

Faculteit Sociale wetenschappen  
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# What's the issue? Studying supply and demand side of online issue strategies of politicians.

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To be written

# Introduction

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## 1.1 Introduction

Social media have given us tools to talk about anything and everything whenever we want. The ease through which you can post a message on Twitter, Facebook or Instagram for everyone to see is remarkable. The same goes for politicians. Slowly but surely, politicians also found their way to social media. Twitter was the first platform politicians started to use (Golbeck et al., 2010). Afterwards came Facebook. Nowadays, politicians have started using Instagram, and some politicians even dabble with newer social media such as TikTok (O'Connell, 2020). Furthermore, recent research has established that social media are increasingly an important source of political information for citizens (Cacciatore et al., 2018; van Erkel & Van Aelst, 2021). Citizens follow the accounts of newspapers but also the accounts of politicians themselves. We can, thus, ask ourselves what politicians actually talk about on social media. This is a crucial question because it is important to know what content citizens get exposed to on social media, especially on platforms where extreme partisanship and disinformation are very prevalent (Flaxman et al., 2016; Humprecht et al., 2021). Moreover, the issue attention of politicians on social media says something about how politicians want to be perceived. Posting on social media is an important way for people to build an image of themselves to the outside world (Toubia & Stephen, 2013).

A short anthology of the Facebook posts of politicians of one single day teaches us two important things. First, politicians communicate about a very wide variety of topics. On the 24th of November 2021, 67 Flemish politicians created around 90 Facebook posts. These 67 politicians talked about 16 different issues. For instance, Willem-Frederik Schiltz (Open VLD) talked about climate change, Imade Annouri (Groen) posted a message about malpractices in courier services, Filip Dewinter (VB) discussed the strike actions of the police unions, Tomas Roggeman (N-VA) posted about the potential repayments of Belgium to Congo and all of this happened within the context of the overbearing topic Covid-19 that heavily dominated the news agenda. Thus, even though the same events happened around



them, different politicians talk about many different issues on the same day. This means that politicians appear to be selective about which topics they talk on social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. We could, thus, wonder what the motives are behind the issue-choice of politicians on social media.

Secondly, we can see huge differences in the amount of audience engagement every post received. Social media allow people to interact with the messages posted through likes, comments, and shares, which we can call audience engagement. These metrics might give us an indication as to what type of content the public wants to see. On the 24th of November, the average audience engagement on a Facebook post made by a politician was 565. However, there was considerable variation between the posts of politicians. That day, the top post received 10.032 audience reactions, while the least popular received 0. So what made the top post more appealing to the audience that they interacted more with it than the bottom one? Was it the topic? Was it the politician? Was it the combination of that specific politician with that particular topic?

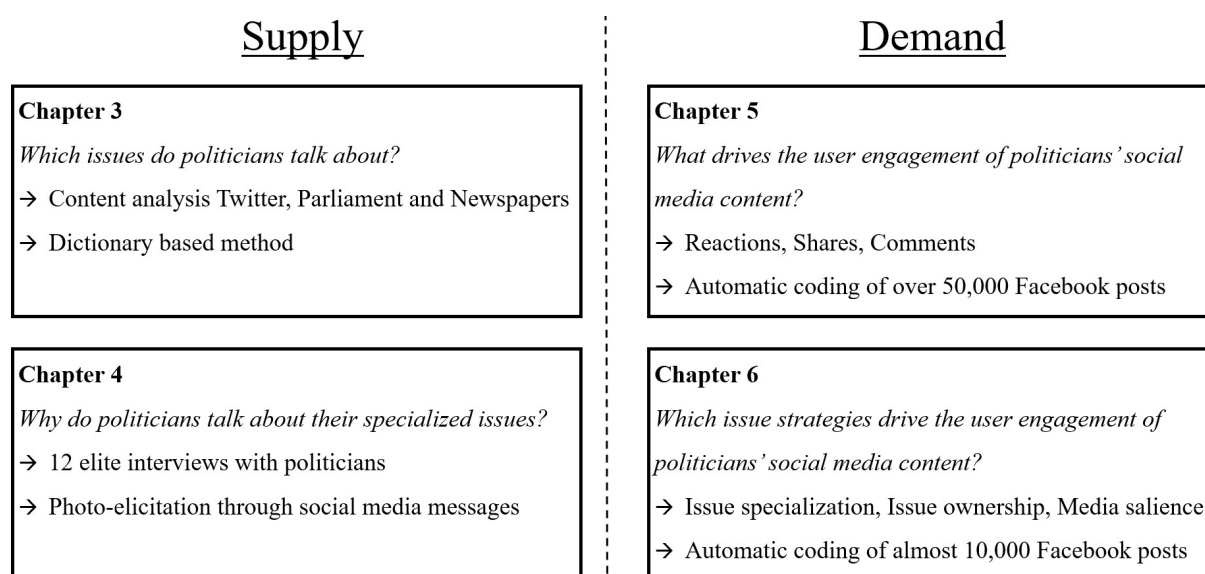
In any case, for politicians, it can be essential to get more audience engagement on their social media messages. Usually, a message on social media only gets shown to the people that have specifically followed the account or page of the person that has sent the message. However, when a Facebook post or a tweet gets more interaction, it also shows up in the timeline of the extended network of the people who interacted with the message but did not necessarily follow the account of the person who originally posted the message (Thorson & Wells, 2016). Thus, it is beneficial for politicians to post content that attracts more audience engagement because it means that their supporters spread this information among their network, thus, allowing the politicians to reach new audiences. Nevertheless, politicians not only communicate to reach the general public, but they also want to influence the leaders of their party and journalists.

One crucial factor in politicians' communication is which issues they talk about. In the literature, it is already an established idea that parties compete with one another by selectively emphasising specific issues beneficial to them (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010). It would then make sense for politicians to do the same, carefully choosing to

highlight those issues that are beneficial for their personal goals. This is exactly what the example above shows; even on the same day, politicians do not stress the same issues. We label this as the issue strategies of politicians. The word strategy supposes a purposiveness and rationality behind the behaviour that is exhibited. Although not every act politicians undertake has a very strict rationale or intent, we argue that politicians are strategic actors that want to reach certain goals with their social media posting (Strömbäck & Esser, 2017). This online issue strategy can be seen as part of the larger goals politicians want to obtain (see further).

This PhD examines three main online issue strategies of politicians and their effects in terms of public response. These three issue strategies are issue specialization, issue ownership and riding the wave (mass media attention). I will focus both on the supply side (which topics politicians talk about on social media) and the demand side of this topic (which issue factors increase the amount of audience engagement on the social media messages of politicians). Figure 1 shows the outline of the dissertation. In chapters 3 and 4, I will focus on the politicians themselves (the demand side). Chapter 3 will uncover to what extent the three issue strategies drive politicians' issue attention on three different political agendas by performing a large-scale content analysis. Chapter 4 uses interviews with politicians in which they reflect on the motivations behind the creation of their social media messages. In chapters 5 and 6, the response of the public is put in the spotlight. Chapter 5 analyses Facebook posts of politicians and tries to explain which factors influence audience engagement. Chapter 6 will specifically zoom in on political posts and learn how the public reacts to the three different issue strategies. In chapter 2, I will divulge further into the specific methods used in the dissertation.

Figure 1: Overview of dissertation



I specifically study issue strategies on social media because almost all politicians are active on these platforms, and they have become an essential part of politics (Ceron, 2017). Furthermore, politicians experience a lot of freedom on those platforms to talk about whatever they want; thus, if we genuinely want to see what politicians want to talk about and emphasise, social media provide us with the best possible study environment. Therefore, this dissertation will try to answer two central questions: *To what extent is the issue attention of politicians driven by issue specialization, issue ownership and mass media attention? And do these three strategies lead to more interaction from the audience on social media?*

This introductory chapter will first outline the central concepts and mechanisms behind the supply side. In brief, politicians try to reach specific goals using different communication strategies, where issue emphasis is the main strategy for this dissertation. I argue that this process can be studied as a specific sort of political behaviour, namely to which issues politicians pay a lot of attention to and which issues get largely ignored. Politicians use different agendas to establish this issue strategy. The focus of this dissertation will mainly be on social media. Next, I will elaborate more on the demand side: what is the content and what are the issues that the (online) public is willing to engage with. I will briefly discuss which factors the literature has already shown to influence audience engagement. Finally, I will give an overview of the different chapters and the overall structure of the dissertation.

## 1.2 Goals and dreams

First of all, we need to establish what politicians want to achieve with their communication efforts. Political actors, such as politicians and political parties, can be described as rational strategic actors. This means that they have their own specific goals that they try to achieve by choosing certain plans of action using all available means (Downs, 1957; Strömbäck & Esser, 2017). For example, politicians are strategic because they are goal-seeking people who allocate their scarce resources and adapt their behaviour to fit a particular destination that they want to reach. The scarce resources of politicians are, for example, their time, attention and media access (Strøm, 1997). In their influential work, Müller and Strøm (1999) discern three different goals that drive party leaders and, thus, in turn, political parties. The three goals are votes, office and policy. First, parties strive to maximise the number of votes they get. As Downs (1957) puts it: “[Party] members are motivated by their personal desire for the income, prestige, and power which come from holding office. [...] Thus all its actions are aimed at maximising votes” (pp. 34-35). Second, office means that parties have the explicit goal to maximise their control over the political office benefits. This can include getting as many ministerial posts for the party as possible. Finally, policy indicates parties' desire to maximise their impact on public policy. Thus, can parties change public policy in line with their positions?

The critical thing that all these studies have in common is that they use political parties as the subject of their research. However, in recent decennia, there has been a trend towards the personalisation of politics (McAllister, 2007). This personalisation of politics manifests itself in different ways. First, party identification and party membership have been in decline for a long time (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002). It seems that individual politicians are more successful at building a close connection with voters and, in some instances, even creating a devoted group of supporters. Figures such as Donald Trump, Emmanuel Macron and Matteo Salvini are in some way transcending their parties and are at the forefront of the political arena (Kanihan & Rim, 2018). In other words, these politicians are more important than their parties, and people often do not have as strong a connection with the party as they do with the politician. Indeed, research has shown that in some countries, individual politicians are an essential factor in the vote choice of citizens (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007; Takens et al., 2015;

van Holsteyn & Andeweg, 2010). Second, we see that newspapers and journalists prefer to report more about individual politicians than about parties. This, of course, aids in building a stronger connection between voters and individual politicians (Van Aelst et al., 2012). Third, the rise of social media has enabled individual politicians to promote themselves more actively and build a public persona. Some politicians have large amounts of followers on social media and, therefore, when they post something, it can have a significant impact (Ceron, 2017). All in all, this means that studying individual politicians has never been more relevant than it is today. That is why this dissertation will centre around individual politicians and not parties as a whole.

Just as parties have goals they try to achieve, politicians also have goals that drive their actions. The goals that politicians want to achieve can vary among different types of politicians. Strøm (1997) identifies four goals politicians might have that can be ordered hierarchically: (1) reselection, (2) re-election, (3) party office, and (4) legislative office. By hierarchically ordered, he means that to accomplish one goal, the previous goals have to be achieved, starting with reselection. For example, to get re-elected, a politician first has to get reselected. Reselection means that politicians, first of all, need ballot access. In this first phase, politicians thus have to compete with members of their party. This is called intra-party competition in the literature (Giannetti & Benoit, 2009). Often the party leadership dictates who gets on the list and which position they get on the list. Therefore, Strøm expects politicians who have made it their goal to get reselected to exhibit behaviour that pleases party leadership. Politicians can do this by, for example, showing loyalty or legislative obedience. The next goal, re-election, is sometimes seen as the most crucial step for politicians. Whatever politicians hope to accomplish in their political career, it all starts by receiving an elected office. However, for some politicians, getting re-elected is not necessarily a goal they want to achieve. An essential notion in this phase is electoral safety (Collie, 1981). Electoral safety means how (un)sure are politicians that they will get re-elected. Some politicians, often incumbents or heavyweights within the party, are relatively confident that they will get re-elected without any problems. In these instances, re-election is not a goal in itself. Less secure politicians will have to try harder to convince voters (Strøm, 1997). The third goal politicians can have, is attaining party office. Ambitious

politicians can try to rise above their rank as backbenchers and strive for a prominent role within their parties. For instance, in parliamentary democracies, such a position can be that of a parliamentary party leader. These people coordinate the efforts of all parliamentarians of the same party (or groups of parties) in parliament and thus have considerable influence (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2011). Finally, the last goal politicians can have is legislative office, for example, ministerial posts or participating in the government.

### **1.3 Communicating about issues**

These goals that politicians have are important because they drive their behaviour. Depending on which particular goal politicians have their eyes on, they will employ different strategies. Strøm (1997) already lists several resources that politicians have at their disposal to use for their strategies. He talks about voting power, time, attention, media access, money under their control and organisation assets. However, a critical part of politics today has been overlooked, namely communication. For politicians to reach their goals, communication is key. McNair (2017) defines political communication as: “[ ] purposeful communication about politics. This incorporates: All forms of communication undertaken by politicians and other political actors for the purpose of achieving specific objectives. [ ]” (p. 4). Then what are the forms of communication that politicians undertake? It might be helpful to first look at what politicians do in parliament. In his influential work, Mayhew (1974) identified three clear activities politicians take in congress: position-taking, credit claiming and advertising. Position taking refers to when politicians have to take a stance regarding statements or vote calls. With credit claiming, he means that politicians try to act in such a way that it seems that they were responsible for making the government do something desirable for the people. Finally, advertising indicates politicians' practices to get their name to become more favourable.

We can apply all of these activities to communication. Through their press statements, social media messages and so on, politicians can very vocally show their support or disdain for certain measures. The same with credit claiming; when politicians achieve something in parliament, they tweet about it or boast about it in the media. By extension, we could also add blame attribution. There are many examples of politicians trying to discredit one another

and instances where politicians are bickering on social media. Donald Trump is probably the most well-known example (Stolee & Caton, 2018). Advertising is also one of the main parts of communication. For instance, during campaigns, politicians often post pictures of themselves announcing their place on the ballot list, asking citizens to vote for them (Graham et al., 2016). Additionally, politicians nowadays can orchestrate their own communication, allowing them to build their own profiles. Especially on social media, where politicians post in their own name, they have the opportunity to try and make themselves stand out aside from their party members even (Ceron, 2017). That is why personal profiling might be better than advertising in encapsulating these activities.

Nevertheless, in political communication, one major activity does not fit into one of these three activities, namely, issue emphasis. Politicians can garner more support by strategically choosing which issues to address. The theory of issue competition has a very long tradition. First mentioned by Robertson (1976), the theory states that instead of addressing every issue, parties selectively pay attention to a smaller number of topics that benefit them. For example, government parties will stress issues or policies that led to positive outcomes that they were able to solve. At the same time, opposition parties will be more inclined to highlight issues where the government failed. It is important to note that he is talking about the attention they have for topics, not the positions they take on those issues. Research has found that parties do indeed stress different issues. Some studies show the importance of the internal organisation of parties (Wagner & Meyer, 2014), some studies indicate that there is a difference between opposition and government parties (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010), and other academic work has found an influence of different party families (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2015).

One of the most influential theories that build upon this premise of issue competition is the theory of **issue ownership**. Issue ownership indicates that parties can ‘own’ issues on which they perform exceptionally well. This means that citizens spontaneously link a particular party to a specific issue. Parties can come to own an issue by having a reputation for focussing on the issue and being regarded as the best suitable party to deal with the issue (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Petrocik, 1996; Walgrave et al., 2012). For example, green

parties own the environmental issue, while extreme right-wing parties (often) own migration. Furthermore, issue ownership theory states that parties benefit from a high saliency of their owned topics. For example, if a party's topic becomes more important during an election campaign, the party will benefit significantly from this. In that sense, it is an opportune communication strategy for parties to focus on owned issues to raise the saliency of that topic (Petrocik, 1996).

Not only for parties but also for individual politicians, it is important to stress these party-owned issues because votes for the party means votes for them. Thus, politicians want to increase the saliency of specific topics. How can they effectively do this? Previous research has already shown that multiple information sources need to highlight the same issue to have the most substantial agenda-setting effect. This is what Eilders (2000) calls 'focusing'. She states that if different media outlets all focus on the same issue and do not differ in their attention, the media will be perceived as a unified actor and, as a result, have a more substantial effect. We believe that this applies to politicians' agendas as well. We know that both journalists and citizens are increasingly getting exposed to messages by politicians. Either by their own volition, by reading newspaper articles that feature a particular politician or by following politicians on social media. Or either by forced exposure, for example, sponsored messages on social media. Therefore, individual politicians exert an agenda-setting effect on both the media and public agenda. Thus, for politicians to have the most substantial agenda-setting effect, they will pay attention to the same issues across all of their available channels.

Issue emphasis is both conceptually different and at the same time overlaps with position-taking, credit claiming and personal profiling. One very important result of this overlap is that by selectively choosing to highlight only certain issues, politicians can create a clear issue profile. They can do this by stressing the same issues all the time. Over time, those limited topics will be more associated with that specific politician. In that sense, it is comparable to issue ownership, but on an individual level. Mostly this is seen as the **issue specialisation** of politicians (Damgaard, 1995; Mattson & Strøm, 1995; Vos, 2016). Having a clear issue profile sends a message to the public, the media and members of the own party,



namely, that the politician is specialised in specific topics. We can describe this as attribution theory; by seeing people post about a specific topic, we attribute expertise to that politician on that topic (Kelley, 1967). Being seen as the specialist is essential for multiple reasons. We know from previous research that politicians have a higher chance of being included in a newspaper article if they are specialised in the article's topic (Vos, 2016). However, journalists first need to know who the specialists are. Thus, politicians need to signal their specialisation. And as explained earlier, politicians will always strive to get as much media exposure as possible because it helps them reach their goals. Additionally, signalling your expertise to your party members is also beneficial for politicians. Most parties employ a division of labour strategy (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2011). Not every politician of a party can be knowledgeable about every single policy issue. That is why members of the same party specialise in different topics. Issue specialists serve as the spokespersons for their parties on their issues, and the other party members take voting cues from the specialist. This means that the issue specialists become more important in the party when their issues become salient. Thus, both raising the salience for your topics as well as showing that you are the specialist on that topic in your party is important to politicians. Furthermore, we know from previous research that when it comes to the allocation of ministerial posts, parties often choose politicians with expertise on the topic (Beckman, 2006). Thus, having a clear issue profile might be even more important for very ambitious politicians.

In conclusion, communicating about issues is key for political actors to reach their goals. Using multiple strategies, they can use communication to their advantage. The common theme in all these strategies is building an (issue) reputation and getting more name recognition. This allows politicians to accomplish most of their goals, ranging from reselection to legislative office.

## **1.4 Social media as a central agenda**

A fundamental concept in political science, and agenda-setting research, in particular, is that of 'agendas'. Agenda means the issue prioritisation of politicians, or as Walgrave, Soroka and Nuytemans (2008) put it: "A political agenda is the list of issues to which political actors pay attention" (p.815). In the literature, there also exist other terms such as channels (Tresch

et al., 2017), arenas (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016) and platforms (Graham et al., 2014). However, in line with the agenda setting literature, I will opt for the use of the term *issue agenda* because it is closest to what I am interested in, namely, which issues politicians are paying attention to. Aside from the political agenda, there is also the media agenda, the issues the media is paying attention to, and the public agenda, the issues that the general public is dealing with and thinks are important. A significant part of political communication deals with how these three agendas interact with each other. This interaction is called ‘agenda setting’, can one agenda influence the others? (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). If an issue is very salient on the media agenda, will these topics then also become salient on the political and public agenda, for example. A lot of literature has already proven that these three agendas all affect one another (see for example Conway-Silva et al., 2018; Sevenans, 2018). Therefore, in my dissertation, I want to go more in-depth and focus on just one agenda. I will devote most of my attention to the political agenda and understand how it comes to be. Moreover, I will dissect the political agenda and divide this into sub-agendas, such as politicians’ social media agenda or parliamentary agenda. By the social media agenda, I mean the issue attention of politicians on Facebook, Twitter and so on. While the parliamentary agenda refers to the issue prioritisation of politicians in parliament. In my dissertation, social media will be the central agenda of politicians that I will focus on. Why do politicians pay attention to the topics on social media that they do?

Prior to the digital age, politicians mainly relied on mass media to hopefully get their message across. Alternatively, politicians could go out and directly interact face-to-face with citizens or hope to promote their own issue agenda by taking initiatives in the parliament (Fenno, 1978; Mayhew, 1974; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016). However, all of these methods have some downsides. First, it is not guaranteed that the media will even broadcast your message and if they do, they might not portray the issue in the way you want them to because journalists still function as gatekeepers (Jürgens et al., 2011; Reese et al., 2009). Second, interacting directly with citizens is very time-consuming. Speaking at markets and knocking on people’s doors takes up a lot of the time and energy of a politician without reaching a large audience. And third, most ordinary citizens are not informed or not interested in the technical side of politics, such as parliamentary initiatives.

However, thanks to the rise of social media, politicians have gotten the possibility to reach a wider audience without a lot of effort with an easy to digest, completely unfiltered message. Social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter provide politicians with a cheap and easy platform to get their preferred messages across to many people (Kalsnes et al., 2017). Politicians can use social media in different ways; they can promote their own work, share news articles where they were mentioned, share more personal information about themselves, etcetera (Graham et al., 2018; Jungherr, 2014, 2016). Nevertheless, this does not mean that politicians have abandoned the more *classical* ways of communicating with citizens. Politicians still go to markets and still go knocking on people's doors, and politicians also recognise the power of media exposure. Thus, by no means are they forgoing these methods to focus entirely on social media. Therefore, politicians have multiple agendas on which their issue prioritization might be different from one another. However, are social media even that particular compared to the other agendas of politicians? A first scholarly debate on this matter is if social media platforms level out the electoral playing field. There are two opposing theories at the centre of this debate: The equalisation and normalisation thesis. This discussion has been going on for some 20 years now (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016). The equalisation thesis states that social media (and digital tools in general) offer challengers, such as opposition parties or fringe parties, opportunities to get their message across despite their limited access to traditional media (Gibson & McAllister, 2015). Thus, social media give smaller political actors tools to 'catch up' to larger parties with more resources. On the other hand, the normalisation thesis argues that, just as with other tools, these new tools will mainly benefit more established parties and politicians who often have more money and have an advantage from an incumbency status (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016). Even though the discussion has been going on for quite some time, support for both hypotheses is mixed. It is mixed in the sense that there is evidence for both. For instance, research by Southern (2015) or Van Aelst et al. (2017) found support for the normalisation thesis, while studies done by Jacobs and Spierings (2016) and Southern and Lee (2019) found evidence for the equalisation thesis.

Thus, there is mixed evidence with regards to levelling out the electoral playing field. However, there are other peculiarities of social media that cause this agenda to be different

from politicians' other agendas. All these different agendas have different characteristics and conventions that politicians have to consider. First of all, different agendas provide politicians with varying amounts of autonomy to choose which issue they address. Parties clearly define what their members can and cannot say regarding policy positions. However, we see no such constraints when it comes to which topics they can talk about (De Winter & Dumont, 2000). Politicians are expected to adhere to the party position but are free to focus on whichever issues they want. This is one of the main differences between social media and the other agendas. On social media, politicians are much freer because, in most cases, they indicate that they post in their own name (Ceron, 2017). In the media, on the other hand, they do not have this luxury. Journalists still are gatekeepers, and they select which politicians are selected for which articles to appear in (Jürgens et al., 2011; Reese et al., 2009). Thus, the degree of autonomy of issue selection is higher on the social media agenda than on other agendas.

Second, the social media pages of politicians have a different (potential) audience than the other agendas. Some agendas are more aimed at specific target audiences than others. For instance, the media agenda of politicians reaches a large number of people, and politicians do not have any control over who sees the message. At the same time, press releases are much more targeted, and politicians themselves can manage to whom the message is sent. This also means that some agendas are better for attracting potential new voters/supporters. On social media, politicians post messages to their followers. These followers are people who, at one point, decided to follow the politician and see their messages appear on their so-called timelines. We could thus say that the audience of politicians on social media is more self-selected, so to speak (Diaz et al., 2016). A survey among 2179 Flemish respondents<sup>1</sup> has shown that most followers of politicians follow a politician because they support the politician and/or want to keep updated on their work. In other words, the followers on social media already support the politician, and consequently, the politician will reach fewer

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<sup>1</sup> This data was collected as part of the NWS Data project. The survey was performed by Dynata among 2179 Flemish respondents.

potential new supporters through social media. It is through their followers distributing their messages that politicians can hope to reach new people. In contrast, they can immediately reach a lot of new potential supporters through the media because the articles are broadcast to a large group. Afterwards, these 'new supporters' might start following the politician on social media. In sum, politicians reach different people with their various agendas.

Third, social media can differ in format. On Twitter, for example, users are limited to 280 characters; therefore, politicians are more restricted in what they can say, which usually leads to short(er) messages. On the other hand, parliamentary documents are characterised by a more formal style and often include more technical terms. However, politicians can extensively cover a specific issue in parliament, making it possible to handle more complex issues. This might lead to politicians becoming more creative when they want to address a certain issue on social media or sometimes making them even forgo the topic altogether. Thus the format and length of agendas differ as well.

