

## PHD REVIEW

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

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### Abstract

Although political parties are considered powerful players in almost all Western democracies, until recently, the ‘brains behind the party’ remained, to a large extent, a blind spot. By focusing on political party think tanks (PPTTs), Britt Vande Walle’s dissertation helps close this gap. PPTTs are (unlike other think tanks) formally linked to a political party, and (unlike political staffers) they transcend specific party segments and enjoy more autonomy. This article discusses how this topic was approached in Vande Walle’s dissertation. It gives an overview of the main findings, reflects on the contribution that is made to the literature, and formulates some suggestions for future research.

**Keywords:** Political parties, Think tanks, Political advisors, Political staff

Although political parties are considered powerful players in almost all Western democracies, and although many aspects of parties have been extensively studied – their members, their functioning, (changes in) their programmatic stances, etc. – until recently the ‘brains behind the party’ remained to a large extent a blind spot. A few years ago, Pieter Moens (2021) explored political staffers (parliamentary assistants, ministerial advisors, and party collaborators) in Belgium. Britt Vande Walle further closes this gap by focusing in her PhD on yet another actor that could be catalogued as ‘brains behind the party’, namely political party think tanks (PPTTs). Unlike other think tanks, these are formally linked to a political party, and unlike

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political staffers, they transcend specific party segments and enjoy more autonomy. Examples are the Wiardi Beckman Foundation (linked to the Dutch PVDA), the Telders Foundation (linked to VVD), and the N-VA Study Centre. As almost no research has been conducted on this topic before, this PhD could be called a Star Trek-PhD: it manages 'to boldly go where no one has ever gone before'. Britt has clearly succeeded in writing a foundational work on which future researchers can build.

Britt adopts a funnel-like approach, starting with a large-N analysis on a broad range of PPTTs in several European countries and ending with an in-depth analysis of specific cases of PPTTs, namely Vooruit and CD&V. This allows both for sketching a broad, general picture, and for detailed, more fine-grained analyses. She draws on an abundance of different data sources (no less than 42 interviews combined with analyses of documents, websites, and archives).

In the first empirical chapter (Chapter 2), Britt maps which PPTTs are present in EU member states, and looks at variation according to political families and countries. This exploration is a necessary step before other analyses can be conducted. Chapter 3 is the masterpiece of this PhD. In this co-authored chapter (together with Sarah de Lange), a typology of the functioning of PPTTs is developed. This typology is based on two dimensions: what PPTTs do (distinguishing between party functions and think tank functions) and who they target (distinguishing between internal and external target audiences). The combination of these two dimensions leads to four types of PPTTs: party assistants, party supporters, party promoters, and party intellectuals. Britt manages to position all Flemish and Dutch PPTTs in one of these types. This typology is highly useful and will without any doubt give much inspiration to scholars studying this topic in the future. In Chapter 4, Britt tries to explain more systematically the variation in the roles that PPTTs are taking by using a crisp-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) that is clearly explained (also for non-experts). The focus is again on all PPTTs in Flanders and the Netherlands. In the final empirical chapter (Chapter 5), Britt analyses the change over time in the functions performed by PPTTs linked to two Belgian parties. This historical approach nicely complements the other chapters.

Taken together, this highly innovative PhD provides in-depth insights into the functions PPTTs perform and the factors causing variation therein. As with any piece of research, some critical comments and suggestions for future research can be formulated. PPTT is conceptualized here as a broad umbrella term encompassing different institutions with sometimes very different formal features. Future research could use a more fine-grained categorisation based on differences in formal rules. This will lead to a smaller, but more comparable, sample of PPTTs. In a future in-depth international comparison involving more countries than Belgium and the Netherlands, this smaller sample need not be a problem. And finally, future research could switch

the unit of analysis from PPTTs to members/employees of PPTTs, and investigate elements such as their background, experiences, and career path.

In any case, these future studies will find much inspiration in Britt Vande Walle's path-breaking work. Given the scarcity of research on this topic, this PhD will have a long-lasting impact on the research field of party politics and beyond.

## References

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