PHD SUMMARY

The Brains Behind the Party: Varying and Evolving Roles of Political Party Think Tanks

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Abstract

Political parties are vital to democratic life, yet they face growing challenges such as polarisation, social media pressures, and internal instability. In this demanding environment, Political Party Think Tanks (PPTTs) - the 'brains' behind political parties - play a crucial but often overlooked role. This dissertation explores how PPTTs across Europe support their parties' core functions, from supporting them in daily political activities to policy development, ideological renewal, and long-term strategy. Drawing on extensive qualitative research, including interviews, content analysis, and comparative case studies, it develops a typology of PPTTs and identifies the conditions shaping their functions. The findings reveal that the roles of PPTTs vary across time and countries, influenced by the level of autonomy, party dynamics, and internal organisation. By uncovering the evolution and diversity of PPTTs, this dissertation offers a foundational understanding of these unique political organisations and highlights their importance in sustaining democratic vitality beyond short-term electoral competition.

Keywords: Political party think tanks, Political parties, Think tanks, Elite interviews, Qualitative comparative analysis

The most widely recognised entities enabling democracies to function properly are political parties (Lipset, 2000; Neumann, 1954; Schattschneider, 1942; Stokes, 1999). They are crucial for winning elections, creating impactful policies, and governing

responsibly (Müller & Strøm, 1999). However, the contemporary European political landscape presents notable challenges to these parties, such as growing polarisation and the increasing importance of social media (Bimber, 2014; Jacobs & Spierings, 2016), pressuring them to prioritise remaining up-to-speed with day-to-day politics and quick and brief communication to gain short-term electoral gains (Caramani, 2017). Moreover, increased electoral volatility (Dassonneville, 2023) and internal pressures such as declining party membership (van Biezen et al., 2012), legislative turnover (Gouglas et al., 2018), and leadership turnover (Cross and Pilet 2015) contribute to instability and loss of know-how within political parties.

In this challenging and unstable context, Political Party Think Tanks (PPTTs), also called the 'brains' behind political parties, can act as crucial partners. PPTTs help political parties with the execution of some of their core functions that often may be overlooked in the pursuit of winning the next elections, such as elite formation, socialisation, interest articulation and aggregation, and ideological development. Moreover, they can document and interpret the long-term societal trends that are key to future-oriented policymaking when parties are in office.

PPTTs exist across party families and in a wide variety of countries, under country-specific labels. Examples of PPTTs include the 'party foundations' in Germany (e.g. Mohr, 2010; Weilemann, 2006), the 'scientific institutes' in the Netherlands (e.g. Timmermans et al., 2015; Voerman 2018), the 'study centres' in Belgium (e.g. Pattyn et al., 2014, 2017), or the 'research centres' in Australia (e.g. Miragliotta, 2021). Despite PPTTs' democratic importance and the variety of political activities they engage in, their roles remain undertheorised in the academic literature. Specifically, there is little theorisation on what their roles entail and how they vary in space and time. This knowledge gap contrasts sharply with our extensive understanding of their affiliated political parties and (non-)partisan think tanks.

Consequently, the central aim of this dissertation is to establish a foundational work that will advance knowledge on the roles of this unique type of political organisation. The dissertation addresses the following overarching research question: *How do the roles of PPTTs in the European political landscape vary and evolve?*

To answer this question, the research first introduces PPTTs in EU member states and analyses the party ties of members of European Political Foundations (EPFs), which are networks of national PPTTs. By reviewing the literature on think tank affiliations, gathering data through exploratory contacts with 37 EPF members, and a content analysis of 166 official websites of EPF members, this part of the research offers insight into the variety of party ties among EPF members, and the ideological and geographical distribution of national PPTTs across EU member states. It shows that PPTTs are mainly concentrated in Western Europe and mainstream party families (Vande Walle & Van Hecke, 2024).