Fourth, social media has an entirely different degree of speed. By speed, we mean how fast can a politician react on the agenda? Evidently, social media is the fastest agenda. Politicians can instantly (and often spontaneously) create a message and distribute it to all of their followers. Parliamentary initiatives, for instance, take much more time and effort and usually have fixed dates when the parliamentary committees meet. Thus, we could say that some agendas are faster than others. Finally, we can argue that social media have a more 2-way direction than other agendas. The media agenda of politicians is clearly a one-way agenda, with no option for citizens to interact with the politicians through the media. While on social media, interaction is possible. For example, research has shown that citizens do interact with politicians on Facebook (Kalsnes et al., 2017).

Concluding, we can say that the social media agenda of politicians has its own peculiarities as well as different conventions and characteristics than politicians' other agendas. This means that studying social media can provide us with whole new insights into the behaviour of politicians because it is different from the more classical agendas of politicians that have been studied in terms of autonomy over issue selection, audience, format and speed.

## 1.5 Politicians and social media

By now, I have tried to show that politicians have multiple goals, several ways in which they can try to reach those goals, why communicating about specific topics is essential and that communicating through social media is different from the more traditional ways that politicians communicate through. However, what do we actually know about how politicians behave on social media? With the advent of social media, scholarly interest was quick to follow. Among the first studies was research into the adoption of social media by politicians. That is, which types of politicians are adopting social media and which are not? These early studies found that the earliest adopters of social media were younger politicians, members of opposition parties or members of smaller parties who operate more in the fringes (Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014; Peterson, 2012). Yet, recent studies have shown an entirely different picture. Social media adoption rates have become very high among politicians. Schmidt (2017) found that 96 percent of German national parliamentarians were on Facebook in 2017. Additionally, Haman and Školník (2021) show that Twitter adoption rates have climbed to more than 90 percent of national parliamentarians in countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and The United Kingdom. Nevertheless, at the same time, they showcase that adoption does not mean activity. When they looked at politicians who posted daily on Twitter, the numbers dropped, for instance, to 73 percent in the UK and to only 33 percent of federal parliamentarians in Belgium. All in all, we can say that for politicians, it is no longer exceptional to be on social media; it has even become exceptional when you are not even if not every politicians is active on the platforms every day.

As I mentioned earlier, we cannot say that politicians address the ‘masses’ on social media but rather a self-chosen network or a particular public. Citizens themselves choose to follow the page or the account of a politician (Diaz et al., 2016; Stier et al., 2018). In other words, the audience of politicians on social media is probably more homogeneous than that of a broader platform such as the traditional media. This would entail that politicians exhibit a different type of behaviour on social media than they do, for instance, in parliament or the traditional media. But how do politicians actually use social media? Studies into the social

media behaviour of politicians have already uncovered several trends. Graham et al. (2014) address how politicians use Twitter primarily as a broadcasting platform. They often use Twitter to promote themselves, share information and use it as a form of impression management (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Graham et al., 2014; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Sæbø, 2011). We could say that politicians still use social media as a one-way form of communication. However, Graham et al. point out that there might be differences between political systems as they find that in the Netherlands, politicians are more inclined to interact with others than in the UK. Other studies focused more on the technical aspects of social media, such as the use of hashtags and @-mentions (see, e.g. Small, 2011). Nevertheless, not using the interactive possibilities of social media is actually a missed opportunity for politicians because studies have shown that interactive communication can, in fact, increase the evaluation that citizens make about a politician (Utz, 2009). Another trend becoming more visible is politicians sharing personal and private content on social media (Graham et al., 2018). This relates to what Van Aelst et al. (2012) see as a part of the personalisation of politics, namely privatisation. They discuss how there is a shift in the media from focussing on political to non-political characteristics of politicians and more and more a focus on the personal lives of politicians. Politicians themselves play into this by showing parts of their private life online (Graham et al., 2018). However, the amount of personalised content that politicians put on their social media depends on certain factors. In an electoral system where there is a high degree of competition, such as two candidates competing against one another or when the election is going to be very close, candidates feel more incentivised to show a more personal side and consequently post more about their personal life. If the race is very close, candidates might feel more need to distinguish themselves from their competitors (McGregor et al., 2017).

However, when it comes to the actual political content (i.e. the issue) of the social media posts by politicians, the research often remains rather general or focuses on the issue attention of parties. For instance, research has shown that opposition parties are freer to talk about their preferred issues, while government parties do not have this luxury. They have to deal with every issue that comes up and are expected to have solutions if problems arise (Wagner & Meyer, 2014). For individual politicians, the literature often talks about different

styles and characteristics, such as interactivity and personalisation, but rarely do they investigate what issues individual politicians talk about (Kruikemeier, 2014). Therefore, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the first major question this dissertation will address is: To what extent is the issue attention of politicians driven by issue specialization, issue ownership and mass media attention? Specifically, this will be the focus of chapters 3 and 4.

## **1.6 Demand side: Public engagement on social media**

Discovering which issues politicians talk about and why they choose to pay attention to those specific issues is an important first step. Nevertheless, it also raises questions. Are these online issue strategies of politicians also effective? Is the content that politicians post actually what the public wants? We know from previous studies that politicians at least are responsive to their online audiences. Both Kelm (2020) and Tromble (2018) find that on social media, politicians adapt their communication in line with what their audience wants or what they think their audience wants. Thus, politicians consciously take the public into consideration when posting messages online. This reactivity by politicians is demonstrated once more by studies investigating agenda-setting on social media. These studies found that legislators are more likely to follow than to lead discussions of issues by the general public and that politicians are more responsive toward their own supporters than to the broader population (see e.g. Barberá et al., 2019).

Luckily, social media have not only made the political communication process more complex, but they have also given researchers and politicians metrics to study social media communication. User engagement metrics allow us to see which content the online public prefers, or at least triggers them to react to it. On social media, users can engage with content in multiple ways. Citizens can engage with a post by reacting to it with a like, sharing content with their family and friends, leaving a comment, clicking on links, following pages or accounts of parties or individual politicians, etcetera. The main appeal for the author of a post is that when someone engages with their content, it will get a larger reach, and thus more people will get exposed to their message. The appeal for the users is that they can



publicly show their support for certain candidates and use social media as a form of self-expression (Xenos et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, we need to acknowledge two facts. First, it is important to note that audience engagement is not an unambiguous indicator of support or preference. People can even leave negative or hate comments underneath social media messages (Poecze et al., 2018). However, at the same time, we can argue that most of the people who encounter the social media messages of politicians are followers of their social media accounts or public pages. As was mentioned before, when asked why they choose to follow politicians on social media, the two main reasons people come up with are that they want to stay informed about the work of the politician and because they support them. Thus, we can assume the large majority of audience engagement to be a sign of support and/or an indication that they like this type of content and, in turn, are a good proxy for audience preference.

Second, this raises the question of to what extent the users of social media are a representation of society? The user demographic of different social media platforms deviates from one another, meaning that Twitter, Facebook and Instagram attract a different type of population (Stier et al., 2018). For instance, Ribeiro et al. (2020) compared Facebook users to census data. They found a bias towards young people, women and people with a college degree. Yet, overall the composition of Facebook users and the census data were relatively similar. In contrast, according to a report by the Pew Research Institute, Twitter users are younger, more left-leaning, higher educated and have higher incomes than U.S. adults overall (Wojcik & Hughes, 2019). Additionally, multiple scholars have already pointed out the lack of representativeness of Twitter users (see, e.g. Jungherr, 2015; Neuman et al., 2014). Thus, when studying how users respond to social media messages, we opt to use Facebook data, which definitely, in the Belgian case, has a broader and more diverse pool of users as opposed to Twitter (Vandendriessche et al., 2020). Still, we are well aware that Facebook users, and in particular those that interact with political content, do not represent the public at large.

When we dive deeper into the intricacies of user engagement, we can discern three forms of user engagement that are most commonly studied, namely liking, sharing (or retweeting) and

commenting. Nevertheless, these three are very distinct forms of behaviour (Kim & Yang, 2017). Previous research has already demonstrated that liking, sharing and commenting are not triggered by the same things. Liking is often seen as the most basic and easiest form of engagement. It requires less commitment and involvement. Simply one click is enough. However, in recent years, liking on Facebook has evolved. Instead of only being able to give a ‘thumbs up’ or like, we are now able to react with multiple different emotions such as ‘wow’, ‘love’ or ‘angry’. Combined, we can call these “reactions”. Because it requires the least amount of involvement of the three primary forms of audience engagement, it is the most common type, also in a political context (see e.g. Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015).

The next step in commitment is commenting. When users comment on a message, they have to actively compose a message that they want to put underneath the content someone else has posted. That post with the comment can then appear on the ‘feed’ of your friends and family, but other posts will eventually push it out of their feed (Kim & Yang, 2017). On the other hand, when you choose to share a message on social media, it appears on your own timeline and, in turn, shows up in the ‘feed’ of your friends and family. In that sense sharing social media messages often can be seen as self-presentation because it contributes to your own online profile and identity (Kim & Yang, 2017). Therefore, people do not do this lightly. In some cases, we can even claim that sharing is strategic because people concisely think about how they will look if they share something (Rui & Stefanone, 2013).

Considering that these three types of audience engagement differ, they are also triggered by different factors. Studies on virality, news sharing, partisan sharing, and general audience engagement have uncovered many factors that influence each of the three forms of audience engagement and some factors that trigger an increase in all of them. The earliest studies into factors that increase audience engagement did so on audience engagement in general, not distinguishing between the three types. One of the most well-explored research areas is online news sharing. An exemplary study is that of Trilling et al. (2017), who find that the original concept of newsworthiness is a good predictor of which articles get shared most often on social media. Additionally, the literature review of Kümpel et al. (2015) shows that

news with a positive valence that contains arousing content is deemed interesting or comes from a trusted source, will be shared more often.

There have also been studies in a political context which studied the user engagement on social media. These studies have already discovered several important explanatory variables. For example, going on the attack, humour, memes, and longer posts increase the audience engagement a post will get. At the same time, calls to action and posting frequently seem to negatively affect audience engagement (Bene, 2017; Heiss et al., 2019; Xenos et al., 2017).

Other studies did try to uncover the nuances between the three types of audience engagement. Kim and Yang's study (2017) was one of the earliest studies to do so. They looked specifically at post characteristics to understand the different interaction behaviour of citizens. Their results show that photos, personal content and posts that stimulate any of the five senses do best at garnering likes and, more broadly, reactions. In addition, a different set of factors influences commenting. Citizens are most triggered to comment on posts containing logical information that solicit responses and are actually less likely to comment on posts containing pictures. Finally, posts with photos or videos that satisfy people's need for information or stimulate people's senses get shared more often.

This last aspect, namely why some posts get shared more often than others, has especially received a lot of scholarly interest. A term that is often used is '*virality*'. If a social media message goes viral, that means that large amounts of people spread it. Berger and Milkman (2012) tried to uncover several aspects that explain this virality. For example, people want to share content that is useful with their own network. Also, content that evokes high arousal, both negative and positive, will boost the number of shares a post will get. Another type of literature interested in the sharing behaviour of citizens is studies conducted on news sharing online, i.e. which articles get shared most often? Trilling et al. (2017) use the idea of newsworthiness to see if it also helps explain which articles people tend to share. They discover that this is the case. Articles containing conflict or human interest, negativity or positivity, that have a small geographical and cultural distance are shared more often. A final strand of literature important for social media sharing is selective exposure research and, in particular, the concept of partisan sharing. Selective exposure means that citizens tend to

search for information in line with their own views and opinions and thus prefer to expose themselves to information that confirms what they already think (Stroud, 2008). This can be extended to the information they share with others on social media. An et al. (2014) apply selective exposure to social media sharing and find that people do, in fact, share information in line with their own political beliefs, which she calls partisan sharing.

All in all, we can conclude that we already have a decent understanding of why people engage with particular social media messages. In recent years we also started to get insights on when and why online publics engage with political content (Bene, 2017; Heiss et al., 2019; Xenos et al., 2017). However, the number of studies is still limited, and what is particularly missing is literature on the effects of politicians' issue strategies. As this introductory chapter made clear, there are reasons to suggest that politicians strategically emphasize specific issues and largely ignore other issues on social media. If this is the case, then the question arises: do these issue strategies lead to more interaction from the audience on social media? This is the second central question that I will try to answer in this dissertation and will be tackled in chapters 5 and 6.

## **1.7 Overview of the PhD**

This dissertation consists of four empirical studies. They can each be read as stand-alone papers, with their own introduction, theoretical framework, methodology section, result section and conclusion. This means that there will inevitably be some overlap between the chapters and between the chapters and this introduction.

**Chapter 2** is a methodological chapter that elaborates on the different methods used in the dissertation and clarifies the operationalization of essential variables that are used in the rest of the dissertation. At the end of the chapter, I describe the Belgian (Flemish) context in which all studies of the dissertation were conducted.

**Chapter 3** will focus solely on which issues politicians pay attention to. To understand the peculiarities of social media, we also included the media agenda and the parliamentary agenda of politicians. This allowed me to briefly compare the issue attention of individual

politicians on different agendas. If we want to understand the issue emphasis behaviour of individual politicians, it is first essential to get an idea of what issues they post about.

The chapter maps the issue strategies of politicians on social media. We distinguish between issue ownership, issue specialization and mass media attention as the main strategies. We analyse this behaviour and then make claims based on the actual content of their communication.

In **chapter 4**, I try to go beyond this pattern by asking politicians themselves about their behaviour. I show multiple social media messages to politicians that they posted and asked them about their motivations to post about those specific topics and events. This allowed me to find various reasons politicians post about the topic that they were specialised in and get some insights into the behaviour of politicians online.

**Chapter 5** focuses on the behaviour of the followers of the social media pages of politicians. In chapter 3, we studied to see what politicians post; the next step is to analyse if this strategy of politicians is indeed successful. By analysing the audience engagement metrics of the Facebook posts of politicians, we can get a better understanding of what triggers their audience to react. This chapter does not focus on issue strategies but zooms out to uncover general patterns of audience engagement with different types of political content. We distinguish between private posts, political posts and campaign posts. We also examine the effects of elections and the use of emotional language on different types of user engagement.

**Chapter 6** will then dive into these political posts and return to issue topics. In this chapter, we will look at the effects issue specialisation, issue ownership and mass media attention, or ‘riding the wave’. First, we can assume that the followers of the pages of politicians follow them because they want to stay up to date on the work of the politicians and are more eager to react to the topics that these politicians are specialised on. Additionally, politicians are still members of a political party; thus, the followers might also prefer content that is the core business of that party. Finally, when a specific topic becomes more salient in the media, citizens will need information about that topic. Therefore, we can assume that they respond positively to social media content about topics that have received much media attention.

The final concluding chapter will bring all previous chapters together and link the findings back to the central questions of the dissertation. *What have we learned on the issue emphasis strategies of politicians on social media? And how does the public react to these strategies of politicians?* This chapter will also reflect on the normative implications of the findings of my research as well as discuss the shortcomings and possible avenues for future research.

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## Hoofdstuk 2    **Methodological considerations**

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The aim of this chapter is to give an overview and better understanding of all the methodological choices of the following four chapters of this dissertation. This section will touch upon three main elements: the different methods and data used, the operationalization of all key variables, and the dissertation's setting, namely the Belgian (Flemish) case.

### **2.1 Different methodologies**

In this dissertation, we use three different methods and four different datasets. An overview can be found in figure 2 below. In the first study in chapter 3, we conduct a content analysis on three different *political agendas*: the parliamentary agenda, the social media agenda (Twitter), and politicians' media agenda (i.e. articles where the politician was present). These data were automatically gathered by scraping all online newspapers of 13 media outlets<sup>2</sup> and searching for the name of the politician in the article, scraping the Twitter page of all the politicians and scraping the website of the federal and Flemish parliament to collect the questions and initiatives politicians had taken. We did this for 144 politicians<sup>3</sup> for a period of six months, between the first of January 2018 and the first of September 2018. For each of these agendas, we calculated how much percent of the total amount of articles, tweets and parliamentary questions and initiatives were about a specific issue. For example, if a politician scored 15 on Twitter for migration, 15 percent of all their tweets were about migration. We will discuss the process of allocating issue topics later in this chapter. The result was a stacked dataset, where each row was a politician-issue combination, meaning that each politician was in the dataset as many times as there were issues. Considering we have 144 politicians and 20 different issues, this meant that the dataset was comprised of

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<sup>2</sup> We included the following outlets: De Standaard, Het Nieuwsblad, Gazet van Antwerpen, Het Belang van Limburg, De Morgen, Het Laatste Nieuws, De Tijd, Metro, Knack, Trends, Humo, Krant van West-Vlaanderen & De Zondag.

<sup>3</sup> Politicians who did not have a single document on any of the three agendas and politicians for whom we did not have specialization data were omitted.

2880 observations. The final analyses look at which factors increase how much a politician talks about a specific issue on each of the three agendas.

For the second study (chapter 4), I personally conducted 12 interviews with politicians. As this chapter wants to dive into the motivations of politicians, asking them directly seems the best-suited method. Therefore, I invited two politicians from each major Flemish party. All interviews were conducted online by one interviewer between the first of March 2021 and the second of April 2021. The interviews were semi-structured and contained two parts. The first part of the interviews included general questions regarding their social media use and issue specialization. The second part introduced a reconstructive element and confronted the politicians with screenshots of actual social media messages that they had made in the past two months. This allowed me to ask direct questions and avoid abstract answers, and it was a tool to keep the interviews focused and to the point. The interviews were coded in NVIVO. To find patterns in the dataset, I created a codebook comprised of both theory-driven as and data-driven codes. The theory-driven codes were mostly about the issue strategies and perceptions of audience engagement. An overview of the full codebook can be found in Appendix I. The categories were not mutually exclusive, and one answer could be coded into multiple codes if need be. I will also use the interviews in this chapter to explain and document certain concepts and research choices.

Figure 2: Overview different methodologies

<p><b>Chapter 3: Party Ownership or Individual Specialization?</b></p> <p>01/01/2018 – 01/09/2018</p> <p>Content analysis three political agendas</p> <p>Cross-classified multilevel regressions</p> <p>51,691 tweets, 8857 Media articles, 12,638 Parliamentary documents</p>	<p><b>Chapter 5: Understanding the online relationship between politicians and citizens.</b></p> <p>01/01/2017 – 01/07/2019</p> <p>Explanatory analysis audience engagement</p> <p>Fixed effects negative binomial regressions</p> <p>34,408 Facebook posts</p>
<p><b>Chapter 4: Issue specialisation and politicians' posts on social media</b></p> <p>01/03/2021 – 2/04/2021</p> <p>Elite reconstruction interviews with photo-elicitation</p> <p>Theory and data-driven coding</p> <p>12 interviews with politicians</p>	<p><b>Chapter 6: My issues on social media: The effects of issue emphasis by politicians on social media</b></p> <p>01/01/2018 – 01/07/2019</p> <p>Explanatory analysis audience engagement</p> <p>Fixed effects negative binomial regressions</p> <p>10,211 Facebook posts</p>

The final two studies of Chapters 5 and 6 on the audience engagement of social media messages of politicians both had a similar methodology. In these studies, we focus on the engagement of the Facebook messages of the public pages of politicians. The reason why we only focus on Facebook in these studies is twofold. First, Facebook is still the most used social media platform by both politicians and the general public (Gil-Clavel & Zagheni, 2019). Suppose we want to study the behaviour of regular citizens. In that case, Facebook provides us with a much better setting than Twitter because numerous studies have indicated that Twitter users are not a good representation of society (Neuman et al., 2014). Second, we had access to the program CrowdTangle, which allowed us to collect Facebook posts with all their audience engagement metrics of publicly available Facebook pages. Thus, our rationale for focussing solely on Facebook for the audience engagement studies is both practical and theoretical. Consequently, we gather all Facebook posts of 124 politicians<sup>4</sup>, with their corresponding number of reactions, shares and comments. We did this for a period

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<sup>4</sup> We were not able to include politicians who did not have a public page on Facebook. Because the number of Green politicians that do have a public page are so few, we opted to leave them out of the analyses. See Appendix L for an overview of the distribution across parties.

of two and a half years, from the first of January 2017 up until the first of July 2019. This resulted in over 50,000 Facebook posts. These Facebook posts are labelled in a two-step process. First, we classified our Facebook posts into three groups: political posts, private posts and campaign posts. Political posts are those that contain a political issue, private posts are about the personal life and leisure time of politicians, and campaign posts do not contain any political substance or opinion but cover calls to vote, etcetera. All in all, we had 19,690 political posts, 8362 campaign posts and 6356 private posts. In the second step, the political posts are coded with an issue topic. In the next section, we will describe in detail how this is done. The analyses conducted in these chapters allowed us to determine which factors increase or decrease the amount of audience engagement the Facebook posts of a politician get.

## **2.2 Operationalization of key variables**

Several variables play a crucial role in this dissertation and will be used in different chapters. More concretely, issue attention, issue specialization, issue ownership, and media salience form the core of this dissertation. I will briefly explain these variables and how we decide to operationalize them.

### **2.2.1 Issue attention**

The main focus of the third chapter of this dissertation is which issues politicians pay attention to. Of course, this means that we need to determine the issue topic of their communication. This can be done in several ways. The traditional way is via manual coding. You train (student) coders to correctly assess the issue topic of a body of text. You do this until you have an acceptable inter-coder reliability (often a Krippendorff's alpha above 0.7), and from then on, the coders can code the data. The main drawback of this method is that it is very time-consuming. There is a limit to the number of texts a person can manually code per hour. In most of the studies in this dissertation, large amounts of data were gathered. In the study in chapter 3, there are over 73,000 documents, and for the studies in chapters 5 and 6, we collected more than 50,000 Facebook posts. Therefore, automatic forms of issue coding seem more suitable. This automatic doing can also be done in several ways. Typically, two methods are used most often. Either a dictionary method based on the relative

frequency of predefined keywords in a dictionary or supervised learning methods where an algorithm learns to label documents into categories using a (manually) labelled training set (Praet, Van Aelst, et al., 2021). The strength of a dictionary approach lies in your control over why something is labelled a certain way. You, as a researcher, comprise the dictionary and the words associated with a particular label; thus, if a text is labelled as education, you know why that is. A main drawback of dictionaries is that they heavily depend on the quality of your keywords and that they are limited; consequently, dictionaries are unable to capture every word that belongs to a specific issue. This is especially true for shorter bodies of text, such as tweets. As a result, supervised learning methods have become more and more popular. When using supervised learning, the relevant features of the text and their weights are automatically determined through a labelled training data set. This eliminates the shortcoming of missing relevant features, which unavoidably happens when using dictionaries (Barberá et al., 2021; Praet, Van Aelst, et al., 2021). However, supervised learning means that you do not have control over the exact reason why a specific text is labelled with a particular code because this is entirely in the hands of the model and happens ‘behind the scenes’.

In this dissertation, we use both a dictionary approach in chapter 3 and a supervised learning approach in chapters 5 and 6. The reasoning is that in the later stages of the dissertation, we had the opportunity to collaborate with Textgain, an organisation specialising in natural language processing. In chapter 3, we use a dictionary approach, as we just mentioned. We use the dictionary made by Sevenans et al. (2014). They compiled a list of words for each of the major CAP codes. Their research showed that these words allow differentiating between different issue topics. We employ the dictionary in the following way: the text of the social media message, parliamentary question or media article is scanned for the occurrence of any of these words. If none of the words from the dictionary is present in the text, the text is excluded from the analyses. The text is assigned to the issue from which it has the highest amount of words. In the case of a tie, a score is given to all issues equal to  $1/\text{number of ties}$ . Thus for each politician, we know how much of their (coded) communication is about a certain issue, expressed in percentages.

In the later stages of my PhD trajectory, the notion of automatic coding through training a neural network via supervised learning came up through a partnership with Textgain. Supervised learning means that you feed a machine learning model with manually coded training data. Based on this training data, the model will automatically code new data by characteristics found in the training data. To label our data, we use a two-step process. First, we divide the posts into either private, political or campaign. And in a second step, the political posts are labelled with an issue code. The machine learning model we use is specifically a support vector machine that is simultaneously trained using the coded posts to suggest a label to the human coders to streamline the process. After manually coding 15,000 Facebook posts with a substantial agreement (0.81 Krippendorff's alpha), a pre-trained BERT language model<sup>5</sup> was trained for the task of recognizing the post types and issue topic. This model assigns labels autonomically without correction by human annotators correctly. In chapters 5 and 6, there is a more detailed summary of all relevant indicators of the performance of the trained model.

### **2.2.2 Issue specialization**

In the introductory chapter of this dissertation, ample attention is paid to the concept of issue specialization. Politicians try to bind issues to themselves by working on these issues and communicating about them (Damgaard, 1995; Sieberer, 2006; Vos, 2016). But how does this specialization come about? How is it decided which politicians will start working on which issues? Firstly, we have to make the distinction between objective and subjective specialization. The objective specialization of politicians can be determined by looking at which parliamentary committees they are active in. The subjective specialization of politicians can be operationalized by presenting politicians with multiple policy issues and asking if they believe they are specialized in the issues. In the third chapter of the

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<sup>5</sup> A BERT-transformer using the GroNLP/bert-base-dutch-cased pretrained model (12-layers, GELU activation).

dissertation, I opt to use subjective specialization, arguing that this is less restrictive than objective specialization. We rely on the data collected by the POLPOL<sup>6</sup> project. They conducted a survey and follow-up interview with all (Dutch-speaking) parliamentarians elected in either the federal or Flemish parliament, with a response rate of 75 percent (N=137). For all major CAP<sup>7</sup> codes, politicians were asked a yes/no question about whether or not they considered themselves to be an expert on that topic. The specific wording is: *“Politicians’ specialization does not always match their committee memberships. Therefore we would like to ask you in which of the following policy domains you consider yourself to be a specialist. Tick as many domains as you want.”* However, when subjective specialization with objective specialization is compared, I find that they lead to similar results (see appendix of chapter 3). The reasoning is that the distinction between subjective and objective specialization is rather small for politicians. As mentioned before, in this dissertation, I conduct multiple interviews with members of parliament (MPs) where I talk with them about this specific part of the political process. When asked what the issues were that they are specialized in, they all default to indicating in which committees they are active. Therefore, I can conclude that both objective and subjective specialization are valid measures of the same concept and can even be used to complement each other.

