

PHD REVIEW

Crafting Campaigns, Messages, and Identities

Belgian Parties in a Digitalised Political Arena

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Abstract

Lucas Kins' dissertation offers a compelling analysis of how digital media are integrated into party organisations, and how parties leverage these tools to shape public perceptions of interparty competition and their relationships with different segments of the electorate.

Keywords: Belgium, Digital political communication, Digital media, Party organization

The study by Kins is divided into two main parts. First, it examines the extent to which political parties adopt or resist digital media for partisan communication, drawing on interviews with party staffers. Second, it analyses the content of parties' digital messaging, focusing on character-based and issue-based attacks, as well as group appeals, through a large-N analysis of over 30,000 posts of Belgian parties and their leaders on X (formerly Twitter) over a 30-month period. This dual approach enables the author to identify patterns in strategic communication across the political spectrum, shaped both by party-specific attributes and broader institutional contexts.

Methodologically, the dissertation stands out for its mixed empirical strategy, combining qualitative insights with large-scale quantitative analysis. Substantively, it makes important contributions to two bodies of literature. In political communication, it moves beyond the notion of negative campaigning by embedding attacks within broader policy and identity frames and extending analysis beyond the confines

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of election periods. In party politics, it shifts focus from static structural attributes of parties to the dynamic use of digital tools in practice, offering a party-centred perspective on strategic communication.

While the findings offer valuable insights, they leave the reader wanting more. The dissertation is grounded in the assumption that parties are strategic actors with bounded rationality, operating within constraints imposed by political competition and historical legacies. This framework enables a nuanced analysis that incorporates both macro-level factors (e.g., multiparty competition, federalism, and consociationalism) and meso-level characteristics (e.g., party origins, ideology, size, and age), while also accounting for parties' agency and strategic decision-making. Yet, it may overlook internal complexities that shape parties' communication decisions. This calls for a deeper engagement with intra-party processes, informal networks, and leadership styles, which may influence strategic planning and responsiveness.

The dissertation's treatment of elite communication opens important avenues but misses the opportunity to fully leverage the dual communication communities in Dutch- and French-speaking Belgium, for instance, to assess the link between elite discourses and political polarisation. Prior research has highlighted the role of elite discourse in driving polarisation (Iyengar et al., 2019). In the Belgian context, research has shown that ideological and affective polarisation is higher in Flanders than in French-speaking Belgium (Bettarelli & van Haute, 2022). The dissertation adds nuance by showing that French-speaking parties engage more in character-based attacks and in in-group appeals, while Dutch-speaking parties engage more in out-group derogation. It suggests that out-group rhetoric, rather than negativity per se, may be a more potent driver of polarisation. Future studies could build on these insights to explore how different forms of elite communication contribute to affective and ideological polarisation in multilingual and federal contexts.

References

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