To delve into the roles that PPTTs play in contemporary politics, the dissertation develops a typology of their key functions (distinguishing between political party and think tank functions) and target audiences (distinguishing between internal and external target groups). The typology serves as the key foundation of this dissertation. It draws upon an iterative process in which a comprehensive review of the think tank and political party literature is combined with a comparative analysis of 22 contemporary Dutch and Flemish PPTTs. Data is collected based on 22 in-depth interviews with PPTT leaders, triangulated with a review of their activities and publications posted on the PPTT websites, party websites, and PPTT social media channels.

Four types of PPTTs are identified in the analysis: (1) *Party Assistants*, such as the Flemish liberal Study Centre Open Vld, which support the party's daily operations and core functions by, for example, developing party positions on day-to-day issues or drafting party manifestos; (2) *Party Supporters*, such as the Dutch GreenLeft Scientific Bureau GroenLinks, which engage in think tank activities aimed at supporting the party's medium- to long-term strategy. They provide research and policy advice tailored to the party's needs, develop new ideas for the party, and contribute to rethinking party strategy—for example through analyses of best practices from sister parties in other European countries; *(3) Party Promoters,* such as the Dutch far-right Renaissance Institute, which disseminate party ideas to a broader audience by, for example, organising events or releasing documentaries; *(4) Party Intellectuals,* such as the Dutch liberal TeldersFoundation, which conduct ideologically driven intellectual work aimed at a wider public, for example by carrying out and publishing studies in their own journal (Vande Walle & de Lange, 2024).

Building upon this typology, the dissertation explains under which conditions PPTTs perform think tank or party functions. Employing Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), it examines the necessity and sufficiency of system- (legal and financial autonomy) and organisational-level conditions (organisational autonomy, party type, and PPTT leader's background) in shaping the functions. Leveraging case knowledge of 22 PPTTs in the Netherlands and Flanders through 22 in-depth interviews with PPTT leaders, triangulated with a review of organigrams, publications, statutes, and activities found on the PPTT and party websites, the research reveals that system-level autonomy proves necessary, and the combination of system and organisational conditions sufficient, in explaining the variety of PPTTs' functions (Vande Walle, 2025).

The research further studies how the roles of PPTTs have evolved in response to broader changes in mainstream political parties. Over recent decades, several trends have challenged mainstream political parties, with PPTTs, serving as their intellectual cornerstones, being particularly affected due to their formal and financial dependence on their respective parties. This part analyses how these drivers of

party change have influenced the roles of PPTTs, focusing specifically on the PPTTs of two mainstream Flemish political parties: the social democratic *Vooruit* and the Christian democratic *cd&v*. Employing an abductive approach, it integrates data from 18 interviews with current and former leading PPTT representatives, alongside archival material and official state and party websites. The findings reveal that both PPTTs have undergone a similar transformation, evolving from Party Intellectuals to Party Assistants. This evolution is driven by an interplay of factors, including new party funding regulations, electoral defeats, loss of office, new party leadership, and changes in PPTT organisational structures (Vande Walle, 2026).

The overarching conclusion is that the roles of PPTTs vary in space and time, and that this variation is shaped by interconnected factors on different levels: (a) system-level factors: i.e. system level autonomy, which is defined by national party legislation, (b) party factors: i.e. party type, electoral results, party leadership, and whether the party is in government or opposition, and (c) PPTT factors: i.e. organisational autonomy, staff organisation, and PPTT leadership background. System- and party-level features thus largely determine the roles of PPTTs. Although PPTT organisational features play a role in how their roles develop, these features are often shaped by the broader system in which they operate and by the party with which they are affiliated.

This dissertation contributes to the literature on political parties, think tanks, and party-affiliated organisations by developing a novel framework for understanding PPTTs. Its main theoretical contribution lies in repositioning PPTTs from the think tank literature to the field of political party research. Methodologically, the dissertation advances research on under-theorised political organisations by introducing a medium-N, abductive research design that combines qualitative case studies with systematic cross-case comparison, supported by original qualitative data. Empirically, it provides the first comparative analysis of PPTT roles across countries, party families, and time, demonstrating how these roles are shaped by institutional context, party characteristics, and organisational autonomy. Beyond academic debates, the findings offer practical insights for political parties, legislators, and PPTTs themselves by identifying conditions under which PPTTs can contribute to long-term party strategy and democratic stability.

Funding

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