But how, then how do parties decide which politician will work on which issue? In the interviews, We asked the politicians how the process of allocating politicians to committees works. Every politician indicates that this starts after the elections when the newly formed party parliamentary group (PPG) meets. First, the PPG leader asks all members to express their preferred committees, and then they start puzzling to make it work.

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<sup>6</sup> The POLPOP project led by Stefaan Walgrave investigated Politicians' perceptions of public opinion in 10 different countries.

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.comparativeagendas.net/> for more information on the CAP project

*“Then the question is asked who wants to follow up which committees, and then it’s to be seen if the puzzle can be put together that way.”*

*Male MP, Specialist, Interview 2*

*It’s the case that everyone can express their preference, and then it’s the difficult task for the parliamentary party leader to try and find a balance in the distribution of committees.”*

*Male MP, Specialist, Interview 1*

Important considerations are whether or not a politician has already worked on the topic in the previous legislature and their past professional expertise. Several politicians mentioned that they asked to work on a particular topic because they have done so in the past. Most politicians indicated that professional experience in the field is the most important consideration. This experience can either be political or non-political. One politician mentioned that he was previously a staff member for a parliamentarian. When that politician retired, it was only natural he continued working on the topics of that politician. Another politician voiced the relevance of his academic studies in the field. Multiple politicians indicated that this is beneficial because the topic is already associated with them. They have made the necessary connections with civil society groups, experts, and interest groups. They have an established network, so to speak. Thus, they have an established track record, and within their party, they are the authority on that topic. Therefore, it is evident that they will continue to work on that topic.

*“At the beginning of the legislature, the PPG leader gauges what everyone’s interests and preferences are and then I said: “Well, I would like to work on [ ]” For [ ] there was no discussion because I have been working on that for many years [ ] and in the current PPG I have no competition in terms of knowledge and experience.”*

*Male MP, Generalist, Interview 7*



*“On the one hand, of course, people who already have past experience with working on it in parliament are being considered. It is always easier if people continue working on the same topics.”*

*Male MP, Generalist, Interview 9*

Politicians do acknowledge that sometimes it is not easy to make sure that every member of the PPG is happy with the package of topics they get. This can lead to politicians being somewhat disappointed. There is, in fact, an intra-party competition when it comes to topics. Some topics are more popular to work on, and multiple politicians show an interest in tackling them at the beginning of the legislature. This is resolved by making politicians talk with one another. If this does not resolve the dispute, parties tend to use one criterion: seniority. Thus, in the end, more senior politicians will get their way if it cannot be resolved among themselves. One politician explicitly expressed his disdain for this criterion. In his eyes, it is wrong that seniority means that someone is more capable or better suited.

*“Perhaps a little disappointed at first, not satisfied is perhaps putting it too strongly. That maybe they had hoped to work on another topic as well, for example.”*

*Male MP, Specialist, Interview 1*

*“Usually, the people who have to decide among themselves are put together with the question of trying to find a solution among yourselves. If that doesn’t work, then I have to say that... that they are quick to search for a non-debatable criterion and that is quite easily seniority.”*

*Male MP, Specialist, Interview 2*

*“What I personally do not understand is that seniority is still a benchmark for correctness, that is something that is very much ingrained in our party and something that we have to fight a little bit every day.”*

*Male MP, Specialist, Interview 5*

However, not every PPG has the luxury of having very specialized members or a very extensive division of labour. During the interviews, several politicians described that the size of the PPG determines to what extent politicians have the luxury of being fully specialized. For example, if there are only four politicians in the PPG, then every member has to follow up on many committees, which forces politicians to become generalists. One politician described how he was able to focus on specific topics after his PPG increased after recent elections and how a larger PPG means more staff to support them.

*“I was a generalist during the previous legislature because we only had 6 parliamentarians at that point, and well, all 6 of us had to do as much as possible across various topics. [ ] And now, since this legislature, where we have 23 parliamentarians, we can divide the work much better. [ ] You probably know, the more parliamentarians, the more staff and that is, of course, also a factor. So the support is much bigger.”*

*Male MP, Generalist, Interview 10*

Finally, politicians have said in all interviews that they are the spokespersons for their party regarding their specialised topics. Therefore, they think it is evident that people will go to them for information, both outside of the party and within the party, about their specialized topics and that they are the ones who broadly define the party’s positioning on these topics with the general ideology of the party in mind. In other words, if an event happens that concerns the specialized topic of politicians, their party will come to them to formulate the party’s general position. Additionally, one politician also mentioned that his party president contacted him before a TV appearance to ask if his notes were correct and if there were any interesting items he might use. Thus, people listen to the specialists within the party and trust them.

*“We are actually given a relatively large amount of autonomy; we have a party programme, of course, and work that has been done in the past, but within that framework, we are given the autonomy to do our own thing, both in terms of content and in terms of communication. Also, concerning the press and the media, we have to play our part and highlight that. But also to determine the general direction of the party content-wise, within the nuances of our party programme.”*

*Male MP, Generalist, Interview 9*

*“So if something happens, then they will look at me and ask: what is our viewpoint? [ ] And then you say: well, I think this should be our opinion. Based on the party programme and those principles.”*

*Male MP, Generalist, Interview 8*

### **2.2.3 Issue ownership**

As explained in the previous chapter, issue ownership implies a powerful link between a party and an issue topic. Issue ownership has a competence and an associative dimension, meaning that the link can be explained because voters think a specific party is best suited to handle the issue. Still, it can also be an association in people’s minds between the party and the issue because of a party’s commitment to an issue (Walgrave et al., 2012). The dimensions are most often measured through surveys, asking citizens which party they think is best suited at handling issue X. However, Walgrave et al. (2016) have voiced concerns regarding the validity of issue ownership measurements, saying that the measurements may be intermingled with citizens’ (dis)agreement with parties’ positions and general party evaluations. In their study, they test this by experimenting with question-wording. They find that competence issue ownership measures are much more affected by confounding factors than the associative measurements. Therefore, in this dissertation, we opt to use associative

issue ownership. We asked citizens in a survey<sup>8</sup> which party came to mind when thinking about issue X. The respondents were presented with 11<sup>9</sup> policy issues where they could then select one party that was, according to them, linked to that issue. In appendix S, there is an overview table of the percentage of people that indicated a certain party for each of the 11 issues. I used the CAP issue classification in my dissertation, which includes more than 20 issue codes. Consequently, I did not have issue ownership data for all issues. However, it is also not necessarily possible to attribute ownership to every issue. Some issues are just not owned by any party. The 11 issues that we presented to the respondents in the survey were important issues that appear (relatively) frequent in the public debate and thus have an owner. We felt that it was useless to ask citizens to attribute ownership to issues where there are no owners in reality.

We used issue ownership in the first and last study of this dissertation. In the first study, which is conducted on the level of individual politicians, we use the actual percentages of respondents that spontaneously link a specific party with the issue. As a result, every politician of a party scored the same on ownership for each issue. For example, if 26 percent of respondents indicated that they thought about party A when hearing education, all members of *party A* scored 26 on the topic of education. This allows us to determine if the amount of communication about that topic increases if the ownership score is higher. The last study of this dissertation is on the level of individual Facebook messages. Therefore, we have a variable that is either yes (1) or no (0) if the message is about a topic that the politician's party owns. We do not use the percentage scores because one Facebook post can be labelled as multiple issues topics. Using this method, we can analyse if the amount of audience engagement increases when politicians talk about an issue that their party owns. However, this poses the question: when can we consider a party to be owning an issue or, differently put, from what percentage of citizens linking the issue to a party can we assign

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<sup>8</sup> This data was collected as part of the NWS Data project. The survey was performed by Dynata among 1340 Flemish respondents.

<sup>9</sup> The topics included: Macroeconomics, civil rights, healthcare, education, environment, energy, migration, mobility & traffic, law & crime, social affairs and culture

that issue to the party? There is no formal benchmark that indicates a specific percentage that must be reached before a party can own an issue. However, we can draw upon previous studies and learn from useful operationalisations. One such helpful operationalisation comes from Dejaeghere and van Erkel (2017), who coded a party as an owner if at least 25 percent of citizens associated a party with the issue and if no other parties scored more than 12.5 percent. Moreover, their findings show that using a continuous issue ownership variable or a dummy variable provides similar results. However, allocating only one owner to every issue is restrictive. As Geys (2012) rightfully points out, individual citizens do not necessarily agree on which party owns which issue. Consequently, one issue can be owned by more than one party. To account for this variation between individuals, we designate ownership as follows: if more than 25 percent of citizens spontaneously link a party to an issue, then it owns that issue, regardless of how many other parties also own that issue.

#### **2.2.4 Mass media attention**

Mass media attention refers to the amount of attention the traditional news media pay to a specific topic. Several theories exist with regards to media attention and its effects on politicians, *political agenda-setting* (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006b), *political waves* (Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006), *riding the wave* (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994), to name a few of such influential theories. All these theories or concepts do point to the same relationship; namely, an increase in attention for an issue in the media will trigger politicians to pay attention to the issue as well. Consequently, as the main focus of this dissertation is on the issue attention of politicians, the variable mass media attention has to be included. When politicians react to a topic with higher media attention, we label this strategy as ‘riding the wave’. This variable is included in the study in chapter 3 and chapter 6. Two different operationalisations are used.

We automatically gathered all online articles from all Flemish newspapers (13 news outlets<sup>10</sup>) to measure media attention. We use the aforementioned dictionary approach to label each article with an issue topic. Every article is scanned if they contain words from the dictionary, and if they do, it is labelled as the issue from which it has the highest amount of words. In the case of a tie between multiple issues, each issue received a score of  $1/\text{number of ties}$ . If no words from the dictionary were present in the article, it was removed from the analyses. Similar to issue ownership, media salience is used in the first and last study of this dissertation. In the study of chapter 3, we use the percentage of articles about that topic to analyse if more media attention leads to more attention towards that topic by the politicians under study. In the last study, we again opt to use a yes/no variable if the Facebook post contains an issue that received an unexpected amount of media attention that week. We draw upon the concept of a data pulse (see Jungherr and Jürgens, 2013). The data pulse is the state of the system at a given time as determined by known aspects. Simply put, it is the ‘normal’ state of a media environment. When we compare empirical data to the data pulse, we can see if it significantly deviates from the data pulse and creates a peak in attention. So with this method, we do not measure unexpected events but events with unexpected high attention. These events break the data pulse, so to speak. Our aim was also to identify periods where certain issues gained more media attention than they normally do, and thus the data pulse was broken. We operationalized this by first, calculating the percentage of articles about an issue on a weekly level. Second, we then determine in which weeks an issue receives more attention than it usually does by relying on the detection of outliers. In other words, weeks where the amount of attention for an issue is three standard deviations higher than the average are considered weeks where that topic receives excessive attention in the media. For example, suppose a politician makes a Facebook post about an issue that receives more media attention than it usually does. In that case, it scores a 1 on our media attention

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<sup>10</sup> We included the following outlets: De Standaard, Het Nieuwsblad, Gazet van Antwerpen, Het Belang van Limburg, De Morgen, Het Laatste Nieuws, De Tijd, Metro, Knack, Trends, Humo, Krant van West-Vlaanderen & De Zondag

variable, allowing us to measure the effects of mass media attention on audience engagement.

## **2.3 The Belgian (Flemish) case**

### **2.3.1 Political system**

The Belgian political system has often been characterized as complex. Belgium is a federal state with regions and language communities. Every region and language community has its own parliament and government, except the Flemish region and the Dutch language community, which are fused. All in all, this means that there are six parliaments and six governments in Belgium, with a total of 475 members of parliament (MPs) (Swenden et al., 2006). In this dissertation, however, I will only focus on the 212 Dutch-speaking parliamentarians of the Federal and the (regional) Flemish parliament. The reason is that we code issues, and coding issues in one language already requires extensive work. Furthermore, Belgium is often classified as a partitocracy with a fragmented party landscape. Consequently, the most powerful politicians in Belgium are usually the party presidents and individual politicians are still very much dictated by their party on how to act. For instance, individual politicians strictly follow voting cues in parliament from their party (De Winter, 1996; Van Aelst & Louwerse, 2014). Therefore, this dissertation always takes the role of the parties into account, although we focus on individual politicians.

The electoral system can be classified as a proportional flexible list system with a formal electoral threshold of five percent. A flexible list system means that people can either vote for a list as a whole or give a preferential vote to someone on the list. The allocation of seats in parliament follows a two-step procedure. First, votes are divided between parties according to the d'Hondt method. Secondly, the seats a party won are then allocated within the party based on the order of the list but also based on the preferential votes, which can alter the order of the list (van Erkel et al., 2016). This entails that politicians in Belgium are incentivized to employ both strategies that maximize votes for the party and personal vote-seeking strategies (Bräuninger et al., 2012). Consequently, the chances are high that

politicians will differentiate from one another on social media to stand out and pursue these personal vote-seeking strategies. However, a key feature of the Belgium electoral system is that not all citizens can vote for every party. All party families have a Flemish and a Walloon party that operate in their respective regions and language communities. Inhabitants of the Walloon region cannot vote for Flemish parties and vice-versa (barring some exceptions). As I just mentioned, in this dissertation I will focus only on the Flemish parties in Belgium.

These characteristics of the Belgian (Flemish case) mean that we are mostly dealing with a most likely case to find politicians that develop an individual issue profile. First, politicians are forced into a division of labour in parliament because it is not possible for every politician to cover every policy issue; thus, politicians specialize in a select number of issues. Additionally, the constituencies in Flanders are relative large multi-member districts. For the federal elections, the constituencies in Flanders allocate between 12 and 24 seats. This means that politicians are not solely responsible for one constituency and do not have to address every issue that is important to the people in their constituency. Next, a proportional flexible list system incentivizes politicians to try and differentiate themselves not only from politicians of other parties but also from politicians within their party to get a higher position on the list. All in all, we can thus expect that a selective issue emphasis strategy will be employed by politicians in Belgium.

### **2.3.2 (Social) Media system**

The media system in Belgium is dominated by two big media concerns, which both have multiple newspapers. Halin and Manchini (2004) classified Belgium as a Democratic Corporatist Model, with high newspaper circulation, external pluralism, strong professionalization and strong state intervention. Anno 2020, according to the Imec Digimeter<sup>11</sup> (Vandendriessche et al., 2020), 91 percent of Flemish people consult the news daily, and 87 percent think it is important to follow the news. The national television news

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<sup>11</sup> Imec annually surveys a representative sample of at least 1,500 inhabitants of Flanders aged 16 or over



broadcasts are still the most important news sources for most citizens, followed by online news websites. Interestingly, only 19 percent of people pay for a digital newspaper subscription. Social media has also become an important source of news for many people. The Digimeter shows that, especially for younger generations, social media is where people encounter a lot of news daily. This finding is echoed by van Erkel and Van Aelst (2021), who stress that especially Facebook is more and more becoming a prominent news source for Flemish citizens. This entails that citizens might be incentivized to follow politicians on social media because they want their news from that platform and directly from the politicians. Indeed a survey<sup>12</sup> we conducted revealed that the main reason citizens follow politicians on social media is because they want to stay up to date on their work.

Social media is a core element of this dissertation. Thus, it is essential to describe how citizens and politicians use social media in the Flemish case, which is the context of all studies in this dissertation. The Digimeter indicates that the social media penetration in Flanders is very high; 83 percent of respondents indicated that they use the Facebook app daily. The report states that 8 out of 10 Flemings are active social media users, meaning that they use social media at least once a month. Facebook is the most popular (74%), followed by Instagram (45%) and Twitter (18%), with surprisingly Tiktok as one of the highest newcomers (14% compared to 4% in 2019). Flemish politicians have also found their way to social media. A quick check of Facebook and Twitter indicates that all 212 Dutch-speaking Belgian MP's are on Facebook (either a private profile or a public page), and 96 percent of them are on Twitter.

Social media adoption among politicians is thus high. Political parties and individual politicians themselves have come to put a lot of priority on social media both in their

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<sup>12</sup> This data was collected as part of the NWS Data project. The survey was performed by Dynata among 2179 Flemish respondents.

campaign strategy as well as in routine periods (Lefevere et al., 2020), which means that citizens routinely get exposed to political messages on social media. For instance, the Facebook ad library<sup>13</sup> shows that the top 20 largest spenders of advertisements are nearly all political parties or individual politicians. This sentiment is something that politicians themselves mention in the interviews. Parties are putting more emphasis on social media and are trying to professionalize their social media presence and those of their members. Multiple politicians specifically indicate the strengths of social media, and others express how the party implements social media professionalization through providing their members with training courses, help with visuals, etcetera. Additionally, almost all parliamentarians can call on parliamentary assistants to aid them with their social media. For some politicians, they entirely run the social media accounts; for others, the assistants have a more supporting role. The following quote is a response to a question about a visual graphic in a Facebook post:

*“That is purely my parliamentary assistant, but the party will now come up with ways to support us even more in that respect. But actually, it is mainly parliamentary assistants.”*

*Female MP, Specialist, Interview 4*

*“The party does provide such... I think there was another one this morning, by the way, training courses on the use of social media and so on where they give tips and tricks.”*

*Female MP, Generalist, Interview 12*

*“[ ] the party is also trying to accentuate some specific issues on Twitter. The PPG also has its own account to do things with. So yes, on that level... there is an incentive [ ].”*

*Male MP, Specialist, Interview 1*

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<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/>

Another aspect that came up in the interviews is the reason why they use social media and why they think social media is essential. The single most important factor that politicians mention is reach. Using social media, they can inform a large group of people about what they are working on. This reach is very important to politicians as it allows individual politicians to try and garner more attention for themselves, both from the media and the public. In that sense, the interviewees stress that this enables them to separate themselves from their party and other party members because it is their page, and the viewpoints are their own. Not only exposure but also trying to bind citizens to them is an important aspect in that regard. Through social media, users may form what we could call para-social relationships with politicians (Derrick et al., 2008). This means that the users feel like they have a relationship with the politician, even though they have never met. Creating a strong base of supporters is important for politicians and helps them get re-elected because these supporters not only can give a vote for the party but, as was mentioned above, they can also cast a preferential vote. If individual politicians have a strong supporter base that votes for them, their chances of getting re-elected only go up.

*“[ ] Then the other element is also important as a politician, you have to build up a supporter base. There are always new elections coming up, so that is also important, of course, [ ] And those resources [social media] often make it easier for us because you can very quickly make contact with people, and people can also make contact with you.”*

*Male MP, Specialist, Interview 2*

*“Yes, it is the only way that backbenchers, such as myself, can get a form of attention. By posting something and people encountering it on social media.”*

*Female MP, Specialist, Interview 11*

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## **Party Ownership or Individual Specialization? A comparison of politicians' individual issue attention across three different agendas**

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### **3.1 Introduction**

Research has demonstrated that political parties are strategic actors that compete with each other through the selective emphasis of different issues. This allows parties to accentuate their strength and competence on a few policy issues on which they have built a reputation (Green-Pedersen, 2007; Robertson, 1976; Schröder & Stecker, 2017). This idea has been echoed by the issue ownership literature, indicating that focusing on specific issues is an effective strategy for parties to build a reputation and garner more votes. Issue ownership means that parties can own certain issues, these are issues that people believe a certain party is better able to handle than others. If political parties then succeed at making their owned issues salient during election campaigns, they will get more votes (Petrocik, 1996). Therefore, parties selectively emphasize certain issues to try and influence the public agenda, by making their preferred issues more salient than others.

This study argues that just as parties compete with each other through selectively addressing issues, individual politicians do so as well. Politicians are faced with two different competitors. They compete both with politicians from other parties, but they also compete with politicians from their own party. To distinguish themselves from politicians from another party, they can stress the issues their party has a strong reputation on. In that sense individual politicians strengthen the party message. Nevertheless, a political party is not an overbearing entity, but rather a collection of politicians that have similar, yet not identical, preferences. Therefore, it is very rare for a party to have perfect cohesion (Ceron, 2017; Greene & Haber, 2017; McGann, 2002). While a main driver of a parties' issue agenda is



issue ownership, this might be less relevant for individual politicians because by addressing party-owned issues it is harder to differentiate oneself from colleagues within the party. Just as parties can own issues that they are competent on (i.e. party ownership), politicians can, to a lesser extent, also try to build a reputation on issues that they want to prioritize. This can be labelled as the *issue specialization* of a politician (Damgaard, 1995; Mattson & Strøm, 1995; Sieberer, 2006; Van Schendelen, 1976; Vos, 2016). Although both terms are clearly related by their focus on issue reputation, they remain conceptually different. Issue ownership is operationalized and defined by how the public perceives the issue reputation of parties, while issue specialization is not about public perceptions, but rather what the politicians themselves identify as their specialized topics (see data and methods section).

Within parliamentary party groups there tends to be a division of labour as members are spread over different specialized committees. Members of parliament (MPs) are deemed as the spokesperson for the party on a specific policy if they are part of that committee (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2011; Mattson & Strøm, 1995). In other words, politicians from the same party are specialized in different policy domains. Comparable to how parties emphasize their owned issues to increase saliency for that topic, we believe that individual politicians will emphasize the issues they are specialized in to signal their expertise, not just to the general public, but also to journalists and to the selectorate of the party who compose the ballot list and distribute political mandates. However, despite numerous recent studies, little to no research has been done to confirm the argument that issue specialization is a crucial driver for the individual issue agenda of politicians. That is why the first aim of this paper is to find out if individual politicians do, in fact, focus more on issues they are specialized in or whether party characteristics (i.e. issue ownership) mainly determine the issue emphasis of individual politicians.

Just as parties, politicians are strategic actors, that have their own goals, and think tactically about the use of all available means to realize those goals (Strömbäck & Esser, 2017). Therefore, we can also expect politicians to be strategic in choosing the channels to signal their specialization. Traditionally, politicians have roughly two ways via which they can promote their own issue agenda: first, by taking certain initiatives in parliament or government (Mayhew, 1974); and second, by getting into the news and attracting public

attention with their preferred issues. During the past decennium, however, social media have given politicians a third way to directly interact with citizens and have allowed for a much more personal approach to political communication. In other words, individual politicians themselves can broadcast their own messages to a wide audience. Each of these three agendas can be conceived as an individual agenda with its own rules and conventions. This means that the specific agenda that is under study might influence the effects of issue specialization and issue ownership. Therefore, the second aim is to investigate on what platform or arena this individual issue agenda is most present. We will compare the issue attention of politicians on three different agendas: the individual media agenda (news items where a politician is present), the parliamentary agenda (initiatives a politician has taken) and the social media agenda (tweets of a politician).

We studied the three agendas of 144 Belgian MPs for a period of nine months, collecting and coding over 73.000 documents. Overall, we find that issue specialization is a strong and consistent factor driving the selective issue emphasis on different agendas, while issue ownership is less important and works different across agendas. In the result section and conclusion we try to interpret these findings and suggest possible avenues for future research.

## **3.2 What influences individual issue attention: issue ownership versus issue specialization**

### **3.2.1 Party competition through selective emphasis**

The idea of party competition through selective issue emphasis, was established by David Robertson (1976). He argued that party competition is focused on selective emphasis rather than direct confrontation. Robertson demonstrates that the politics of competitive democracy is, in essence, the politics of problem-solving, meaning that there are several societal problems and that political parties each present ways to remedy them. Next, voters then can choose which solution they prefer. Thus, it would be illogical of opposition parties to draw attention to problem areas in which the government has been successful. Just as it would not make sense for the government to draw attention to problems it has not been able to properly solve. Therefore, we expect parties to focus on different issues rather than compete about

the same ones. Budge and Farlie (1983) further developed this selective emphasis thesis. They argue that parties stress particular issues that work in their favour. For example, left-wing parties handle unemployment and social welfare problems; right-wing parties are more skillful dealing with inflation, excessive taxation etc. In other words, a party wins by reinforcing its base vote with the support of persuadable voters who have been attracted by a campaign fought over issues on which the party is regarded as particularly competent.

The issue ownership theory by Petrocik (1996) has expanded this idea even further, claiming that parties can 'own' certain issues. These are issues that people believe a certain party is better able to handle than others. Parties get this reputation due to a history of attention, initiative, and innovation towards these issues, which leads voters to believe that one party is better equipped and committed to doing something about that issue than other parties. Therefore, if parties are able to make that issue the one at stake during a campaign, it will result in more votes for that party. Since then, researchers have provided an increasingly sophisticated understanding of what issue ownership means, and how it develops over time (Thesen et al., 2017). For example, Walgrave, Lefevere and Tresch (2012) divided the concept of issue ownership into a competence dimension (how capable is the party on the issue) and an associative dimension (the spontaneous link between some issues and some parties). To sum up: selectively emphasizing issues is a crucial element in the competition for votes between political parties. Parties highlight 'owned' issues that are advantageous for themselves, while they ignore issues that are disadvantageous or are owned by other parties.

