativity. This suggests that substantive negative campaigning is deeply embedded in issue competition. The analysis shows that this extends beyond election campaigns. During routine periods, political actors tend to adopt a defensive strategy, attacking primarily when they control the issue or face a direct challenger for its ownership. In contrast, during campaign periods, they adopt a more aggressive stance, targeting both issue owners and competitors. These findings contribute to both the literature on issue ownership and on negative campaigning in multi-party settings, by demonstrating that negativity serves not only to attract attention, but also to claim and defend issue ownership.

Finally, the thesis explores how Belgian party actors invoke social group identities in their everyday communication online. More specifically, it distinguishes between the mobilisation of positive and negative party-group ties (see Kins et al., 2024), as well as "us vs. them" frames. The results highlight the singularity of traditional (or "pillar") parties' communication towards groups in society: They prioritise ingroup appeals while refraining from disparaging others. This may reflect the need for these parties to build support across various population segments. The most important finding concerns the persistent influence of historical cleavages on party actors' group cues, with the linguistic or community cleavage being dominant in Dutch-speaking Belgium, and the economic cleavage among French-speaking party actors. Although group cues linked to the universalism vs. particularism divide (e.g., migrants, religious minorities) have gained traction in Dutch-speaking Belgium, they have yet to supersede the entrenched centre-periphery cleavage.

All in all, this dissertation contributes to a more holistic understanding of how campaigns are envisioned at the intra-organisational level, and how they unfold in plain sight. Thanks to its combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, it

unravels how organisational- and system-level characteristics shape parties' diverse approaches to digital communication, but also their messaging strategies regarding negative campaigning, issue ownership, and group cues. Overall, the findings indicate that Belgian political parties' adoption and use of digital media reflect the country's unique institutional context. Beyond enriching our understanding of Belgian politics from a communicational perspective, this dissertation offers insights into how, when, and why parties leverage digital media to navigate interparty competition, which is a necessary step towards a more transparent and accountable democracy.

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