The existing issue ownership literature can partly help us to explain the issue attention of individual politicians. If parties benefit from their owned issues becoming salient, we can also expect individual politicians to address issues that their party is strong on, as a vote for the party indirectly means a vote for them. Politicians compete with politicians from other parties by selectively strengthening the parties' reputation on certain issues. For instance, politicians from a green party will pay attention to environmental issues, while an extreme right politician will more likely stress immigration. Therefore, we can expect issue ownership to have an effect on the issue attention of politicians.

H1: Politicians from parties that own an issue pay more attention to that issue than politicians from parties that do not own the issue

### **3.2.2 Individual competition through selective emphasis**

Although considerable research has been done towards the selective issue emphasis of parties, almost no research exists on the issue agenda of individual politicians. However, there are several good reasons to devote more attention to the individual level. First, in recent years we see that party identification in general has been in decline. Individual politicians, on the other hand, are more and more becoming the forefront of the political arena. Therefore, people are more familiar with these individual politicians than they are with abstract parties (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002). This personalization of politics manifests itself in different ways. For example, in media coverage, journalists prefer individual politicians to parties (Van Aelst et al., 2012). Research also indicates that, at least in some countries, individual politicians are becoming more important for the vote choice of citizens (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007; Takens et al., 2015; van Holsteyn & Andeweg, 2010).

Second, the introduction and rising importance of social media have given individual politicians a new tool to promote themselves and their own issue agenda. On social media, politicians post messages ‘in their own name’, this means that they are more free to focus on their preferred issues (Ceron, 2017). Thus, individual politicians themselves interact with the general public on social media, reinforcing their visibility and potential importance in the vote choice of citizens. Therefore, we should not only look at how parties compete, but also include the competition between individual politicians. Individual politicians can compete with one another by for example endorsing different policy proposals (I. Budge & Farlie, 1983), or by using different types of rhetoric (Krebs & Jackson, 2007). This study, however, focuses on how individual politicians compete with one another through selectively emphasizing certain issues.

To get re-elected, politicians not only have to compete with politicians from different parties, but also with politicians from their own party. In each party there is a so-called intra-party competition for the best positions on the ballot list and the best mandates (e.g. minister posts or parliamentary leader posts). Individual politicians can try to impress the party leaders, or

alternatively, the electorate in their district. In particular electoral systems with a flexible list system encourage politicians to adopt personal vote-seeking strategies (Bräuninger et al., 2012). By using a preference vote for an individual politician, voters can change the list order that was created by the party selectorate. Therefore, politicians will want to differentiate themselves from politicians from their own party in order to move upwards on the ballot list. However, politicians can hardly rely on ideology and issue positions to differentiate themselves from politicians from their own party, seeing as they (more or less) share the same ideology. Therefore, it is an opportune strategy of politicians to not only focus on issues their party owns but also highlight other issues. Hence, we believe that issue specialization might impact the individual issue agendas of politicians.

Issue specialization can have different origins. Often politicians specialize themselves through their professional background. The education of politicians and the profession that they were active in before becoming a politician impacts the specific policy domains they specialize in (Tresch, 2009). For instance, a politician who has studied medicine and was previously a doctor, will most likely be specialized in healthcare. MPs can also build this individual issue ownership through their parliamentary work. In parliament, politicians are seated in different specialized committees and because of this, politicians get specialized in those policy areas. MPs either choose their own committees or are allocated to a specific committee by their party that favours a division of labour within their organization (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2011). Politicians are expected to work on the issues of their committees and in that way can also become the spokesperson for the party on those specific policy domains. This also helps them build a reputation within their party, as MPs indicate that they often take voting cues from the party specialist (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2011).

Next, politicians have to signal their expertise to journalists, voters and the party selectorate in order for them to know they are indeed specialists on specific topics. The same way parties can own issues by paying a lot of attention to them or coming up with new initiatives, individual politicians can also bind issues to themselves. By tweeting, through legislative proposals and by appearing in the media, politicians try to demonstrate that they are experts on a certain topic. It makes sense that if politicians try to signal their expertise they will divert more attention towards their specialized topics on their issue agendas. This in turn will

cause their agenda's to be more concentrated because they focus on a select number of issues instead of following a 'generalist' approach by paying attention to a wide number of topics. Politicians want to signal their specialization to strengthen their visibility and relevance. First, if an issue politicians are specialists in becomes salient, they become more visible in the media. Political specialists function as any other type of expert because they are very knowledgeable about a specific topic (Albæk, 2011). Therefore, we expect journalists to utilize these specialists to give background information regarding a specific news event and comment on it (Conrad, 1999). Van Camp (2017) shows that the specialization of politicians does indeed have a positive effect on their chances of getting into the media, meaning that if politicians are specialized in a certain topic, journalists will more often include them in articles, leading to more visibility. Nevertheless, this means that journalists have to know who the specialists are, thus, politicians try to signal their specializations to the media through their tweets and parliamentary work.

This visibility is beneficial to politicians for two reasons. First, it helps politicians to become more well known by the public. It is very unlikely that citizens will vote for candidates they do not know, and the most important source of information about candidates for citizens is the news media (André et al., 2012; Arnold, 2004). Moreover, Däubler, Bräuninger and Brunner (2016) argue that the mentioning of an MP's name causes people to get a preference for that candidate over lesser-known candidates. Meaning that getting into the news is good for getting more votes and thus getting re-elected. Second, the visibility of politicians influences the selectorate of the party. In most political systems, party leaders arrange the positions on the ballot lists and they are the ones who distribute the mandates after the elections. The visibility of politicians can influence the decision of the party selectorate because in mediatized democracies an important selection criteria for political parties is how well their representatives have performed in the media (Sheafer & Tzionit, 2006). Therefore, visibility leads to more media exposure, which in turn leads to a higher chance of getting re-elected.

The second reason why politicians want to signal their specialization is because it raises their policy relevance within their party. When an issue is more salient, parties are expected to form policy positions on that topic. Parties rely on the expertise of their specialized

politicians to form policy positions that are congruent with the party's ideology. All members of the party are then expected to endorse this position. This means that politicians are able to weigh more heavily on the political agenda when the issues they are specialized in become more salient. In addition to being able to shape the parties' policy position, specialized politicians with ambition are also more eligible to be in the running for cabinet posts. Research has shown that parties do in fact allocate minister positions to politicians with political expertise on the topic (Beckman, 2006). Thus, it is crucial for politicians to show to the leadership of their party that they are specialized, and therefore competent, in certain issues. In sum, politicians have good reasons to signal their expertise to voters, the media and the selectorate of their party and are therefore expected to put the issues they are specialized in on top of their individual agenda.

H2: Politicians that are specialized in an issue will pay more attention to that issue than non-specialized politicians.

### **3.3 Agenda autonomy**

Politicians have multiple agendas on which they can address issues, that is why we opted to investigate three separate political agendas: the twitter agenda, the individual media agenda and the parliamentary agenda. Each of these agendas has its own rules and conventions. For instance, the three agendas have a different format and length. On Twitter, users are limited to 280 characters, usually resulting in short messages, where they can link to other websites, posts pictures and so on. Parliamentary documents are much more formal, but politicians can extensively address a certain issue, making it possible to handle more complex issues. The media agenda is quite diverse in terms of format and size, depending on the type of medium and outlet. We believe that the particular set of rules and conventions of each agenda causes the individual issue attention of politicians on these channels to differ from one another. A key element in this regard is the degree of autonomy that politicians have to choose the issues they will address. Unlike with policy positions, previous literature has not shown that parties constrain their members in which topics they can talk about (De Winter & Dumont, 2000). It seems that, as long as politicians adhere to the party position, they are

free to focus on the topics that they want. This degree of autonomy differs, however, for each agenda.

We can arrange our three agendas from most autonomous, Twitter, to least autonomous, the media. Social media, such as Twitter, are unmediated online platforms where users often post spontaneous messages. This increases the likelihood that these online posts reflect the true preferences and interests of political actors (Ceron, 2017; Schober et al., 2015). On Twitter there are almost no restrictions as to what you can and cannot talk about. As long as it does not violate the Twitter rules, meaning no graphic violence, adult content or any abusive or hateful conducts<sup>14</sup>, people can tweet about whichever topics they want. This indicates that most of the time, politicians are free to focus on whatever issues they seem fit on social media.

In parliament, politicians are bound by institutional rules. Parliamentarians are assigned to certain committees by their party and are expected to work on the topics of these committees (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2011). Therefore, it becomes harder for politicians to work on issues of committees that they do not belong to. Furthermore, in parliament, politicians are part of a parliamentary party group. One of the main roles of a parliamentary party group is to make sure that MPs respect a certain discipline, this means that the hands of most MPs are tied regarding confidence votes, legislation and also parliamentary questions (Dandoy, 2011; De Winter & Dumont, 2000). Therefore, politicians might have only limited autonomy about which issues they ask parliamentary questions or submit bills.

Lastly, whether or not a politician gets featured in an article is a journalistic choice and politicians mostly need to be asked to appear in an article. Leading politicians can sometimes dictate the news and force access to the media arena (Van Aelst et al., 2016), but most ordinary politicians are not newsworthy enough to claim media attention. Journalists remain the gatekeepers as to which events get covered in the news and which events do not (Jürgens

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<sup>14</sup> For a full list see <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/twitter-rules>



et al., 2011; Reese et al., 2009). In short, we can conclude that the individual issue agenda of politicians might be dependent on the autonomy they have over the agenda.

It is also important to note that the three agendas under study are not independent of one another. Research has already shown that there is a reciprocal relationship between for example the media agenda and the twitter agenda of politicians (Conway et al., 2015; Conway-Silva et al., 2018; Harder et al., 2017), but also between the media agenda and the parliamentary agenda of politicians (Sevenans, 2018; Van Aelst & Vliegenthart, 2014). However, this reciprocal influence does not affect the degree of autonomy of the different agendas. Although, politicians on Twitter, for instance, often react to what is happening in the media, they still have the freedom not to do so and address an alternative issue.

In general, we expect that politicians will try to signal their specialization across all of their agendas. Each agenda reaches a partly different audience, therefore, in order to signal their specialization to the largest amount of people, politicians will emphasize specialized issues on all three agendas. Nevertheless, we can expect issue specialization to have the most outspoken influence on the Twitter agenda. On this platform, politicians have the most autonomy to choose what issues they want to address. Since addressing personally ‘owned’ issues can be very beneficial, we expect that issue specialization will have the biggest influence on the Twitter agenda. This leads to the following two hypotheses:

H3: Issue specialization has a positive effect on the issue attention of individual politicians on all three agendas

H4: Issue specialization has the strongest effect on the issue attention of individual politicians on Twitter.

### **3.4 Data and Methods**

Our analyses are based on 144 MPs from the six different parties represented in the (Flemish and federal) parliament (Groen, sp.a, CD&V, Open VLD, N-VA, Vlaams Belang). In total there are 212 Dutch speaking Belgian parliamentarians, but we excluded those that did not have a single document on all of our three agendas (N=18) and the politicians about whom we did not have specialization data (N=48). The remaining politicians had more or less the

same distribution by gender and party as the whole population of Dutch speaking Belgian politicians. The period of analysis is eight months and ranges from January 2018 up until the first of September 2018. During that period all the tweets from our politicians were collected which resulted in a total of 51,691 tweets, which also included the retweets the politician had made. To measure the media agenda of the politicians, we scraped all the online articles from the websites of 13 different Flemish news outlets<sup>15</sup>. We selected the articles where at least one MP was present, which lead to 8857 articles. Finally, the parliamentary agenda of the politicians was constructed by collecting all the written and oral questions, interpellations and legislative proposals. This lead to a total of 12,638 parliamentary documents.

To classify each tweet, article and parliamentary document, we automatically coded all of our recorded data using the Dutch dictionary based on the issue codebook of the Comparative Agenda Project (CAP) (Sevenans et al., 2014). Sevenans and colleagues showed that dictionaries can produce reliable, valid and comparable measures of policy and media agendas. In order to label each text with an issue topic, the number of words from the dictionary was counted in each text. A text was labelled with the issue it had the highest count of words for. For instance, if a text had 10 words from the ‘macroeconomics’ topic and 6 words from the ‘employment’ topic, that text was classified as ‘macroeconomics’. In the case of a tie between issues, multiple topics were assigned to the text with a weight of 1/number of ties. The same dictionary was used for each of the three agendas, to compare the different issues that were present in each of these agendas (see Appendix D for a list of string examples). The CAP master codebook differentiates 28 issue topics, in our dataset only 20 of those topics were present. However, we were not able to automatically attribute an issue code to all documents. Sometimes there was no issue present (e.g. a tweet about a personal topic) or the issue was not clear because there was not enough text or none of the words in the dictionary appeared in the text. This resulted in “non-issue” items that were omitted from our dataset. This is especially the case on Twitter where almost half of the

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<sup>15</sup> We included the following outlets: De Standaard, Het Nieuwsblad, Gazet van Antwerpen, Het Belang van Limburg, De Morgen, Het Laatste Nieuws, De Tijd, Metro, Knack, Trends, Humo, Krant van West-Vlaanderen & De Zondag

tweets are ‘unclassifiable’ in terms of issue code. Often tweets consist of very short messages or replies that cannot be coded even through manual coding. On the other two agendas, the non-codings were significantly lower mainly due to the amount of text in both types of documents. In total 1900 articles (21%) and 3700 parliamentary initiatives (29%) did not receive an issue code. For these types of documents non-codings do not necessarily include non-substantial documents. This indicates one of the drawbacks of using a dictionary approach. It could be the case that our dictionary was not complete enough to capture all current political issue debates and therefore, we were not able to classify the documents. Another possible method of automatically labelling the texts with a certain issue is topic modelling, a more data-driven approach in which topics are based on the words in the text. A topic model discovers the hidden topic structure in a collection of texts. This way every tweet, article and parliamentary initiative should get a topic assigned to it. The problem with this approach, however, is that the discovered topics are defined as a collection of words, without a clear definition. With the CAP dictionary, on the other hand, we start with predefined issues that allow us to make sense of our agendas and to compare them. Therefore, we opted for this approach even though this resulted in a relative large amount of non-codings. Most importantly, however, we believe that the non-coding of documents happens across different issues and therefore does not systematically influence our results<sup>16</sup>.

The specialization of a politician, a central independent variable, can be measured by either looking in which committees politicians are active, which we label as their objective specialization or by directly asking them what their specializations are, which we could call their subjective specialization. In this study, we use subjective specialization and in later analyses we control for objective specialization as a robustness check. Subjective specialization was operationalized as follows: for all the different major CAP codes, members of parliament were asked a yes/no question whether they considered themselves to be an expert on that topic. This data was collected as part of the POLPOP project that

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<sup>16</sup> We performed a manual check on 200 randomly selected documents. This showed that a little over 70% of the non-codings were in fact non-classifiable documents. For the other 30% our dictionary was not able to properly classify the documents.

performed a survey and a follow-up interview with all (Dutch-speaking) parliamentarians elected in either the federal parliament or the Flemish parliament, with a response rate of 75 percent (N=137). The specific wording of the question was: “Politicians’ specialization does not always match their committee memberships. Therefore we would like to ask you in which of the following policy domains you consider yourself to be a specialist. Tick as many domains as you want.”. Table 1 shows how the subjective specialization of politicians is distributed. A little over 70 percent of our politicians is specialized in only three or fewer issues, meaning that our politicians tend to focus on just a select number of issues, rather than trying to work on a whole range of topics (for an overview of the distribution of specialization across parties see Appendix B). As for the objective specialization, we matched the different parliamentary committees to our different issue categories and if politicians were seated in a specific committee we considered them to be experts on that issue.

Table 1: Distribution of subjective specialization (N=137)

Number of specialized issues	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
1	14.6%	14.6%
2	22.6%	37.2%
3	33.6%	70.8%
4	17.5%	88.3%
5 or more	11.6%	100.0%

Issue ownership was operationalized by asking citizens in a survey<sup>17</sup> which party they instinctively thought about when hearing a certain issue. We presented respondents with 11 issues (see appendix S) that appear frequently in the public debate and of which we felt confident a large amount of citizens could link to a certain political party. We used the

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<sup>17</sup> This data was collected as part of the NWS Data project. The survey was performed by Dynata among 1340 Flemish respondents.

percentage of respondents that linked a certain party with the topic; and next gave each politician relative party ownerships scores. For instance, if 32 percent of respondents indicated that they linked party A with education and only three percent with party B, then all of the politicians from party A scored 32 on issue ownership and all those of party B 3 for the topic of education. See appendix S for the exact ownership scores per party. However, this left us with nine issues for which we have not obtained a public attributed degree of ownership. These are more technical policy issues that appear less in the news and which are hard to link to a certain party or ideology, such as spatial planning or housing. We believed that there hardly exists a spontaneous link in the minds of voters between these issues and a certain party. Thus, for these issues we gave all six parties an equal issue ownership share of 16.7 (100% divided by 6 parties).

We also included the total media attention a topic got during our eight months under investigation, in other words, all articles from our 13 news outlets, also the ones where no MP was present. This way we could control for issues that were more in the news and might, therefore, receive more attention from politicians (for an overview of the distribution of issues across the whole media agenda see Appendix A). Finally, the three dependent variables are operationalized as the relative share of attention for an issue on a politician's individual Twitter agenda, media agenda and parliamentary agenda. This means that we first divided the number of tweets/initiatives/articles that contained a certain issue by the total number of tweets /initiatives/articles of that politician. Then we multiplied it by 100 to get the share of attention for that specific issue. The higher the share, the more emphasis was put on that issue on that specific agenda.

### **3.5 Results**

Our results section is divided into a descriptive section and an explanatory section. In the descriptive section, we try to get a better idea of the differences and similarities between our different agendas on the aggregate level, as well as exploring the individual issue agendas of politicians. Next, in the explanatory section, we perform multilevel regressions on the share of attention an issue got on Twitter, in the media and in parliament. This enabled us to see which factors explain the individual issue attention of politicians.

### 3.5.1 Descriptive analysis

First, we used Pearson correlations to compare the overlap between the individual Twitter, media and parliamentary agenda of politicians. Table 2 shows that there is a positive correlation between all of our agendas, meaning that the share of attention politicians give to an issue on one agenda is to a large degree related to the share of attention they give to that issue on the other agendas. This indicates that, on the individual level, the rank order of issues runs parallel. This is largely similar to the aggregated share of attention each issue gets on the three individual agendas under study, which can be seen in appendix E.

Table 2: Individual Agenda correlation

	Media	Twitter	Parliament
Media	1	-	-
Twitter	0.46***	1	-
Parliament	0.46***	0.64***	1

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

Next, to get a better understanding of how diverse or rather concentrated the individual agendas of our politicians are, we calculated the Herfindahl index for all our politicians on each of the three agendas. We then calculated the mean Herfindahl for each agenda to see which agenda was the most concentrated. The Herfindahl index is a measurement that ranges from 0 to 1, the closer the index is to 1, the higher the concentration is. For individual politicians the mean Herfindahl indexes range from 0.22 on the Twitter agenda, over 0.32 on the parliamentary agenda to 0.39 on the media agenda. This means that the attention on Twitter is more distributed across multiple issues, while politicians only tend to make it into the news with a select number of issues. The attention in parliament is situated between Twitter and the media. When comparing different types of politicians, those with the lowest Herfindahls scores are the party leaders. In particular their media agenda is very much spread across issues suggesting that party leaders are expected to react to a great deal of issues in the news.

### 3.5.2 Explanatory analysis

As a first way to check if specialized politicians indeed differ from their party colleagues, we calculated the average party attention for each issue on each agenda. Next, we calculated the absolute difference between the attention the individual politician had for an issue on an agenda and the attention all members of the same party had on that agenda. Finally, we used a t-test to investigate if the difference between the party attention and the attention of individual politicians was larger for issues they were specialized in or not. This appeared to be the case, on each of our three agendas the differences between party and individual politician significantly increased for specialized issues. Table 3 **Fout! Verwijzingsbron niet gevonden.** shows that the average difference between a party and an individual politician increases with 7.8 percent on the media agenda, with 6.2 percent on the Twitter agenda and with 7.8 percent on the parliamentary agenda.

Table 3: T-test for individual attention vs. average party attention on specialized issues

	Specialized	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	p
Media	No	2452	5.55	7.95	.00
	Yes	428	13.32	19.03	
Twitter	No	2452	3.67	4.45	.00
	Yes	428	9.85	14.21	
Parliament	No	2452	5.89	8.07	.00
	Yes	428	13.71	19.15	

To find out which factors influence the issue attention of individual politicians, we conducted three cross-classified multilevel regressions on the share of attention an issue received on each of the three agendas. In model 1, the share of attention on the media attention was the dependent variable, in model 2 the attention on the Twitter agenda and in model 3 the attention on the parliamentary agenda. To test our hypotheses, the specialization of the politicians and the ownership of the issue by the party were included as central independent variables.

Our findings in Table 4 show that issue specialization has a positive effect across all agendas, confirming hypothesis 2 and 3. This means that politicians who indicate that they are specialized in an issue will spend a larger share of their attention on that topic than politicians who are not specialized in that issue. Concretely, we find that politicians will direct more of their tweets and parliamentary work towards issues they are specialized in. Additionally, specializing in an issue also helps to get into the news with that topic. We find the same positive effects when using objective specialization instead of subjective specialization (see appendix C), confirming our initial findings.

Next, the effect of issue ownership seems less outspoken and differs widely across agendas. A bit surprisingly, issue ownership has a clear significant effect on the Twitter agenda, where politicians are believed to be the most autonomous. This suggests that on Twitter politicians stress not only their own issues, but also the issues owned by their party. One potential explanation is that politicians can support their colleagues and the party by retweeting their messages. Alternatively, it might be that politicians want to present themselves as loyal party members and want to make a good impression on the party leadership. Next, issue ownership has no effect on the media agenda. This means that if the party owns an issue, it does not help all the politicians of that party to get into the media with that topic. Journalists prefer to let only the party specialist or the party leader speak on that issue.

Furthermore, issue ownership also does not encourage politicians to spend a greater share of their parliamentary work on those issues. Here we even find a modest negative effect that suggest that members of parliament in their daily work are less guided by the parties issues. How can this be explained? First, it seems to confirm the idea of the division of labour that mainly manifests itself on the parliamentary agenda. Second, the negative effect might, at least in the case of government parties, be influenced by the role of ministers. Government parties try to strengthen their issue reputation by obtaining cabinet positions on the issues they own. As a consequence, however, politicians of that party cannot profile themselves on the same issue. Asking parliamentary questions to the minister of their own party is unusual, and taking parliamentary initiatives is difficult as the minister tries to develop its own policy. Overall, we have to reject hypothesis 1 stating that issue ownership is driving the selective issue attention of politicians, except in the case of Twitter.



Apart from our main independent variables, we also included several control variables. First, we added the amount of attention the individual politicians had for the issue on the other two agendas. This largely confirms the results of the aggregate correlation analysis. Namely, that the three agendas all positively influence each other and thus, that politicians do try to push the same issues on all agendas. Second, we included party dummies to all our models to control for variation on the party level. None of these variables are significant, suggesting that our findings are across the board and not influenced by specific party strategies. Lastly, we added the total media attention to our analyses to control for issue fluctuations in the broader media debate. Here we can see that the total media attention only has a positive effect on the media agenda of politicians, but not on the other two agendas. The main reason for this is probably that the effect of the total media agenda is already largely encapsulated in the media agenda of politicians because the individual media agenda and total media agenda are highly similar.

Finally, we also conducted two robustness checks, presented in appendix G. As a first check, we ran our multilevel regressions without the attention of the other two agendas. It was possible that the attention for an issue on the other two agendas suppressed the effects of our other independent variables. This appears hardly to be the case, the only difference is that issue ownership no longer has a significant (negative) effect on our parliamentary agenda. Second, we control for the total amount of tweets, articles or parliamentary initiatives of a politician. Because we are working with relative shares, the absolute number of documents can inflate the relative attention politicians have for an issue. Therefore, we include the total number of tweets, articles and initiatives in our model and created an interaction variable with issue specialization. Again, we see no change in our results, issue specialization does not have a different effect for politicians with different activity rates.

Table 4: Multi-level regression on individual issue attention on three different agendas

	Model 1: Media agenda	Model 2: Twitter agenda	Model 3: Parliamentary agenda
Specialization	2.60***	3.37***	5.77***
Issue ownership	-0.02	0.05***	-0.03*
Media		.22***	.23***
Twitter	.52***		.46***
Parliament	.30***	.26***	
Party (ref=N-VA)			
Open VLD	-0.55	0.63	-0.08
CD&V	0.19	-0.03	-0.35
Sp.a	0.03	-0.02	0.04
Groen	-0.54	0.51	0.07
Vlaams Belang	-1.09	0.84	-0.22
Total media attention	0.25**	0.08	0.09
Intercept	-.16	.41	.86
N (total)	2900	2900	2900
N (Politicians)	144	144	144
AIC	21724,04	19263,35	20946,32

\*p&lt;.05; \*\*p&lt;.01; \*\*\*p&lt;.001

### 3.6 Conclusion

Inspired by research on the selective issue emphasis of political parties, this study focused on the issue strategies of individual politicians. More than ever, individual politicians have

the opportunity for more personal visibility and vote-seeking strategies to differentiate themselves from politicians from other parties as well as their colleagues from their own party. Therefore, the first aim of this study was to find out if individual politicians focus more on issues they are specialized in or whether issue ownership of parties is driving the issue emphasis of individual politicians. It turned out that both matter, but issue specialization clearly trumps issue ownership. We found that issue specialization has an outspoken impact on the issue attention of politicians. The share of attention politicians pay to an issue goes up if politicians indicate that they are specialized in that topic. Additionally, we also found significant effects of issue ownership, but that effect was not consistent across all of our three different agendas.

This brings us to the second aim of the paper, which is to investigate on what platform or arena this individual issue agenda is most present. First of all, we find that there is a large overlap between our three individual agendas. If the attention of politicians for an issue is high on one agenda, the attention for that issue is also high on their other two agendas. Therefore, politicians are, to a certain extent, consistent across their different agendas. This means that politicians try to reinforce their issue profile by communicating about the same issues across all of their agendas.

For issue specialization the picture is clear and consistent: politicians try to signal or highlight their specialization through all of their communication channels and in all arenas. This indicates that politicians recognize the benefits of being regarded as a specialist on an issue. By signaling their expertise to journalists, to the party selectorate and to voters directly politicians are able to build some sort of individual issue ownership. Probably this personal issue reputation is mutual enforced by external communication and performance on the different agendas. For instance, if politicians build a strong reputation on a certain issue in parliament and on twitter they will be able to get into the media more easily on this topic. This media visibility, in turn, could help politicians to get the attention of both voters and the party leadership and strengthen the electoral or parliamentary position of the politician. We must note, however, that the effect of issue specialization seems to be equally strong on all three agendas. Thus, suggesting that our assumption (H4) that the more autonomous the agenda, the stronger the effect of issue specialization is not confirmed.

Issue ownership, on the other hand, produces mixed effects, as it does not seem to affect all individual political agendas the same way. First of all, issue ownership has a positive effect on the issue attention of politicians on Twitter. The more an issue is linked to a party in the minds of voters, the more that members of that party will stress those issues on their personal Twitter accounts. This suggests that politicians use the issue ownership of their party to profile themselves at the expense of politicians from other parties. Secondly, we find no effect of issue ownership on the media agenda of politicians. It seems like issue ownership does not help all politicians of the party to get into the media. Most likely, journalists prefer to let the party specialists and party leaders speak about the owned issues. Finally, issue ownership has a negative effect on the individual parliamentary agenda of politicians. This confirms the idea that in parliament there is a strong division of labour. It does not matter if the issues are owned or not, in parliament politicians work on the issues the party has assigned them to. The negative effect of issue ownership might be, in the case of government parties, be explained by the role of ministers. When a minister is responsible for a certain policy area, the other members of that party are not able to shape the parties' position on that issue, thus, taking parliamentary initiatives becomes difficult. Moreover, it is unconventional of politicians to ask parliamentary questions to the minister of their own party. Therefore, attention for owned issues might be lower on the parliamentary agenda.

In sum, we can conclude that politicians' issue agenda is mainly driven by their personal specialization. However, the case of the Twitter agenda shows that politicians are not solely driven by either individual or party characteristics. On the agenda over which they have the highest autonomy, we see that politicians stress a whole range of issues, combining the ones they are specialized in and the ones their party owns. This means that issue specialization and issue ownership are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Probably it is even the most opportune strategy for politicians: signal their individual expertise, and show their party loyalty at the same time.

To fully understand the reasoning behind the issue strategy of politicians, we need further research using different methods. For instance, so far it is unclear whether politicians focus on issues because of strategical reasons or rather because of their personal interests. In-depth interviews with MPs might be more suited to fully grasp why politicians post more about

certain topics than others. Also the role of the political context and the influence of certain external events on the issue strategies of politicians has been left unexplored. To fully understand the dynamics between the different agendas of politicians, future research should include more advanced analyses with a time component. This would allow us to see how the individual Twitter, media and parliamentary agenda interact with each other. Furthermore, in a next phase, it could be valuable to go more-in-depth and see if specialization could have a stronger effect for some issues than for others. The issue effects might also be depended on the type and nature of each agenda. Some channels might be more suited for some type of issues. For instance, more complex and technical issues might be harder to fully address in 280 characters and therefore be less prevalent on the Twitter agenda.

Finally, as a next step it is relevant to see if politicians' efforts are fruitful, that is if signaling their specialization to voters actually works. Looking at the effects of issue specialization on a politician's reputation or success could indicate whether or not the specialization of politicians matters directly for voters. Therefore, studying underlining motives, time dynamics, issue type and effects of issue specialization on politicians efforts are four potential avenues for future research. We hope this study can be a source of inspiration that showed that it is possible and relevant to focus on the individual agenda of politicians in the digital age.

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## Issue specialization and politicians' posts on social media

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### 4.1 Introduction

*In the previous chapter, we uncovered what the issue attention of politicians is on social media. We discerned multiple patterns based on which politicians make their selection of the issues they want to stress. Largely it showed that issue specialization drives the issue attention of politicians. In this chapter, I want to dive deeper into the motivations of politicians behind these patterns that we observed.*

A crucial part of politics revolves around issues. Both issue positioning and issue attention form the core of parties' and politicians' strategic decision making (Wagner & Meyer, 2014). The dominant (Downsian) view of how different political actors compete with one another was for a long time that parties position themselves on a whole range of policy issues and that voters then can decide which parties' ideology matches closest to their own and vote for that party (Downs, 1957; Thesen et al., 2017). However, Robertson (1976) posited the claim that political competition was not solely providing different viewpoints on a left-right scale, it was also a contest of which issues receive attention and which do not. Parties do not necessarily compete with one another on the same issues. Parties try to alter their issue attention strategies to focus on issues where they have an advantage over other parties. This is called issue competition (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2007). Therefore, in order to understand the competition between political parties, we need to look at a combination of issue positioning and issue attention.

As the previous chapter has shown, the rise of social media in politics has made it especially easy for political actors to be very selective in the issues they pay attention to because on social media, almost no institutional constraints tell political actors which issues they should talk about. That is why in recent years, more and more of a focus has been on the issue attention of political actors and parties in particular. When it comes to parties' issue attention,

research has indicated that there are two partly overlapping strategies that parties predominantly use. They tend to focus on the issues they own and try to ‘ride the wave’ of public and media attention (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994; Petrocik et al., 2003; Wagner & Meyer, 2014). Additionally, both Wagner and Meyer (2014) and Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010) found differences based on the party configuration, where opposition parties are more able to focus on the issues that they prefer and are advantageous to them while governing parties do not have that luxury as they have to deal with the day-to-day problems that face society.

We already know a lot about parties’ issues attention strategies, but we know remarkably little about the issue agenda of individual politicians. However, in this day and age of politics, we see a shift, for instance, in media attention, from a focus on the party to a focus on individual politicians. This is what Van Aelst et al. (2012) call the ‘individualisation of politics’. It is also easier for voters to build a connection with an individual instead of a more abstract party, which, in some countries, has resulted in individual politicians becoming more important for the vote choice of citizens (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007; Takens et al., 2015). Thus, studying individual politicians and not solely political parties is crucial. The previous chapter, however, is one of the few studies on this topic. We discovered that especially issue specialisation is a consistent and strong driver of politicians’ issue attention. In other words, politicians seem to mostly concern themselves with talking about issues that they are specialised in.

However, we do not know the reasoning behind this behaviour of politicians. By looking at their behaviour or its outcome, we can only speculate about their motivations. That is why in this exploratory research, we asked politicians directly about their social media strategies and why they chose to post about the topics that they specialised in. As was just mentioned, individual politicians are more and more becoming the central actors in politics at the expense of political parties. This becomes only more evident when we compare followers on social media. For the two biggest Flemish parties, the party president has more followers

on Twitter than the account of the party<sup>18</sup>. This means that it is important to understand the behaviour of individual politicians as they are now very much impacting politics.

To better understand the behaviour of politicians, I conducted twelve elite reconstructive interviews with Flemish politicians from six parties. Moreover, I used the innovative approach of photo-elicitation by showing politicians actual social media messages that they posted, which resulted in politicians giving more detailed responses as to why they posted about a specific event or issue. This technique allowed me to uncover four different motivations as to why politicians tend to mostly post about the topics that they own on social media. First, *Issue profile* means that politicians try to establish a track record on the issues that they are specialised in and signal their expertise to the world. Second, *Party Arrangements* indicates the internal structure of parties which pushes politicians to talk about the issues that they are specialised in. Third, *Routine & Comfort* entails that politicians feel that they frequently have to update their followers and are most at ease talking about the topics they are specialised and most interested in. Finally, *Window of Opportunity* means that politicians, for instance, often scan newspapers to capitalise on an increased amount of salience for their specialised issues.

## 4.2 Theory

### 4.2.1 Issue competition across parties

A core element of politics is competition. The view on the nature of this so-called political competition is something that has been debated in the literature (Binzer Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008). The earliest (Downsian) view of political competition was that parties compete on the same issues where they both present their diverging viewpoints. Voters then choose the closest party to their ideal point on those issues (Downs, 1957). However, later work stresses the fact that parties do not compete on the same issues; but rather emphasise certain specific issues that benefit their party (see, e.g. Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996;

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<sup>18</sup> For N-VA: party account has 79,000 followers and their president has 175,200 followers. For Vlaams Belang: party account has 32,500 followers and their president has 37,000 followers.

Robertson, 1976). According to the latter theory, if a certain topic is salient, it will benefit one specific party, resulting in parties trying to increase saliency for their preferred issues. For instance, Budge and Farlie (1983) argue that some issues are more favourable to left parties, such as unemployment or social welfare, while others favour right parties, such as inflation. Petrocik (1996) further develops this idea and stresses that certain parties can actually ‘own’ specific issues. A party owns an issue when that party is seen as the best one to handle that problem by the public. Moreover, Walgrave et al. (2012) point to the fact that a mere association or link between a party and an issue in the minds of voters is enough for that party to own that issue. If then, in the run-up to an election, an issue that a party owns becomes salient in the news media, that party will benefit greatly because the issue will be more top of mind for voters when they make their choice at the ballot box (Thesen et al., 2017). Thus, parties will want to make sure their preferred issues receive a lot of media attention and stressing that issue can help in this regard.

However, political competition does not happen in a closed-off vacuum. Political actors are forced to respond to the political surroundings and daily (unexpected) events that happen in society (Meijers & van der Veer, 2019). We could thus say that political actors do not have full control over their issue agenda. This ties into the agenda-setting literature. In the agenda-setting literature, an agenda is the notion that at any given moment in time, there is a hierarchy of issues to which the relevant actors then have to pay attention, while at the same time, they are competing about the future hierarchy of these issues (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010). Thus, this hierarchy limits political actors in the sense that they must address issues that are high up on the agenda whether they want to or not. However, not every political actor is equally constrained by this hierarchy of issues. Previous research has, more than once, shown that the political configuration (i.e. government versus opposition) matters in this regard. While opposition parties are much freer to focus on whatever issues they want, governing parties much more often have to deal with the day to day problems, seeing as they are the ones who need to solve them. Governing parties can be held responsible for societal problems because they should have policy tools to resolve them, while opposition parties cannot be held responsible for policy solutions (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Wagner & Meyer, 2014). All in all, this results in a reciprocal relationship

between the actors and the agenda. On the one hand, actors will want to introduce new issues that are beneficial to them onto the agenda, but on the other hand, they will have to pay attention to the already existing issues that are on the agenda. Being able to ‘set the agenda’ is thus very crucial. If you can decide which issues all political actors have to pay attention to, you will be able to steer attention towards your preferred issues, and away from issues, you do not want to talk about.

However, this notion of an agenda does not solely exist in a political context. Indeed, there are many more agendas, such as the media agenda and the public agenda. Respectively, they describe the hierarchical issue importance of the media actors and the general public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). These three agendas impact one another, as the saliency of an issue can travel from one agenda to the other, which is known as agenda-setting. When the media cover specific issues very intensively, it will become more important in the minds of the public, which McCombs and Shaw first described in 1972. There also exists extensive literature devoted to the effects of the media agenda on the political agenda, often called political agenda-setting. When parties actually do pay attention to issues that are salient in the news, this is called ‘riding the wave’ (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994).

#### **4.2.2 Individual issue attention**

Social media have given individual politicians tools to have a more individualised communication, and in turn, it is easier for politicians to employ a selective issue emphasis communication strategy. On social media, politicians have a large amount of autonomy to decide which issues they want to talk about and which ones they want to largely ignore, especially compared to, for instance, which issues politicians can cover during question time in parliament (De Winter & Dumont, 2000). On social media, politicians are much freer to talk about the issues that they want, as long as they adhere to the official party standpoints. There has been research into politicians’ behaviour on social media. Some scholars investigated how often politicians post about their private life (Graham et al., 2018), others how citizens’ expectations shape the social media messages of politicians (Kelm, 2020), and some studies dive into if politicians’ issue attention is dictated by the publics’ issue attention (Barberá et al., 2019). However, what are the issues that politicians choose to talk about?

We know that the social media context has facilitated competition between individual politicians. As the previous chapter has shown, issue competition through selective issue emphasis is also applicable to individual politicians. Politicians will try to bind an issue to themselves by stressing specific issues in their communication. They argue that politicians compete with politicians from other parties, as well as members of their party, resulting in politicians paying attention to the issues that their party owns, but more importantly, to the topics that are they specialised in. The same pattern emerges when we look at another type of communication where politicians have a lot of autonomy, namely press releases. Huber et al. (2020) and Meyer and Wagner (2021) study the issue attention of politicians in their press releases. They point to the division of labour in parliament, which forces politicians to specialise and that politicians will interact with politicians from the same committees as them. This results in them finding that MPs primarily choose to talk about the issues they specialise in. In other words, if politicians are free from any restraints, they will prioritise their attention on their specialised issues.

Research has also indicated that politicians readily make use of this opportunity to freely choose which issues they talk about. Social media adoption nowadays is widespread among all politicians. For instance, in Germany, Schmidt (2017) found that 96 percent of national parliamentarians were on Facebook and almost 70 percent were on Twitter, and in their comprehensive study on the adoption of politicians worldwide, Hama and Školník (2021) show that in Western Europe the adoption of Twitter among politicians is very high. For our Belgian case, Praet et al. (2021) indicate that almost 90 percent of politicians are on Twitter. This entails that politicians on social media are not the exception but rather the rule (Kelm, 2020; Schmidt, 2017).

Nevertheless, we know little about politicians' motivations to post about the issues that they specialise in. As mentioned earlier, Kelm (2020) shows that politicians adapt their online communication to what their followers expect of them or what they think their followers expect of them. This resulted in politicians discussing more with others, motivating others, or criticising others. Additionally, Barberá et al. (2019) found that politicians are more likely to be influenced by the issue priorities of the public than the other way around. This again



points to the fact that the public heavily influences politicians' behaviour. However, the downside of a lot of studies explaining the behaviour of politicians is that they only observe the behaviour and consequently mostly speculate on the reasoning behind why politicians focus on their issue of specialisation. For instance, social media have been attributed to bridging the gap between politicians and citizens since politicians can interact with their followers on social media (Coleman & Blumler, 2009). We can observe how often politicians effectively interact with regular citizens on social media. Yet, this does not tell us if politicians do this as a strategy to appear responsive or if they do this because they want to listen to citizens.

To fully understand the motivations of politicians, more qualitative research methods might be needed, such as interviews. Yet, only a handful of studies have done interviews with politicians and social media managers of parties on the social media use by politicians. For instance, Spierings and Jacobs (2019) found several motivations for politicians' general use of social media. Directly reaching out to voters and getting attention from politicians are important motivations, just as monitoring journalists and appearing responsive. Additionally, Ross and Bürger (2014) noted in their interviews that visibility and appearing 'hip' were important drivers for politicians to be active on social media (for other studies see for example Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Kalsnes, 2016). This still leaves us with the question of what politicians' motivations are for choosing certain topics or events to post about on social media over others. As mentioned earlier, we know from studying their behaviour online that politicians more often post about the topics they are specialised in and the topics that their party owns (Huber et al., 2020; Meyer & Wagner, 2021). In the previous chapter, we argue that this might be the case because they want to signal their expertise to the media, the selectorate and the public and communicating consistently about the issue helps in getting that message across. However, do politicians actually also see it that way? Or do politicians have other motivations for posting about the topics that they are specialised in? Seeing as politicians can actually influence the media agenda and, thus, in turn, the public agenda with their social media messages (see e.g. Harder et al., 2017), it is relevant to know why politicians choose to pay attention to certain issues. Are their reasons strategic, spontaneous or something else entirely? Because little is known about the motivations why

politicians favour posting about specialised topics over other topics, I formulate a research question:

RQ: What are the motivations of politicians for posting about their specialised topics?

### **4.3 Data & Methods**

To answer the research questions of this paper, I will focus on the Flemish (Belgian) case. Belgium provides us with an interesting situation; it can be classified as a flexible list system with both a federal and regional level. This means that Belgian voters can either vote for the party list or they can vote for one or several individual candidates within one list (Deschouwer, 2009). Afterwards, seats are allocated in a two-step procedure: first, seats are divided between parties and secondly, seats are allocated within the party based on personal votes and party votes. This means that there is an incentive for individual politicians to exhibit personal vote-seeking behaviour (Bräuninger et al., 2012). However, Belgium is also characterised as a partitocracy, which means that politicians are still very much dictated by their parties on how to act, e.g. when it comes to their voting behaviour (De Winter, 1996). Focusing in this context on how issue specialisation impacts the individual communication strategies of politicians on social media provides us with an interesting case. If I find effects in the Belgian case where the party and party presidents are still the most important political actors, then it is likely that these are also applicable to contexts where there is a more personalised centred political system, such as systems with single-member districts.

To examine how specialisation impacts the social media behaviour of politicians, this study is based on data obtained from twelve elite interviews. The sample contains two politicians from every major Flemish party (CD&V, Groen, N-VA, Open VLD, Vooruit, Vlaams Belang). Of the twelve participants, eight were members of the federal parliament, and four were members of the Flemish parliament. The politicians were selected based on their social media activity and degree of specialisation. Only politicians who posted regularly on social media (at least a couple of times per week on Facebook and Twitter) were considered for this study. Next, I tried to include one politician with a more specialist profile and one with

a more generalist profile from each party. This was based on data from the POLPOP project<sup>19</sup> that had performed a survey and follow-up interviews with all (Dutch-speaking) parliamentarians elected in either the federal parliament or the Flemish parliament with a response rate of 75 percent (N = 137). In these POLPOP interviews, politicians were asked if they considered themselves a specialist in a wide range of topics, and they could indicate yes or no. Politicians who indicated that they were specialised in more than three topics were considered to have a more generalist profile. Additionally, I tried to include politicians that are specialised in different issues to make sure that certain findings do not only pertain to specific issues. Politicians were invited via e-mail, and almost all politicians agreed to participate. Only for two politicians, a replacement had to be found.

The interviews took place online between the first of March 2021 and the second of April 2021. All the interviews were between half an hour and one hour long. The interviews were semi-structured, with main questions and follow-up questions. I opted to use reconstruction interviews, where a main part of the interview consisted of me sharing five screenshots of actual social media messages the interviewee had made a maximum of two months before the interview took place. Posts from the Twitter, Facebook and Instagram profiles of the politicians were selected<sup>20</sup>. Only posts that were made by the politicians themselves were chosen; retweets or shared Facebook posts were not eligible. A couple of characteristics were present in all groups of selected posts of the politicians. There was at least one post that contained a shared newspaper article, there was at least one post about the specialised topic of the politician, there was at least one post that got relatively high audience engagement, and there was at least one post that underperformed in terms of audience engagement. Using this photo-elicitation method resulted in garnering more detailed comments and more specific questions that could be asked, such as looking up beforehand what else happened on the same day and asking them why they did not post about that. Additionally, focusing on very specific cases reduced the number of abstract answers and helped in reducing social

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<sup>19</sup> The POLPOP project led by Stefaan Walgrave investigated Politicians' perceptions of public opinion in 10 different countries

<sup>20</sup> Only posts from the publically available Facebook page were selected, not from their personal profile.

desirability. All interviews were conducted by one researcher who used the same protocol for every interview.

All interviews started in the same way; I briefly introduced the purpose and again asked for their consent to record the interview. I explained that the interview would consist of two parts and that we would be starting with general questions before heading over to the part where we looked at the social media posts they made. In every interview, all general questions were asked (not all in the same order). The general questions can be found in Appendix J. In the second part of the interview, I confronted the politicians with actual social media posts that they had made in the last two months, which we collected from their Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages. Here I prepared some guiding questions that could be asked, but the interviewees were able to talk about what they wanted. The prepared questions were also a tool to steer the conversations back to the topic at hand when the interviewees would deviate too much from the overall aim of the study. Nevertheless, for each post, there was one question that was always asked, namely why they chose to post about this specific topic or event, with some follow-up questions that could (but not necessarily) be asked. See the appendix for the list of (potential) questions we prepared for the second part of the interviews.

To analyse the data, all transcriptions of the interviews were coded in NVIVO using a codebook. The codebook was comprised of both theory-driven codes as well as data-driven codes (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). The theory-driven codes mostly consisted of those about, for instance, issue ownership and questions about audience engagement. An overview of the full codebook can be found in Appendix I. The categories were not mutually exclusive, and one answer could be coded into multiple codes if need be. The codebook allowed me to find patterns in the answers that the politicians gave across all interviews.

## **4.4 Results**

At the beginning of the interviews, all the MP's that were questioned were asked about how frequently they use social media. We made a distinction between just scrolling and posting something themselves. Politicians could choose between 'never', 'monthly', 'weekly',

‘daily’ or ‘multiple times per day’. All 12 politicians indicated that they scroll multiple times per day on Facebook, 10 of them scroll multiple times per day on Twitter (the other two indicated ‘daily’), and 7 politicians said that they went on Instagram multiple times per day (3 indicated ‘daily’, 1 ‘weekly’ and 1 ‘monthly’). Politicians do seem to be very active observers of social media, checking in often. One politician described this as follows:

*“It is really an addiction, and it is a source of information, of course.”*

*Male MP, generalist, interview 10*

With regards to posting something, most politicians indicate that they either post weekly or daily on social media, some even saying they posted multiple times per day on some platforms. At the start of the interviews, we explained the distinction between specialists and generalists to the politicians and asked them which of the two descriptions they thought fit them best. This question was not only meant to check if the predetermined division was correct but also to get a better understanding of how politicians see the distinction themselves. This question was not evident for most politicians to answer; they indicated that the policy level where they were active determined if they were more a specialist or a generalist. Often politicians indicated that on the local, municipal level, they were generalists and that on the federal or regional level, they were specialists. Some exemplary quotes were selected:

*“On the local level, I am a generalist, and on the Flemish level, I am a specialist.”*

*Male MP, Generalist, Interview 3*

*“I find it very difficult to choose one of the two. Why? Because my function as an MP is different from my function as a local party group leader.”*

*Female MP, Generalist, Interview 12*

In that sense, there is an overlap that makes it difficult to fully determine if a politician is a generalist or a specialist. However, all politicians did, in the end, choose one of the two, which was used for the classification of the twelve politicians. The political reality forces regular MPs to specialise since they are seated in specific committees in parliament and that you focus in the first place on the issues of the committees you are seated in. Consequently, The politicians that said that they thought of themselves as generalists did proceed to mention what their specialisations in parliament were, which always coincided with the committees in which they were active. Politicians did indicate that within their party, they were able to be more of a generalist, but to the outside world and in parliament, they had to focus on their specialisations. Multiple politicians noted that a generalist profile is something that is mostly attributed to people in the ‘upper ranks’ of the party. Hence, we could say that the generalists par excellence are the party leaders and the PPG leaders. Backbenchers in parliament do not have the luxury to start focussing on a whole range of topics. Two politicians summarised this very nicely:

*“Intra-parliamentary the basis of our working is a division of labour and everyone within a PPG, the quote-unquote “regular MP’s”, only work on a small number of topics. [ ] You also notice that it is very hard for other MP’s to maintain a more generalist profile next to the PPG leaders, who should be the generalists par excellence.”*

*Male MP, Generalist, Interview 9*

*“I also have lots of ideas and thoughts about the things that happen around me that are not part of my specialisation, strictly speaking. [ ] But I try to restrict myself to the issues that I am specialised in, and I should communicate about them even more because I even miss opportunities to post about them on social media at the moment.”*

*Male MP, Specialist, Interview 8*

This actually implies that there was no distinction between the two types of politicians and that all interviewees had multiple issues that they were specialised in. This leads us to the main research question of this paper that focuses on politicians posting about the issues they are specialised in, namely what the motivations are for politicians to post about these specific issues. Based on the analysis of the coding of the twelve interviews, I saw roughly four motivations emerging that help to explain why politicians post about the topics that they are specialised in. Two motivations were mentioned in all interviews, namely **Party arrangements** and **Issue profile**; next to those two, I was able to discern **Routine & Comfort** and **Window of opportunity** as two additional motivations.

#### **4.4.1 Building and maintaining an issue profile**

The first reason why politicians talk about their specialised issues is issue profile. This motivation was most prominent in all interviews, both in how often it was mentioned and what first came to mind. During the interviews, I noticed two patterns emerging regarding issue profile. This led me to the conclusion that issue profile has two dimensions: offensive and defensive. These two often happen next to each other. First, I will elaborate on the offensive side. Several interviewees mentioned the importance of trying to stand out among the other MPs by networking with relevant actors in the field of your specialization, so these people know who to contact. All politicians indicated that it is important to talk about their work to *claim an issue* and showcase what their specialisations are. In that sense, politicians try to build an issue profile for themselves on social media. We can link this back to the theory of issue ownership. In their heads, voters link a certain party with a specific issue. This link is established by a long tradition of paying attention to the issue. The party is seen as the best to handle the issue, and it is consequently beneficial for the party if that issue becomes salient during an election period. My interviews show that individual politicians try to do this as well. By consistently posting about an issue, they want to showcase that they are tackling the issue and try to associate themselves with the issue in the long run.

*“Yes, most politicians have their own specific topics, but that’s also a bit logical, I think, that you try to profile yourself on certain topics and that that also comes back... That people know what they can link you to.”*

*Female MP, Specialist, Interview 4*

*“Of course, there are 150 members of parliament in the Federal Parliament, [ ] and there are 124 more in the Flemish Parliament, so if you want to stand out from that group and want to mean something, or let’s say you want to be approached more than all the rest about a topic, then you have to try in one way or another to get out there [ ].”*

*Male MP, Specialist, Interview 1*

*“Yes, that must be partly the image that remains at the end of the day, I think. I don’t think it has to be specifically in which committees we sit, but definitely which issues we tackle.”*

*Male MP, Generalist, Interview 9*

During the interviews, it emerged that claiming an issue and showcasing their specialisation by posting a lot about it has important advantages for politicians. Some politicians mention that it boosts their credibility. The politicians talk about how if you are recognised as the specialist on an issue, then if they say something about that issue, citizens will be more inclined to believe it. Second, multiple interviewees mention the benefit that it can lead to more visibility as journalists will contact them as specialists, and this visibility leads to more name recognition. Some exemplary quotes underscore the importance of credibility and visibility:

*“You also have to make sure that your image, in the long run, is that you have been working on the topic and are still working on it, so that people in the ‘scene’, also journalists that follow you, do not forget that you are the one who tackled this. That only increases your credibility in the long run.”*

*Male MP, Generalist, Interview 9*



*“And also, of course, I tried multiple times to take my story to specific journalists and the like so that they know what I am doing and know that they have a point of contact. That makes it sometimes easier for people to find me and contact me and such. Once you are at that stage, it becomes easier for the sector [ ] and interest groups to find you and to enter into a discussion.”*

*Male MP, Specialist, Interview 1*

*“I think that if people associate you with certain topics, it means that people will know how to find you and that they can see that you are tackling it.”*

*Female MP, Generalist, Interview 12*

Additionally, the politicians mentioned that the news media helps a lot. Each politician was shown a social media post of a news article that they shared. I asked them what they thought the benefits were of doing this. Almost all politicians gave a similar response: appearing in the news is a direct result of being regarded as a specialist in a certain issue, and it helps in signalling their expertise to the general public. If a politician is quoted in a newspaper article, it legitimises what they are saying as well as indicates its relevance and reaffirms their status as an expert. This is the most important driver the twelve politicians mentioned why they often share a newspaper article in which they appear. This also includes showcasing what they are working on in parliament to give it more exposure because they feel that otherwise, citizens would not know about certain initiatives they undertook in parliament. For instance, one politician mentioned that he wanted to showcase the media appearance he made as a result of a bill that he had proposed in parliament. The other quotes exemplify the legitimization and credibility aspect of the media:

*“That was a good way to draw attention to the bill I was proposing. And if you then have a media appearance about it, I think you have to [ ] show it everywhere, also on your social media.”*

*Male MP, Specialist, Interview 2*

*“I am also convinced that if you share an article, you can give more credibility to your statements or opinions as a politician.”*

*Male MP, Generalist, Interview 9*

*“It’s a kind of authority argument; if you have been in the newspaper, then it is relevant.”*

*Male MP, Generalist, Interview 7*

The whole argument of the issue profile rests on the assumption that citizens know which issues politicians are specialised in. When I asked the interviewees: do you think the public knows which issues you are specialized in? I got the same response from almost all politicians. All interviewees have the idea that the people who follow them on social media are aware of this issue profile. When asked to what extent they thought that their specialisations are known by the public and their social media followers, one politician mentioned that it is impossible to miss if you look at her social media page. This is a sentiment that comes up in almost all interviews: the broader public does not know what they are working on, but their followers on social media certainly do.

*“I generally think that my followers know that. It is hard to miss, of course, if you look at my social media.”*

*Female MP, Specialist, Interview 4*

*“I think that the people who follow me on social media will know that. I am sure of it. [ ]  
But to what extent that is known with the broader public, I wouldn’t bet on it.”*

*Male MP, Specialist, Interview 2*

As mentioned, this offensive issue profile is only one of two dimensions that I detected in the responses from the politicians. The second pattern of responses connected back to politicians making sure that they can maintain their issue profile. During the interviews, I noticed how much importance politicians attach to impression management. Most

interviewees told me how they often post about the issues they are working on because they feel that they have to, that it is expected of them and that they actively think how it would come across to others when they do not. The interviewees indicated that they feel that certain interest or societal groups or other actors would find it weird if something happened about their specialised issue and that they did not post about it. If politicians do not continue to post about the issue, then they will start to lose their issue profile. Therefore there is a second more ‘defensive’ dimension to issue profile, namely, to maintain the ownership of their specialised issues, they need to keep showcasing that they are the specialists on that issue for their parties. In that sense, this is a defensive issue profile strategy because they have to make sure that they don’t lose it. For instance, one politician described how there was a media story about an issue he was specialised in; however, he thought that the moment to post about it was already over because he was a bit late and his party leader had already spoken about it, but that he felt that others would find it weird if they didn’t see anything from him about the topic, so he decided to do it anyway.

*“This was already in the stage of: actually, yes, I have to respond, I have to show that I am working on that too. [ ] but the big peak of outrage on Twitter, for example, was not over at that moment but in a downward curve. [ ] my party leader had already tweeted before this, yea, then I am actually too late. [ ] At that point, I also want to show, because who are my followers on Twitter? Those are people who also find [ ] important and worry about that. Yea, if they then don’t see anything from me, then I assume that they will think: hmm.” (sic)*

*Male MP, Generalist, Interview 9*

#### **4.4.2 Party arrangements**

We know from previous studies that there is a division of labour in parliamentary party groups (PPGs). Politicians simply cannot be expected to follow up on every policy issue because there are too many of them. Therefore, all policy issues are divided between the available members of the PPG (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2011). This aspect also came up in the interviews. Every politician indicated that the division starts after the elections when the

newly formed PPG meets. The PPG leader asks all members to express their preferred committees, and then they start puzzling to make it work.

*“Then the questions is asked who wants to follow up which committees, and then it’s to be seen if the puzzle can be put together that way.”*

*Male MP, Specialist, Interview 2*

*“It’s the case that everyone can express their preference, and then it’s the difficult task for the parliamentary party leader to try and find a balance in the distribution of committees.”*

*Male MP, Specialist, Interview 1*

The interviewees' answers showed that all politicians, thus, have a small number of topics they are responsible for. Furthermore, all politicians clearly stated that it is not expected that politicians ‘trespass’ on the topics of their colleagues. Politicians are thus also confined by the PPG workings of their party. Even though in most interviews, politicians mention that there are no formal rules by the party about which topics that they can talk about on social media, they indicate that there is more or less the unspoken rule that you deal with your own topics and often only retweet another colleague instead of making posts yourself.

*“You do have freedom, [ ] But if I suddenly would announce [ ] that I would be taking an initiative about consumer protection. [ ] Then I would get a phone call saying: This is really not your topic; someone else is working on that.”*

*Male MP, Generalist, Interview 7*

*“No, there actually aren’t any rules. There is the unspoken role that says that every MP is, and I’m talking about parliament and not the government, the spokesperson for the committees where he or she is active in.”*

*Male MP, Generalist, Interview 3*

#### 4.4.3 Routine & Comfort

Another motivation that the politicians often spoke about was that they post about their specialised topics because posting on social media is something they routinely do or feel obliged to do. The politicians all mention how posting on social media is something that is part of their job and that they are conscious that they frequently have to put something online, so their followers see that they are active and up-to-date. They feel most comfortable talking about topics that they are knowledgeable on. It does not require a lot of effort, and it feels most natural. When asked, all politicians mentioned that their interests and specialisation overlapped, meaning that they also like the issues that they work on. When I questioned them further on this interest in their issues, politicians revealed that their interest often predates their political specialisation because these interests often coincide with previous job experiences. Several interviewees pointed out that they had a previous job before they became professional politicians. They carry this experience with them into their new political work and consequently are passionate about those topics. For instance, one politician mentioned that she used to be a doctor and, therefore, naturally, she was interested in healthcare. Several politicians mentioned that because they are interested in these issues, it follows and feels natural to talk about those issues. This also entails that politicians will refrain from posting about topics that they know little about.

*“But [ ] is also a bit of a comfort zone (laughs), [ ] everything that has to do with those [ ] issues, I don’t think there are many matters where I immediately have to say: ha, I don’t know anything about that or I can’t say anything about that or I can’t defend my own position or whatever. That will never happen with [ ], with other issues, I sometimes have to look for information myself to be able to interpret certain things, and undoubtedly there are people who know much, much, much more about it than I do [ ].”*

*Male MP, Specialist, Interview 1*

*“[ ] I think it just results from what you are working on, so I mainly focus on things I am tackling myself, [ ].”*

*Female MP, Generalist, Interview 12*

*“I will also not talk about social affairs or nuclear energy; I know too little about that.”*

*Male MP, Specialist, Interview 5*

*“I wouldn’t call it a real strategy. It’s just also my area of interest.”*

*Female MP, Specialist, Interview 4*

*“To be a credible source of information, you, of course, have to have the competence to be familiar with the case because if you start talking about things you don’t know, well, you can keep it up for a while, but sooner or later you’re going to be found out.”*

*Male MP, Specialist, Interview 5*

This attitude is further exemplified by how politicians act when they create a social media message about a topic that is not their specialisation. As I mentioned earlier, several politicians pointed out that they will either not post about the topic or retweet a message of their colleague and add a small text themselves as opposed to making their own post about the topic. Some politicians also mentioned that they would only post general statements about topics that they are not specialised in after quickly checking with the party specialist, instead of detailed opinions as they do in their regular social media messages.

*“I would definitely check that, and it would rather be a retweet or a repost than writing about it myself.”*

*Female MP, Generalist, Interview 11*

*“It would be more logical and also collegial if, for example, when it comes to tweets, you just take a tweet from your colleague and add something personal or something like that. Or just retweet.”*

*Male MP, Specialist, Interview 2*

#### 4.4.4 Window of Opportunity

One important general aspect that came up in all interviews was the notion of a ‘window of opportunity’. Kingdon (1995) described how sometimes ‘windows’ open for political actors, which allows them to push certain initiatives, conceptions or problems. The theory states that these windows open when an event suddenly occurs in society. These windows often coincide with an increase in media saliency for an issue, and it is expected that politicians will try to ride this media wave to get more exposure, which in turn leads to more name recognition. This phenomenon describes exactly what multiple politicians said in the interviews. For instance, one politician mentioned how there are multiple issues that he is working on and that he is always on the lookout for opportunities to raise awareness for ‘his’ issues. Additionally, because of the fact that politicians are working on these issues and often have been doing so for a substantial amount of time, they perfectly know the ins and outs of their specialised topics. This means that they have a personal advantage when it comes to their issues and are, therefore, in a much better position to capitalise on an increase in saliency for their topics or if a specific event is happening because they know all peculiarities of their issues, they can link it to other aspects and problems in society, etcetera. An example, one politician mentioned how she decided to post about something because she found a study that was perfectly supporting the point she had been trying to make for a long time. If she did not actively scan for opportunities like this, she maybe would not have come across this study. Moreover, the fact that she has expert knowledge allows her to use this study to her advantage. For this reason, politicians actively scan newspapers, magazines and the like to find these opportunities to accentuate their own opinion or work. If politicians are working on a certain issue and they, for example, see a newspaper article about it, they will not hesitate to make a post on social media.

*“Politics is also often a matter of timing, and I walk around all day with all kinds of issues, cases, things that I want to raise within the spectrum of things I’m working on, things I worry about, stuff that makes me think: this should be the subject of a social or political debate, this should be higher on the agenda. And when I see opportunities, I seize them to bring more awareness.”*

*Male MP, Generalist, Interview 9*

*“I looked at the study, and I was like, alright, this perfectly supports the point I have been trying to make all legislature long.”*

*Female MP, Specialist, Interview 6*

## **4.5 Conclusion**

In this paper, we tried to get a better understanding of the social media behaviour of politicians. After studies on the adoption of social media by politicians and the content of what they post, we dug deeper into the reasons why politicians choose to post about specific topics. The topics that politicians most often choose to post about on social media are the topics they are specialised in. One of the main strengths of the present paper is the method that we used. We conducted 12 semi-structured reconstruction elite interviews where we confronted politicians with actual social media posts they made. This allowed us to go into detail about every case and discern why they chose to post about one event rather than another. Thanks to this innovative method, we were able to make two discoveries.

First, the main focus of this research was on why politicians mainly talk about the issues that they are specialised in. Thanks to using reconstruction interviews, we were able to come up with four main motivations why politicians prefer to talk about the topics they are specialised in on social media. These four motivations are *Issue profile*, *Party arrangements*, *Routine & Comfort* and *Window of opportunity*. Politicians indicate that it is important to signal to the outside world what they are working on to, first of all, claim the topic as their own. They want to signal that they are the ones tackling those particular topics to journalists, the general public and relevant stakeholders. Because they post a lot about those topics, it is hard not to be aware of which topics the politician is handling. Subsequently, politicians indicate that it is, therefore, important to keep posting about these topics. The followers of politicians expect them to react to everything related to those topics. If something happens in the media on the topic a politician is specialised in, they feel like they have to make a post about it because that is what is expected. Their followers are, among others, stakeholders in the issue and



societal groups tackling the issue; thus, they will find it weird if the politician does not react. Second, the institutional context ‘forces’ politicians to post about the topics they are working on. In parliament, political parties work with a division of labour, meaning that topics get allocated across all available MPs. Politicians cannot work on every policy domain; thus, they divide all the topics and specialise. Politicians are then expected to stay within their topics. It is frowned upon to work on the topics of a colleague within the party. This also translates to social media, where politicians will refrain from making posts about topics they do not work on. In the cases that they do, they often retweet or share the post of their colleague.

Third, posting on social media is a routine in the sense that politicians feel like they have to at least post multiple times a week to keep their followers updated. Politicians are most comfortable talking about the topics they are working on because they feel like they fully grasp the complexities of the issue and can be a reliable source of information. Moreover, they are simply also passionate and interested in the issues that they work on and want to inform others about the issue. Finally, politicians constantly actively scan newspapers to look for windows of opportunity where they can highlight their issues. Thus, the moment something happens related to the issues that are specialised in, they seize the moment and post about it on social media. Finally, Concluding we can say that there are multiple reasons why politicians choose to post about the topics they are specialised in. For some politicians, certain reasons are more impactful than others especially building an issue profile was very prominent in every interview. For politicians, this signalling function seems to be especially relevant for their social media communication. However, during the interviews, it became apparent that it is mostly a combination of motivations and not one sole factor driving their issue attention online. The party arrangements and division of labour in parliament dictates which issues a politician is specialised in, in the first place. Often this is determined by pre-existing interest or expertise by the politicians. It is then their intention to signal this expertise to the outside world. Finally, seeing as they work on those issues, they are often aware when something happens on those issues. All in all, the motivations are all interconnected and lead to politicians posting about the issues that they specialise in.

Second, interestingly it is hard for regular MP's to maintain a generalist profile. Generalists are politicians who focus on a broad range of issues. Before we started the interviews, we tried to select politicians based on this criterion. However, during the interviews, it became apparent that because of the institutional context, politicians have no choice but to specialise. There exists a division of labour in parliament that makes sure that regular MP's have to concern themselves with a select number of policy domains. During the interviews, the MP's mentioned that the politicians who are generalists are the party leaders and the PPG leaders. Backbenchers in parliament are already very busy dealing with their topics, which makes it hard to then also try to follow up on other topics. Furthermore, it is hard to profile themselves next to their party leader and PPG leader. Therefore, we can conclude that the distinction between generalists and specialists is a distinction that is not as meaningful to make between backbenchers in parliament as it is between backbenchers and, for instance, PPG leaders.

This research adds to the literature in multiple ways. First of all, the innovative method of showing the politicians actual social media posts that they made provided us with very rich and detailed data. During regular interviews, it is sometimes difficult to make sure that interviewees do not give abstract or very broad answers. By using our method, this can be avoided, and we hope to have shown that this is an interesting method to use in future research. Second, our study adds to our understanding of what goes on inside the heads of politicians. Politicians are actively and consciously working on binding issues to themselves. This happens in the same way as issue ownership with political parties. Politicians want to create a reputation of paying attention to an issue and make sure that journalists, the general public, and their selectorate know that they are the ones tackling the issue. This allows them to try and stick out among all other MPs. Thus, we show that issue competition is something that is not only attributable to parties but also to individual politicians.

This study has some implications for future research into the driving factors behind the issue attention of politicians on social media. Firstly, this research focuses heavily on the motivations why politicians post about the issues they are specialised in on social media. It might also be a good idea for future research to focus on the instances where politicians do deviate from their 'regular' pattern and do not post about the topics they are specialised in.

This way, we could get a broader understanding of the social media behaviour of politicians. Additionally, citizens can interact with the social media messages of politicians in the form of likes, shares and comments. It might therefore be interesting to see if these metrics are something politicians consciously take into account when posting something on social media.

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# **Understanding the online relationship between politicians and citizens. A study on the user engagement of politicians' Facebook posts in election and routine periods.**

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## **5.1 Introduction**

Politicians are known as strategic actors who use the media to promote their views and improve their reputation among the electorate (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2014). Since the rise of the internet and the growing popularity of social media, politicians have new channels to connect with the public and bypass the traditional media. Social media have offered politicians a fast and unfiltered way to reach their (potential) supporters without journalistic interference (Chadwick, 2017; Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014). At the same time, these platforms have given citizens a way to respond and interact with politicians' communication. By engaging with specific messages followers can indicate what kind of messages they like or want to share with their own network. This has created a more dynamic way of understanding the relationship between politicians and citizens (Xenos et al., 2017).

The rise of social media as political tools has provided researchers with a new way to study and understand politicians' online performance and popularity. Social media metrics can give us insight into the amount of audience engagement a politician is able to attract. For instance, some studies focused on the overall popularity of politicians on social media and identified factors that explain why some have more followers than others (O'Connell, 2020; Vaccari & Nielsen, 2013). Social media metrics also allow us to study the popularity of politicians' online communication strategies at an even more fine-grained level (Bene, 2017a; Heiss et al., 2019). In general, we can argue that more engagement by the public on

social media means that politicians are performing better in terms of audience response and have an effective online communication strategy. This can be consequential, as liking, and certainly sharing a politicians' Facebook post, means it will reach a much larger audience, often going beyond the small network of supporters (Bene, 2017b). Furthermore, studies suggest that audience engagement on social media with politicians' posts is a good, but far from perfect, predictor of offline voting behavior (e.g., Kristensen et al., 2017; Vepsäläinen et al., 2017). Finally, studying user engagement is relevant as research has shown that user reactions have implications for how politicians communicate on social media. More concretely, politicians adapt their communication based on both actual audience reactions and perceived audience expectations (Kelm, 2020; Tromble, 2018).

In this study we focus on two important dimensions of the online communication of politicians that have been addressed in previous research. First, we deal with the distinction between political and private messages. Politicians try to convince voters by expressing their political views or promoting their political accomplishments, but at the same time want to connect with their followers by showing their 'private persona' (Colliander et al., 2017; Graham et al., 2018). Is it successful to show parts of their private life and do these private messages lead to a different type of engagement than political messages? Second, we look at the sort of language politicians use in addressing their followers. More specifically, we focus on the degree of emotionality in the posts. Several studies have shown that more emotional posts lead to more user engagement (Eberl et al., 2020; Heiss et al., 2019). However, we know less about how that degree of emotionality interacts with the type of posts (private versus political), and the type of engagement (reacting versus sharing and commenting).

This study goes beyond the existing literature in two important ways. First, by scrutinizing the differences between elections and routine times, a distinction that has been neglected in most studies so far. Today, more than ever, social media allow politicians to 'campaign' permanently (Larsson, 2016), blurring the difference with election campaign periods. However, election campaigns remain periods in which politicians and parties are extra active, citizens are more interested in political messages, and news media are more open to

publicize political content (Van Aelst & De Swert, 2009). It is therefore not surprising that during election periods there is a proliferation of the amount of social media content that politicians share (Ceccobelli, 2018). It is unclear, however, to what extent campaign periods change the online strategies of politicians and lead to different types of user engagement on social media. Do politicians adjust the type or style of posts in campaign time? Or is it rather the public that reacts differently when elections near?

Second, to examine the role of election campaigns we analyze a much longer period of study than previous research has done, containing two election campaigns. This choice also requires automatic forms of gathering and coding social media data. In this sense our study is innovative from a methodological perspective by using automatic language processing techniques and machine learning to analyze large amounts of Facebook data. We analyze the audience metrics of the Facebook posts of 124 Belgian politicians for two and a half years, collecting over 34,000 Facebook posts. We focus on Facebook, which is still the most used platform among both politicians and the wider public in most Western democracies (Gil-Clavel & Zagheni, 2019).

## **5.2 User engagement on Facebook and political messages**

### **5.2.1 Studying different types of user engagement**

Facebook users have a wide range of options to engage with messages on the platform; people can follow an account, they can click on a posts if it contains a hyperlink, they can react, comment on and/or share a post. The user is no longer a passive consumer but actively rates the message or shares it with friends and strangers. For the author of the posts there is the advantage that the message generates a larger reach through this engagement. The authors can also learn from this engagement, since this behavior is quantified through the so-called engagement metrics that indicate how a particular post performs in relation to previous posts.

However, the three forms of Facebook engagement should not be considered equal, as they all represent a different aspect of engagement. It is assumed that a reaction such as a like is given the quickest, since it requires less commitment and less involvement compared to a

comment or a share (e.g. Kim & Yang, 2017). In recent years, Facebook also added the option to not only like a post but also display other types of reactions, such as ‘haha’ or ‘love’. Combined we can call these “reactions.” Clicking the reactions button has even become a kind of habit or ritual in this way (Alhabash et al., 2019). Also in a political context these reactions are the most common type of user engagement (Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015; Larsson, 2015) and these are - perhaps even counterintuitively - often studied as the only dependent variable to measure the success of political posts (e.g. Nave et al., 2018). Posting a comment is a totally different type of engagement than giving reactions. Burke & Kraut (2016) refer to "one-click communication" when talking about reactions, while they see posting a comment as a form of "composed communication" that requires more effort, and can thus be seen as a more meaningful indicator of genuine care and interest than reactions (Zell & Moeller, 2017). Sharing a post on Facebook also requires a more complex handling and more cognitive effort than these simple reactions. A share also creates more visibility for a post than a comment, a comment remains limited to the feed under a post, while a share ensures that the shared post appears on your timeline and therefore contributes to your own online profile and identity (Kim & Yang, 2017). The fact that the three forms of engagement are different is also shown by the fact that they are not triggered in the same way by the characteristics of the (political) messages. This is evident from various research that has studied, for example, the impact of post length, facial attractiveness, references to political competitors, emotions, etc. on the behavior of the public, with features provoking more reactions than shares and/or comments, or vice versa (see e.g. Heiss et al., 2019; Markowitz-Elfassi et al., 2019). With this study, we aim to provide further insight into how the content and tone of political messages affects the reactions, comments and shares of Facebook users, focusing on the differences between political vs. private post, and on the influence of emotionality, and this inside and outside election periods.

### **5.2.2 Private versus political posts**

The social media posts created by politicians can serve different functions. Graham et al. (2013) distinguished several functions that can be regrouped into three categories: campaign information, privatized messages and political messages of substance. Campaign information includes calls to vote, updates on the campaign trail, etc. These types of

messages generally do not contain any substance in terms of policy plans or political opinions. Functions that fall under the category of political messages are, for instance, taking positions, critiquing opponents or giving advice. These types of posts have more substance in the sense that they go into more detail about policy and often can be linked to a specific issue topic. The third category consists of messages that contain information about, or images of, the politicians' private life, such as their families and leisure time.

This threefold distinction will be used in the remainder of this paper to help us understand why some Facebook posts of politicians attract more engagement than others. Several studies indicated that online content showing the private life of politicians has become a significant part of the social media strategy of politicians across the globe (e.g. Geber & Scherer, 2015; Metz et al., 2020). When politicians post about their private life, it deepens the amount of empathy voters have towards the politician as a regular person, as someone who is like them (Graham et al., 2018). It generates a sort of authenticity as opposed to the more formal and impersonal communication parties tend to have. In that sense, social media help politicians bridge the gap between themselves and the people they represent (Coleman, 2011; Graham et al., 2018). Lee and Oh (2012) show that personalized messages increase the (imagined) intimacy between voters and the politician and positively impact the evaluations that they make about the politician. This is also known as a 'para-social interaction', where a person feels they have a friendly relationship with a public figure, even though they have never met (Derrick et al., 2008). This process of politicians developing a more intimate relationship with voters, has potentially positive outcomes for politicians. For instance, a study done by O'Connell (2020) on the Instagram posts of US politicians shows that family photos and pets posts, among others, receive significantly more likes than impersonal content.

This positive effect of privatized posts on users' engagement, however, might not be the same for each of the three types of engagement. In fact, we could expect that privatized posts might have a positive effect on the number of reactions, while having a negative effect on the amount of shares and comments. People enjoy encountering privatized social media content from politicians and probably want to express their para-social appreciation towards the politician through an easily given reaction (see e.g., Alhabash et al., 2019). In contrast,

people share online messages, news stories and such because they contain useful information. For example, reviews of restaurants or movies might help others make better decisions (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Wojnicki & Godes, 2008). Privatized posts, in essence, do not contain such useful information. When people do comment on, or share a post by, a politician, they might be more likely to do so when the post contains relevant or practical information that makes them want to inform other people or appear knowledgeable (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Wojnicki & Godes, 2008), or to share their political point of view, known as partisan sharing (An et al., 2014). This variation in types of user engagement has found some confirmation in a recent study that showed that the private posts of German politicians received more reactions, but not significant more shares or comments (Metz et al., 2020).

Thus, we expect the following:

H1a: Privatized posts will receive more reactions than political posts

H1b: Privatized posts will receive less comments and shares than political posts

We did not have clear expectations related to campaign posts as they fall somewhat in between. They can contain useful information (e.g., place on the list), but often only refer to the ‘fun’ aspects of being on the campaign trail with supporters. Therefore, we limit ourselves to a research question.

RQ1: How much user engagement (reactions, comments, shares) will campaign posts receive compared to political and private posts?

### **5.2.3 Emotionality of social media posts**

Emotions are important in building strong relationships with others. The importance of emotionality becomes clear when we look at which types of news people prefer. Audiences are drawn toward news that isn’t just a neutral description of events. Emotionality, whether positive or negative, draws an audience to the story (Berger, 2011). This is also reflected in people’s response to political posts on social media. Berger and Milkman (2012) showed that stories that were better in creating emotionality were able to achieve higher viral effects

than news events that lacked such positive or negative tones. Echoing this finding, Kalsnes and Larsson (2018) found that the Norwegian newspapers articles that were being shared the most on social media were those that contained high amounts of emotionality. Additionally, multiple studies show that in political communication, a more emotional tone results in more audience engagement on Facebook posts (Heiss et al., 2019; Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018; Nave et al., 2018).

In general, we can say that when a political post on Facebook carries a certain level of emotionality, it affects the user and consequentially the corresponding engagement. Less clarity exists about the determining influence of positive versus negative emotions and the impact on the different types of engagement. In line with the success of negative campaigning (Lau et al., 2007), it is plausible that negative emotions and tonality in the posts would lead to more attention and consequently more engagement, as angry and outraged users want to offer their point of view. A study on the Facebook pages of Hungarian politicians indeed showed that posts with a negative tone or emotion provoked more comments and shares than positive ones (Bene, 2017a). However, there are also arguments to believe that posts with a positive tone or emotion could provoke more engagement as they allow people to create a more positive self-image on Facebook (Qiu et al., 2013). For example, recent research on Austrian politicians has shown that political posts that contain language or pictures that refer to positive emotions provoked more likes, comments and shares, while posts with negatively loaded emotions only had a positive effect on the number of likes (Heiss et al., 2019).

Based on these mixed findings, our expectation is that when Facebook posts politicians contains more emotionality, both positive or negative, their followers will engage more with the content.

H2a: Posting more positive emotional messages has a positive effect on the likes, comments and shares of social media messages of politicians

H2b: Posting more negative emotional messages has a positive effect on the likes, comments and shares of social media messages of politicians

As the research so far is mixed or inconclusive, we do not formulate concrete expectations about potential different effects for the three types of user engagement but formulate a research question.

RQ2: How much will the effect of (positive and negative) emotionality differ for the different types of user engagement (reactions, comments, shares)?

#### **5.2.4 Election versus routine periods**

In election research the notion of a ‘permanent campaign’ (Blumenthal, 1982) suggests that the differences between election periods and routine periods are blurring and that it becomes ever more difficult to distinguish between the two. Mainly because politicians feel a constant need to maintain popular support, they constantly (want to) communicate with the public (Heclo, 2000). This would imply that it is empirically unnecessary to make a distinction between campaign and routine periods. However, scholars suggest that both periods are structurally different for the main actors involved. Most clearly, for politicians there is more at stake, and therefore they become more active in developing activities to attract public and media attention. Van Aelst and De Swert (2009) claim that election periods also change how the media handle political news and information. For instance, they show that journalists devote more attention to domestic news items and more attention is given to political parties as central actors in the news. This suggests that the amount and nature of the political information citizens encounter during elections is different.

Furthermore, citizens also behave in a different way. Elections are periods when attention for politics is at an all-time high. People become more interested in politics and information about politics becomes more relevant to citizens because people need to make an informed decision at the ballot box (Neudert et al., 2019). There is a heightened attention for politics and consequently politicians operate under stricter observation by both the public and the media. Thus, there are several reasons to assume the short period before an election day is different from routine periods (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006).

However, one can argue that nowadays social media allow or even force politicians to remain in a permanent campaign mode. Nevertheless, studies that focus on the social media behavior



of politicians find differences over time. Larsson (2016) showed that Norwegian politicians and parties became much more active on Facebook in the run up to election day. Stier and colleagues (2018) found a similar effect for German politicians on Twitter. Ceccobelli (2018) assessed the permanent campaign theory on the Facebook communication of party leaders in different countries and found that the amount of Facebook posts politicians put on their page is significantly higher during election times than during routine periods.

Thus, we can expect that politicians become more active on Facebook during election time, but less is known about whether this also changes what politicians post about and how. Only a few studies explicitly distinguish between campaign and routine periods in studying the social media activities of political actors. The study of Ceccobelli (2018) showed that election campaigns increase the personalization of party leaders' Facebook posts, but not the degree of privatization of posts. The leaders become more central, but not their personal life. Additionally, the number of posts about policy issues decreased. He concludes by saying that "on Facebook, not every day is Election Day" (p. 137), meaning that the behavior of political leaders on social media is fundamentally different during campaigns. In a similar study of US parliamentarians on Twitter, Vasko and Trilling (2019) confirm that election campaigns change the behavior of politicians. For instance, the level of hard news went down during campaigns, and the level of negativity was lower than in routine periods. The authors conclude that "the notion of a permanent campaign does not appropriately describe political campaigning on Twitter, but that the exact differences are still poorly understood" (p. 342).

Although the research on the role of different time periods on how politician use social media is gradually increasing, the empirical knowledge on how this impacts online user engagement is still absent. We can expect citizens to be more attentive and active online (e.g., Gerbaudo et al., 2019) but we do not know whether and how this impacts their preference for certain types of messages or the emotional leaning of the communication. For instance, campaign periods might stimulate citizens to be more eager to interact with political content, but the higher supply of political messages might also have the opposite effect. Similarly, campaign periods are 'heated' periods that might increase the emotionality

of the communication, but that does not mean that these posts have the same effect on user engagement as people might be more reluctant to comment or share emotionally charged posts (Liu et al., 2017). Because of these mixed expectations and our limited knowledge on how campaign periods influence the precise online interaction between politicians and citizens we formulate the following research questions:

RQ3: How do election periods impact the type (private-political-campaign) of politicians' Facebook posts?

RQ4: How do election periods impact the (negative-positive) emotionality of politicians' Facebook posts?

RQ5: How do election periods impact the interaction of different types of user engagement (reaction-share-comment) with the type and emotionality of politicians' Facebook posts?

### **5.3 Data & Methodology**

We gathered Facebook posts of 124 Dutch-speaking Belgian politicians from five political parties represented in parliament between the first of January 2017 and the first of July 2019. Originally, we considered 237 politicians for the study, this included all Flemish regional and federal parliamentarians<sup>21</sup>, all ministers and party presidents. We used CrowdTangle to collect Facebook posts from publicly available pages<sup>22</sup>. This meant that not all Dutch-speaking Belgian politicians could be included as some politicians only had a personal profile or did not have Facebook altogether. Considering this, we opted to leave out the few remaining members of the Green party and independent parliamentarians as their number was too low for the statistical analyses. This resulted in 124 Facebook pages of politicians that were included in our study. Most politicians that were omitted were backbenchers or

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<sup>21</sup> Substitutes who (temporarily) filled in the parliamentary seat of a ministers were also included

<sup>22</sup> For more info see <https://www.crowdtangle.com/>

politicians that were inactive on social media (see Appendix L for an overview of the distribution across parties).

We classified our Facebook posts into three groups: political posts, private posts and campaign posts. As described earlier, political posts are those that contain a political issue, private posts are about the personal life and leisure time of politicians, and campaign posts do not contain any political substance or opinion, but cover calls to vote, etc.. Although some of the indicators for a certain type of post may be contained in the attached image or video, we only based our codes on the textual information contained in a post. Training a multimodal machine classifier was beyond the scope of this paper. The codes were first manually assigned to the posts by four annotators. A machine learning model, specifically a support vector machine, was simultaneously trained using the coded posts to suggest a label to the human coders to streamline the process. After manually coding 15,000 Facebook posts with substantial agreement (0.81 Krippendorff's alpha) a pretrained BERT language model<sup>23</sup> was trained for the task of recognizing the post types. This model assigned labels autonomically (without correction by human annotators) correctly in 86% of the test cases.

The automatic coding process then involved assigning a score from 0 to 100 of how confident the trained model was about each of the labels (political, private and campaign). Each post was labelled as the classification that scored the highest confidence of the three. However, if a post did not score at least 70 on any of the three classifications, it was removed from the dataset because it could not confidently be classified. In order to test the effectiveness of this operationalization, we compared a random subset (N=311) of posts that were manually coded with the label that was automatically assigned to it using the aforementioned method. We ran correlations for each of the three categories. This resulted in a correlation of 0.96 for campaign posts, 0.97 for political posts and 0.93 for private posts. This shows the robustness of our operationalization. This automatic encoding process reduced our total amount of Facebook posts from over 50,000 to 34,408 Facebook posts that

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<sup>23</sup> A BERT-transformer using the GroNLP/bert-base-dutch-cased pretrained model (12-layers, GELU activation).

were labeled, with 19,690 political posts (57%), 8,362 campaign posts (24%) and 6,356 private posts (19%).

To look at the engagement scores of political messages, we distinguish between three separate measures: reactions, shares and comments that a Facebook post got<sup>24</sup>. Table 1 shows the average numbers of reactions, shares and comments that Facebook posts of politicians got, as well as the standard deviation, median and maximum. In validation of previous work, reactions are more freely given than shares or comments. A Facebook post by a Belgian politician averaged 375 likes, 47 comments and 56 shares in our dataset. The high standard deviation and low median indicate the large variation in user engagement that political posts get.

Table 5: Different types of engagement on political Facebook posts (N = 34.408)

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Median	Max
Reactions	375.0	1133.3	56	33036
Shares	53.2	439.7	3	41283
Comments	47.1	167.9	3	7599

In order to test our hypotheses we included several additional predictors in our study. First, to measure emotionality we used the LiLaH emotion lexicon for Dutch created by Daelemans et al. (2020). The LiLaH lexicon is translated from the NRC emotion lexicon (Mohammad & Turney, 2013) which has been used to extract emotion scores for social media texts for the purpose of sentiment mining (Rouvier & Favre, 2016) and online hate speech detection (Gao & Huang, 2017, Markov et. al, 2021). LiLaH associates words with a

<sup>24</sup> For Reactions, all sub types of reactions were aggregated (likes, wow, haha, sad, angry and love)

polarity (positive or negative sentiment) and eight emotion categories. We processed the Facebook posts by taking each word and looking up its base form (lemma) in the lexicon. If a lemma was associated with a polarity or emotion, it contributed to an overall emotion score of a Facebook post. Posts that did not contain any word present in the LiLaH lexicon thus received a score of 0 and were considered completely neutral. Posts got both a positive and a negative score, which corresponds to the amount of positive and negative words that were present in the Facebook post. On average a Facebook post made by a politician contains 2.6 positive words and 1.25 negative words. Both variables were logarithmically transformed to account for the very skewed distribution<sup>25</sup>.

Next, we annotated whether the post was made during a campaign. Our dataset comprises two election periods, namely the local elections of October 2018 and the regional, federal and European elections of May 2019 (all three elections were on the same day). To investigate if Facebook posts score better during these periods, we added a variable that indicated if a post was created in the four weeks leading up to one of the two elections periods.

Multiple control variables were added. First, we included the function of the politician; our dataset is comprised of parliamentarians, party leaders and ministers. These were recoded into a variable that indicates if a politician is a high profile (minister or party leader) or not. Second, we control for the number of likes a page had when the post was created and divided this by 10,000, which means that an increase of 1 means an actual increase of 10,000 page likes. This was included to account for the overall popularity of politicians on Facebook. Thirdly, we checked the level activity by adding the number of posts a politician made during our 2.5 year time period (and divided this by a 1,000). Fourth, we included the party of the politician to account for the overall popularity of some parties. And lastly, we included the type of post. Previous studies have shown that adding visuals or video can lead to more user engagement (Yuki, 2015). CrowdTangle records this variable and distinguishes eight distinct

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<sup>25</sup> Skewness for Positive words = 3.47 and skewness for negative words is 3.12

types: status, photo, link, video, live video, live video complete, native video and YouTube. We recoded all types of video and YouTube into one category, resulting in 4 types. For a descriptive overview of all dependent and independent variables appendix M and N.

## 5.4 Results

Our first hypothesis revolves around the distinction between private posts and political posts. As a first indication Table 2 shows the average number of reactions, shares and comments for each of the three types. In line with our expectations, private posts seem to garner the most reactions. Apparently, when people encounter messages or photos of politicians as ‘private persons’, they are more inclined to give that post a reaction. In contrast, private posts appear to be less shareworthy. Here we can see that political posts are the most popular. As expected, it appears that people prefer to share posts that contain substance and/or political views. Finally, the difference in the average number of comments shows us that political posts receive more comments than both campaign posts and private posts. It seems that posts with political substance incite more discussions among the followers of politicians’ Facebook pages. For a standardized version of the table, see appendix K.

Table 6: Average engagement per classification of post (N = 34,408)

	Reactions		Shares		Comments	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Campaign	275.6	1108.8	19.2	555,5	27.2	175.7
Private	462.8	1408.1	27.1	257,0	40.6	195.2
Political	389.9	931.1	81.4	126,0	57.7	116.6

Next, for a more formal test of our hypotheses we conducted fixed effects negative binomial regressions (Table 3). This type of analysis is warranted because our Facebook posts are nested in politicians and because our engagement scores are in essence count variables. All the results in the table are incidence rate ratios. We expected that private posts would score more reactions than political posts (H1a) but score less on comments and shares (H1b). It appears that both assumption are confirmed. There are significant differences between private posts and political posts. Political posts receive on average 16 percent less reactions than private posts. Also campaign posts receive less reactions than private posts (about 10 percent). In other words, private posts are more ‘likeable’ than political posts. Our analysis shows that the opposite is true for shares and comments. Percentage-wise our results show that private posts get 42 percent less shares than political posts. Political posts score also higher on comments (around 6 percent) than private posts. All in all, our hypotheses confirm that political and private posts attract different types of behavior from citizens following the pages of politicians. The conclusion for campaign posts is less clear-cut. Just as political posts they receive less reactions (about 10 percent), but more shares than private posts. However, in terms of comments they score even lower than private posts (almost 9%) suggesting that campaign posts provoke the least discussion on the platform. Which answers our first research question: campaign posts attract the least amounts of reactions and comments, but seem to score better on shares than private posts.

Table 7: Fixed effects negative binomial regressions on number of Reactions, shares & comments

	Reactions	Shares	Comments
Classification of post (ref=Private)			
Political	0.84***	1.42***	1.06**
Campaign	0.90***	1.02	0.91***
Negative emotions	1.03***	1.07***	1.08***

Positive emotions	1.01***	1.01*	1.00
Election period	1.27***	1.35***	1.17***
Political status (High profile)	0.93***	1.15***	1.51***
Page likes	1.02***	1.02***	1.02***
Number of posts	1.05**	0.98	1.08***
Type of post (ref = Photo)			
Status	0.85***	0.88**	1.20***
Link	0.81***	0.94***	0.99
Video	0.90***	1.26***	1.06**
Party (Ref = N-VA)			
Open VLD	0.98	0.99	0.71***
CD&V	1.03	1.17***	0.78***
sp.a	1.15***	1.23***	0.98
Vlaams Belang	1.03	1.20***	1.04
Intercept	1.22***	0.28***	0.41***
<hr/>			
N (total)	34,408	34,408	34,408



N (Politicians)	124	124	124
AIC	389,204.1	219,983.9	231,517.7

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\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01;\*\*\*p<.001

Hypothesis 2a and 2b state that using more emotional language (both positive and negative) will have a positive effect on the reactions, shares and comments of a Facebook posts made by politicians. Our analysis shows a clear effect of both negative emotions and positive emotions on the amount of interaction a post gets. This means that emotionally charged language makes users engage more with posts. Citizens seem to be more drawn towards emotionality than to neutral posts. However, the effects for negative language, are more outspoken and have a significant effect on all types of engagement. Positive language helps to get more reactions, but the effect on shares is modest, and there does not seem to be a significant effect of positively charged language on the amount of comments. Negativity seems to lead more often to a written reaction in which the user can express his shared anger or frustration with the message. Therefore, we find evidence for both hypothesis 2a and 2b.

A part of the explanation of the different effects of emotionality are related to the types of posts. Negative emotions mainly strengthen the engagement of political posts, while positive emotions seem to boost engagement with private posts. This becomes clear when we perform interaction effects between emotionality and type of post (see appendix Q and R). Mainly, the effects of negative emotionality appear to vary for different types of posts. Negative emotional language has a slight negative effect for the number of reactions of private posts, while it has a modest positive effect on campaign posts and a strong positive effect on liking political posts. When it comes to the number of comments, negative emotionally charged language has no effect on private posts, while it does have a positive effect on the amount of comments for both campaign and political posts - which answers our second research question.

Some of our control variables also yielded significant results. As expected, the overall online popularity of a politician matters. The more likes a page has, the higher the amount of

reactions, shares and comments the posts of that politician will get. A similar effect is at play for the number of posts a politician has made. More active politicians get more reactions and comments, but not necessarily more shares. Next, we see that the status of politicians has an impact, in particular with the more demanding forms of user engagement. High profile politicians such as party leaders and ministers, can attract more shares and especially more comments than regular parliamentarians. Nonetheless they tend to do worse in terms of reactions. This might be partly explained by the fact that high profile politicians are not only followed by people who ‘like’ them, but also by people who oppose them and use social media to vocally protest them. We can also report some modest party differences. Interestingly, again, the variation between parties is not consistent over the three measures of user engagement. For instance, the posts of politicians from the Christian Democratic party (CD&V), controlling for other factors, get more shares, but less comments than the Flemish nationalists (N-VA). Finally, regarding the type of post, it seems that photos are the best at garnering the most reactions, but videos do best in terms of shares and comments.

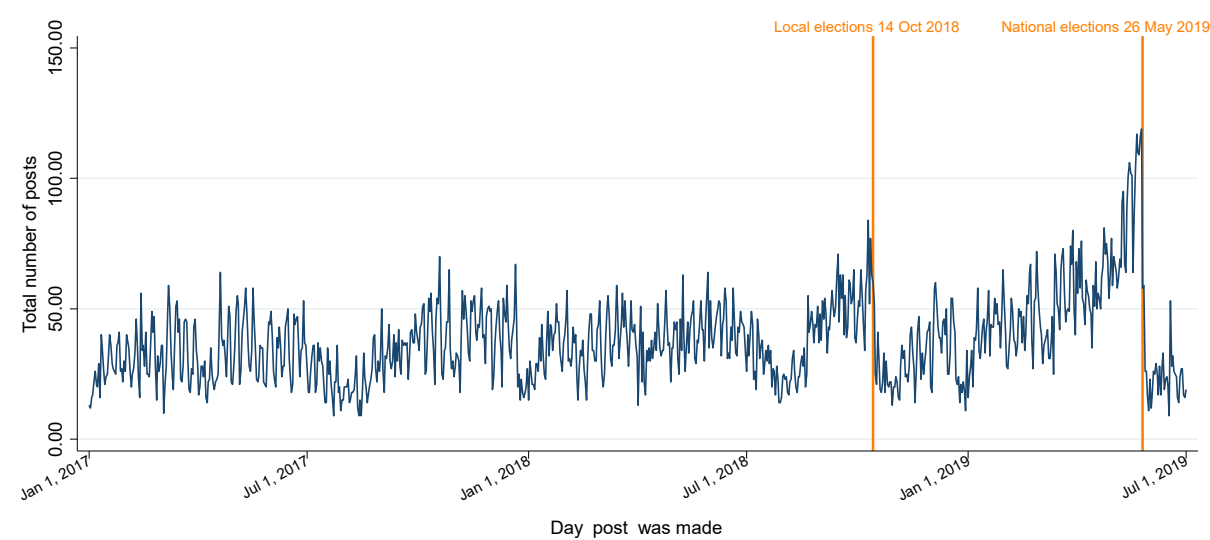
#### **5.4.1 Campaign versus routine periods**

Next, we explore the differences in the amount of interaction the Facebook posts of politicians get between routine periods and election campaign periods. Figure 1 shows that the amount of Facebook posts increases during election times. One smaller spike during the 2018 local elections in the beginning of October 2018, and a second bigger one, during the national elections at the end of May 2019. Overall, the number of posts in an average routine month (about 1,000) almost doubles in the four weeks before election day. Remarkably both elections are followed by a significant drop in the amount of Facebook posts. It is as if politicians have been working tremendously hard during a campaign and therefore need a break after the election day itself.

When we zoom in to the types of posts, we can state that during elections all types of posts appear more often. However, to answer RQ3, we look more in detail at the composition of posts. In routine times around 22 percent of posts are campaign posts, 19 percent private posts and 60 percent political posts. In the weeks leading up to an election around 45 percent of posts are campaign posts, 15 percent private posts and 40 percent political posts. This

indicates that mainly political posts, focusing on substantial issues or political opinions, lose in relative importance. However, it is important to note that in absolute numbers both political and private posts increase significantly, but their share decreases because of the exponential growth of campaign posts.

Figure 1: Total posts per day



Next, to explore if the amount of emotionality differs between election and routine periods (RQ4), evidence shows that the average for both positive and negative emotionality is significantly lower during election periods. The positive emotionality score is on average 0.12 lower in election periods ( $p < .05$ ) and the negative emotionality score is on average 0.22 lower in election periods ( $p < .001$ ). Our results thus show that during election campaigns, politicians are more neutral in terms of the language that they use.

Table 3 shows that there is a general positive effect of campaigns on the user engagement of politicians' Facebook posts. Users produce more reactions (27 percent), more shares (35 percent) and more comments (17 percent). However, we were interested to see if different types of posts get different types of user engagement in elections times compared to routine times. Thus, to answer RQ5 regarding the effects of elections on user engagement, we interacted the campaign period with our threefold typology (private, campaign and political), as well as with emotionality (for the full regression see appendix Q ). Figures 2, 3 and 4

show us the difference in engagement between the three main types of posts both in election times (red triangle) and routine times (blue circle). At first sight, it becomes clear that all three types receive more reactions, shares and comments during election periods. Figure 4 indicates that the amount of comments posts received in election times is slightly higher for some types of posts. In the run-up to an election, campaign posts score clearly better in terms of comments, while private posts seem to benefit less in this regard. However, all in all, we conclude that for the most part citizens do not show a different engagement behaviour with Facebook posts of politicians between routine and elections periods.

Figure 3: Reactions in election and routine periods between types of post

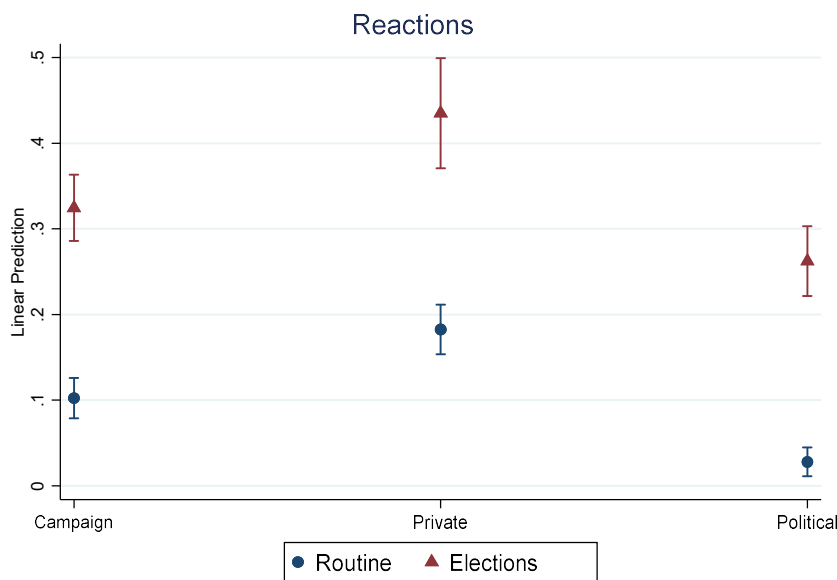


Figure 4: Shares in election and routine periods between types of post

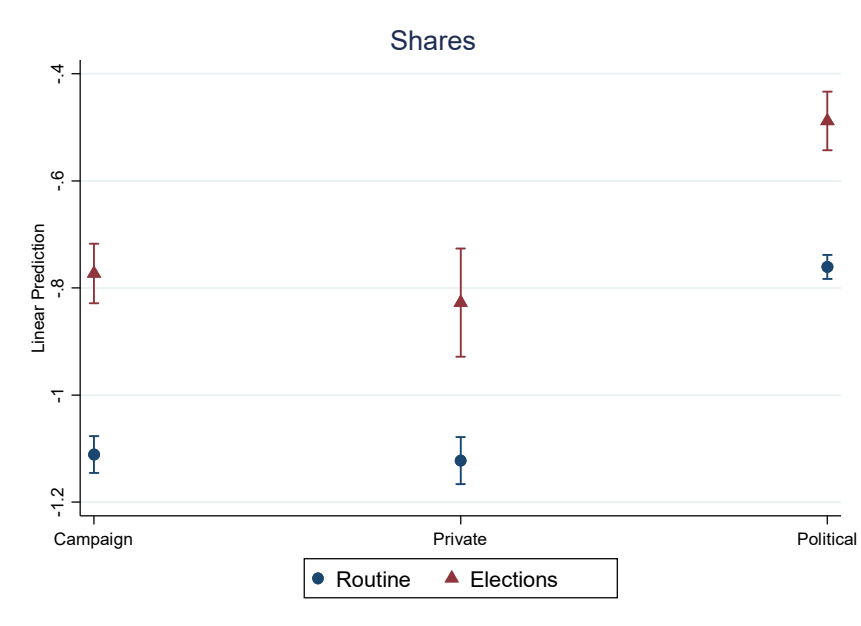


Figure 5: Comments in election and routine periods between types of post

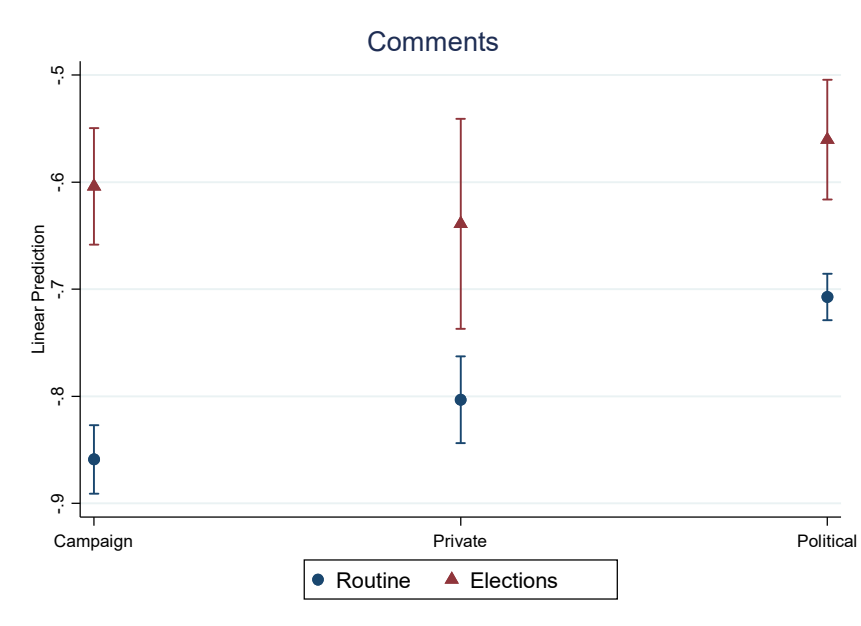
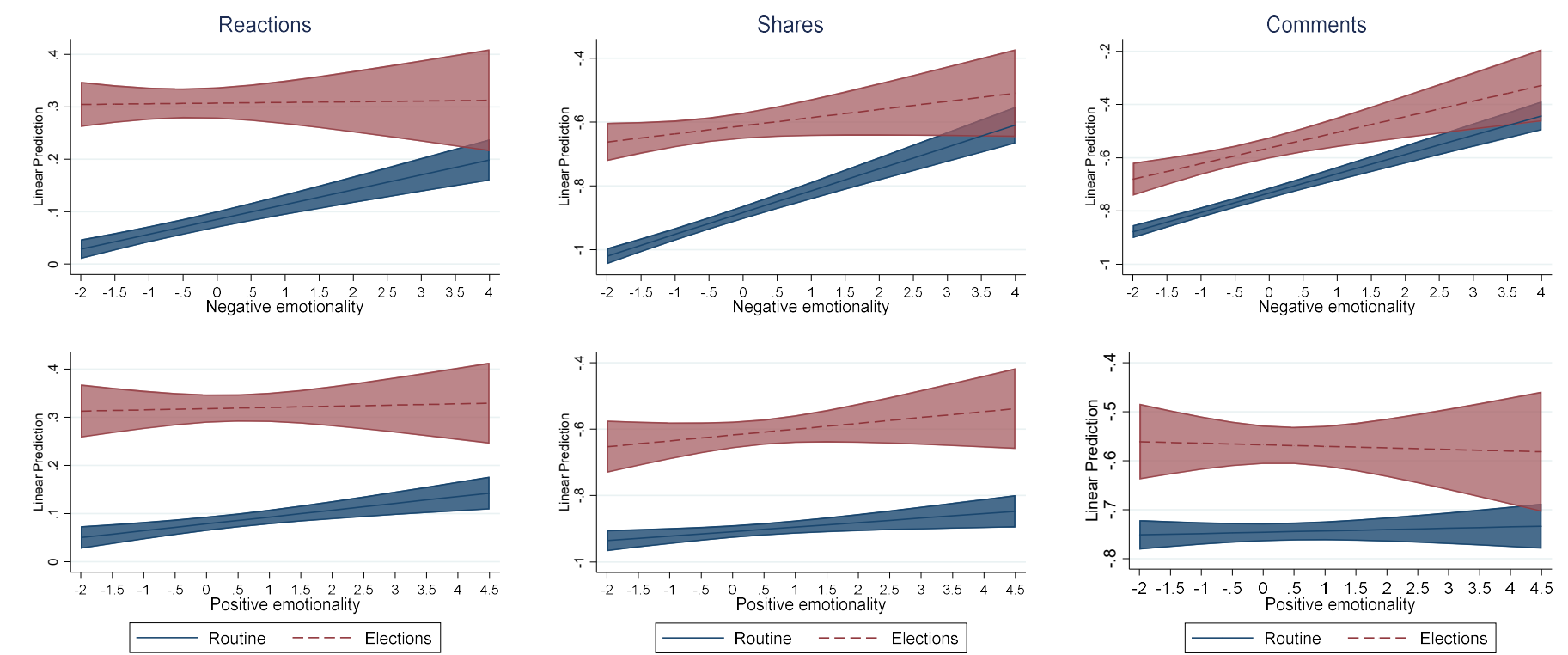


Figure 5 shows the difference in the interaction rate of both positive and negative emotionality between routine periods (blue) and election periods (red). We do find significant differences between the two periods. It appears that emotional language, both

positive and negative, does not have an impact during a campaign period. In contrast to routine periods, higher levels of emotionality do not lead to more engagement. An exception to this trend is negative emotionality as affects the amount of comments. Also during election periods, negative emotionality has a positive effect on this specific type of engagement. Overall, these results indicate that emotional language has a smaller influence on Facebook engagement during election campaigns.

Figure 6: Reactions, shares and comments in election and routine periods for negative and positive emotionality



## 5.5 Conclusion

The social media revolution has not only changed the opportunities for politicians to spread their message, but also for citizens to interact with them. A recent but growing number of studies tries to explain which messages from politicians will lead to more interaction than others. Our study adds to this literature in several ways. First, we have shown that the type of social media post co-determines how the online public engages with it. For instance, when politicians share private matters, which happens in one out of five Facebook posts, these posts lead to more reactions than political posts, while simultaneously they are less likely to be shared or commented on. This means that the so-called para-social interaction between politician and citizen remains rather superficial. The politician gives a quick insight into an aspect of his/her personal life, and the follower shows a form of appreciation with an even more hasty response. For political posts another dynamic is at play. When politicians share their political ideas, opinions or accomplishments, people more often react to them in a more meaningful way by commenting on them and sharing the message with others. As these types of interaction require a bit more effort from the user, they also show more involvement and commitment to the user's community.

Second, if politicians want to get more interaction on their Facebook page, the use of emotional language is key. Overall, and in line with previous studies, we find that messages containing more positive or negative emotional words lead to more user engagement. The effect of negativity is clearly more outspoken, and much stronger on the higher levels of interaction such as comments and shares, where the effect of positivity becomes small or non-existent. Our data suggest that this difference is also related to the type of message. Where positive language works well to improve the number of reactions on private messages, negative language has a stronger effect on the shares and comments for political posts.

Third, and most innovatively, we focused on the role of the political context, by distinguishing by routine and election periods. Our findings are in line with previous studies that state that the idea of a permanent campaign does not imply that "every day is election day" (Ceccobeli, 2018). Both politicians and citizens are more active on social media during this 'exceptional period', but the dynamic of the interaction between political actors and the public remains largely the same. All types of posts get almost to the same extent substantially more reactions, shares and comments. Therefore, we can conclude that election campaigns intensify the interactions



between politicians and citizens but does not change the dynamic. Campaign periods also do not mean that politicians start using more emotional language, on the contrary, campaigns lead to less emotional messages and emotionality has less effect on user engagement. Only for the most active people who make the effort to comment on a post does negative language work better during campaigns. This seems to suggest that during campaign periods, when stakes are higher, politicians do not need to use strong language to provoke public interaction on social media.

More broadly, our study can weigh in on the ongoing debate on the effectiveness of negative campaigning (Lau et al., 2007), as our results suggest that ‘going negative’ is a fruitful political strategy to increase one’s online popularity. However, there are a few important nuances. First, it is unclear whether more interaction is always positive for the politician. In particular posts of leading politicians seem to generate a large number of comments that critique the message or its sender. We should thus be careful when interpreting these numbers purely in terms of success and popularity. Second, negative emotional language is less used and less effective in the important period preceding an election. In that sense the notion of ‘negative campaigning’ is somewhat misleading, as negative language is more present and more successful in routine times than in election time. This could be due to the fact that in election times Facebook posts containing negative emotional language is seen as less sincere, or more strategic, by the public, which causes it to have less of an impact. Outside election time, negative emotionality might be perceived as more related to actual policy and less as a form of negative campaigning to damage an opponent and gain votes. This finding echoes what Aaldering et al. (2018) found in their study on the lower effect of negative news coverage of political leaders during campaign times compared to routine times. Third, our study tells us little about the right ‘doses’ of negative language. It is possible that negative messages mainly attract attention if they are not the norm and are mixed with more positive communication. In a similar way, it is possible that private messages only get more likes if they are not the dominant form of communication. Put differently, further research is needed to determine what a successful combination is of both emotionality and types of messages.

However, the present study has other limitations that could be addressed in future work. Our findings are based on a large N dataset, which means that there was less room for personal differences. For instance, we did not include a lot of variables on the post level, such as pictures, videos or the timing. Thus, big data research such as this, is best used in combination with

qualitative analyses to further deepen our understanding of which factors of the Facebook posts of politicians result in a more audience engagement. Although, we devoted ample attention to the different types of user engagement when studying how people interact with Facebook posts of politicians, we combined the seven different types of reactions. We are, however, aware that a more fine-grained analysis could provide more accurate insights on what types of posts lead to ‘positive’ (like, love, care) or more ‘negative’ (angry, sad) reactions. Finally, the present study only took the textual content of the Facebook posts into account when labeling each post. After all, there might be a difference in terms of meaning and content between the textual and visual messages of a Facebook post. Whereas a politician might post a private message in the form of a status update, the accompanying photo or video might well have a political focus, or vice versa. This (non-)congruence between textual and visual elements and associated meanings is therefore valuable to study in the future. Despite these limitations, we hope that our large-N study and partly automatic analyses of social media posts of political actors will inspire others to further develop our understandings on when, how and why politicians and citizens interact on social media.

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## Hoofdstuk 6 **My issues on social media: The effects of issue emphasis by politicians on social media**

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### **6.1 Introduction**

In the current day and age, political competition is no longer a sole matter of competition between parties. Indeed there has been a trend toward a more individualized form of politics where individual candidates are coming more and more to the forefront. This also becomes visible in the media in what Van Aelst et al. (2012) call the ‘individualization of politics’, which entails that there is a shift in attention in the media away from parties and toward individual politicians. This could encourage politicians to pursue a more personal vote-seeking strategy and, in turn, create competition between individual candidates between and within parties (Bräuninger et al., 2012). We could argue that mainly in proportional election systems, politicians not only have to compete with politicians from different parties but also with politicians from their own party. This ‘intra-party competition’ is mainly one over obtaining a favorable ballot list position. to increase their chances of getting (re-)elected (Ceron, 2017; Cheibub & Sin, 2020; Van Remoortere et al., 2021).

An important way for political actors to compete with one another is by selectively emphasizing different issues. It is beneficial for political actors to try and accentuate topics that they are strong on and accentuate their strengths. Thus, politicians will only talk about a select number of topics that benefit them. On social media, politicians have the most degree of freedom to talk about the issues that they want to put forward. Thus it provides us with a very suitable platform to study the issue attention of politicians as the likelihood is higher that these posts on social media reflect the true preferences and interests of political actors (Ceron, 2017; Schober et al., 2015). As chapter 3 of this dissertation has shown, there are three types of topics that politicians talk about in order to compete with one another. First, politicians can address topics that their party owns in order to compete with politicians from different parties. We argue that accentuating the strengths of the party and trying to raise the saliency of the party owned topic is beneficial for politicians because more votes for the party means a higher chance that the individual politician will get elected. Second, the issue specialization of politicians will

determine to a great extent what politicians talk about. We attribute this to the need to differentiate themselves from members of their own party, as they cannot do this by talking about the owned party issues. Finally, the study in chapter three shows that the media agenda impacts what politicians talk about. In other words, if more articles are written about a topic, politicians will feel the need to talk about those issues. This could play into a strategy of politicians of coming across as responsive or as knowing what's really going on in society and thus increasing external political efficacy (Esaiasson et al., 2015).

Hence, we do have an idea which factors drive the issue attention of politicians on social media. It is another question to what degree the audience reacts differently to this type of content from the politicians that they follow. In order to measure this, we will use the audience engagement metrics of social media. These metrics help us get a better understanding of the relationship between the content of what politicians post and the audience's response to it (Heiss et al., 2019; Xenos et al., 2017). To a certain extent, these metrics measure the appreciation of the content that the followers see. Thus, this would allow us to test whether the three issue strategies mentioned earlier, issue ownership, issue specialization and riding the media wave, are effective. Or in other words, if posting about these topics increases the amount of audience engagement. For instance, numerous researchers have attributed the recent successes of extreme right-wing parties to the fact that migration has become an important issue for a lot of voters (see for instance Harris, 2019; Hiers et al., 2017). As the owners of that issue, extreme right-wing parties benefit from this increased salience in the mind of voters. However, does this then also mean that each individual politician of these parties benefits from posting about immigration? Or is rather smart to focus on other topics and stress one's specialization or show an active involvement with the 'hot' topics in the news

A survey conducted in Flanders among 1340 respondents showed that the main reason citizens follow politicians is because they want to stay up to date on their work (68 percent of respondents gave this response). This suggests that people like the Facebook pages of politicians because these politicians work on topics that they are interested in and want to see content about. This again ties into the fact that followers will reward content they deem important or relevant with more reactions, shares and comments. Finally, when a certain topic receives more media attention, it raises the importance of that issue in people's heads, which is called agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). This raised importance increases the need for information about that topic among citizens (Chaiken, 1980;

Petty & Cacioppo, 1979). Thus when people encounter social media messages about the topics that they find important, they will react positively, and chances are higher that they will engage with the content. Therefore, if politicians ‘ride a media wave’ and post about a topic that received a lot of media attention, then we can expect that post will score higher in terms of audience engagement. In conclusion, the main mechanism at play when it comes to why these three issue strategies might increase the amount of audience engagement on the Facebook posts of politicians is that if people care more about a topic (i.e. they find it more important), they will engage more with content about that topic.

Nevertheless, in chapter five, we have shown that when studying the audience engagement of politicians, we have to take into account that election periods are ‘special’ occasions. Even though scholars like to mention the concept of a permanent campaign (see e.g. Larsson, 2016), where the lines between campaign periods and routine periods are fading away. During campaign periods, we can see an increase in activity on social media by parties and politicians, as well as a heightened interest in politics by the general public and a willingness of media outlets to write more about political content (Ceccobelli, 2018; Van Aelst & De Swert, 2009). It is thus not surprising that the previous chapter showed that in election times, the audience engagement of the posts of politicians is generally higher. Therefore election campaigns can have a moderating effect on the impact that the three issue strategies have on audience engagement. Overall we can expect that the effects of the three issue strategies are stronger during campaign periods because of the heightened interest and need for information by the public.

In order to test these expectations and effects of issue ownership, issue specialization and media attention, the audience engagement of more than 10,000 Facebook posts of 118 Dutch-speaking Belgian politicians was analysed for a period of 18 months. The choice to study Facebook is based on the fact that it is the most used platform among both politicians and the wider public in most Western democracies (Gil-Clavel & Zagheni, 2019; Newman et al., 2019). My results show that media salience has a positive effect across the board, while issue specialization only has a positive effect in election times and that issue ownership has no effect.

## **6.2 Theory**

### **6.2.1 Audience engagement on social media**

In this day and age of social media, the public is no longer a passive bystander. The main source of information about politicians used to be the mass media, where citizens consumed news without possible interaction. Now, SNSs such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, have started to become an important source of information about politics for people (Cacciatore et al., 2018; van Erkel & Van Aelst, 2021). On these SNSs, the public can engage with a post by reacting to it with a like, sharing content with their family and friends, leaving a comment, clicking on links, following pages of parties or individual politicians, etcetera. The main appeal for the author of a post is that when someone engages with their content, it will get a larger reach, and thus more people will get exposed to their message. This engagement of the public can be quantified through what we call engagement metrics. These metrics indicate how many times, for example, a post is reacted on, shared and commented on. This can help politicians understand the preferences of their audience better. Indeed research has shown that politicians adapt their communication based on how their audience reacts, as well as how they think their audience will react. For instance, Kelm (2020) shows that if politicians think that their audience expects them to discuss with others, motivate others, or criticize others, they will, in fact, do this more often in their communication. Thus, we can say that politicians do take the audience engagement of their social media posts into account.

Several studies have already tried to determine the success factors of the social media messages of politicians. For instance, we know from the previous chapter, among others, that more emotional posts lead to more audience engagement (Eberl et al., 2020; Heiss et al., 2019), that calls for action have the opposite effect by garnering less engagement, posting more decreases engagement and longer posts increase engagement (Heiss et al., 2019; Xenos et al., 2017) and that posts about the personal life of politicians also seem to do better in terms of likes (Bene, 2017), which was also one of the main conclusions of chapter five of this dissertation. When it comes to issue strategies, we know less about which factors increase or decrease the amount of audience engagement.

### **6.2.2 Issue strategies**

People that see the Facebook posts of politicians mostly consist of the people that have followed (liked) the public page of the politicians. Thus, we could say that politicians are

speaking to a more specific group. A recent survey conducted in Flanders<sup>26</sup> showed that more than half of the people who follow political parties or politicians on social media do so because they support that party or politician and want to stay up to date on their work (see Table 8). This suggests that citizens follow politicians on social media because of political posts of substance that convey policy information or a political opinion. To understand why certain Facebook posts by politicians receive more audience engagement than others, we should look into the actual substance of the posts and the strategies that politicians employ. As discussed in the third chapter of this dissertation, an important approach that parties and politicians use in their communication strategies is selectively emphasizing certain issues. This allows them to accentuate their strengths on specific issue topics. They will emphasize certain issues because it benefits politicians and parties if these topics become salient (Green-Pedersen, 2007; Peeters et al., 2019; Robertson, 1976). The three issue strategies that politicians employ are emphasizing the issues that they are specialized in, the issues that their party owns and riding media waves. Chapter three convincingly showed that these strategies are actually influencing the issue attention of politicians on social media.

The question then remains if these strategies trigger a response among the followers of politicians on social media, which can be measured by looking at the audience engagement of social media messages, in this case, Facebook. The argument of this chapter is that these three issue strategies do, in fact, increase the amount of audience engagement. The reasoning is that people will look for information about topics that they find important and respond well to that type of content.

In the current internet age, people deal with an information overload. When you go online, you get confronted with numerous problems and issues that are happening all around the world. Most people do not have the resources or motivation to attend to all of these issues and problems because the cost of being fully up-to-date is substantial. People will therefore be selective in their information gathering and the issues they will follow. In 1964 Converse introduced the issue public hypothesis. This hypothesis describes this limited attention capability of people. The hypothesis poses that because of this limited attention, people will develop interests in only a few issues. By developing interests in issues, people become part of the issue public of those

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<sup>26</sup> The survey was performed in 2018 by Dynata among 1340 Flemish respondents.

specific issues (Converse, 1964). Another theory that builds upon this premise is the theory of cognitive misers by Fiske and Taylor (1984), which implies that our brains will always try and use as few cognitive resources as possible when gathering information, just like a miser will always try and spend as little money as possible. Our brains will, therefore, always try to reach a conclusion as fast as possible. Processing information about topics that we find important is easier and faster than information about topics we do not consider to be important. This is why we could expect people to pay more attention to issues they find important. Furthermore, research has shown that even if people do not make use of sophisticated cognitions, they can still easily form attitudes regarding issues they consider important. Therefore people will select information and news that are relevant to the issues they find important. When an issue is considered to be important, people will desire more information regarding that issue compared to issues that are not seen as important (Chaiken, 1980; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007), since attaching importance to an issue motivates people to use and express their attitude about that issue. Therefore it is useful for people to look for information regarding the issues that they find important in order to form valuable attitudes (Iyengar et al., 2008). In what follows, we will describe how this mechanism is applicable to the three aforementioned issue strategies.

### **6.2.3 Issue ownership**

An important determinant of voting and party choice is nowadays based on issues. On the one hand it is based on the policy positions of parties and politicians, do you agree or disagree with the policy proposals of parties on issues that are important to you? On the other hand, it also matters if you think a party is competent on the issues you think are important (Aardal & van Wijnen, 2005; Carmines & Stimson, 1980). The theory of issue ownership states that parties can ‘own’ certain issues. This means that people either spontaneously think about a certain party when hearing a particular topic or that people believe that one party is more competent to handle a certain issue. In some cases, these two types of issue ownership can overlap (Walgrave et al., 2012). Parties can gain a reputation on an issue through an extensive history of paying attention to the topic. Studies have demonstrated that if an issue that a party owns becomes salient leading up to an election, that party will benefit and garner more votes (Petrocik, 1996). Therefore, we can expect parties and individual politicians to pay more attention to the issues that they own on social media, which was confirmed in chapter three. By talking about the issue, politicians attempt to raise its importance on the public agenda. If they succeed, both the party and the politicians themselves will benefit from this, considering that more votes for the

party will increase the chance of individual politicians on the ballot list to get elected. Therefore, they will selectively emphasize those issues (Peeters et al., 2019).

*Table 8: Reasons why people follow politicians on social media (N=190)*

	Percentage
I want to stay informed about their work	60,5%
I support the politician	54,7%
I want to be directly informed by the politician	32,1%
I find their messages interesting or funny	27,4%
Traditional media do not give the politician enough attention	23,7%
I want to show other people that I support the politician	10,5%
Other	4,7%

Thus, people's party choice nowadays can, for a large part, be attributed to which issues they find important. For example, if you think that environment is an important issue, you will be more drawn toward green parties because they have a reputation for paying attention to the issue and appearing competent in dealing with the issue. Therefore, people will be more inclined to favour parties that own the issues that are important to them. As we have described above, if someone is interested in a certain party or politician, chances are higher that they will start following that party or politician on social media. In other words, their viewpoints tend to align with those of that particular party or politician. We know that people are drawn to parties because of the specific issues they find important. In particular, when they find issues that a party owns important, they will be more likely to support that party. Therefore, the party that they support and follow on social media is often the party that owns the issues that are important

to them. Moreover, previous research has shown that people are drawn to information about issues they find important (Chaiken, 1980; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979).

Thus, we have established that people prefer information about the issues that they find important. Additionally, we expect that these issues coincide with the issues that the party of the politicians that they follow on social media own. In turn, we could therefore assume that people prefer social media content about the topics that the party of the politicians that they follow own because those types of content are the reason they started following them in the first place. Concluding, we can expect that citizens will engage more with Facebook posts about the issues that the party of the politician owns, leading to hypothesis 1:

H1: People will engage more with Facebook posts about the owned issues of the politician's party.

#### **6.2.4 Issue specialization**

In the same vein that parties can own issues, politicians can, to a lesser extent, also try and bind issues to themselves and become specialists on certain issues. This is known as issue specialization (Mattson & Strøm, 1995; Peeters et al., 2019; Sieberer, 2006; Vos, 2016). Because it is not possible for individual parliamentarians to be specialized and knowledgeable on every topic, there tends to be a division of labour within parties. Politicians get allocated to specific committees in parliament and are expected to work on those topics. Politicians either get designated to a committee by their party or, in some cases, are able to choose themselves (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2010; Mattson & Strøm, 1995). Issue specialists can have a large impact on their parties and are the spokespersons for their party on the issues that they are specialized in. For example, they are the ones that give voting cues on their issue to the other members of their parties (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2010). Chapter three of the dissertation has shown that politicians do, in fact, pay more attention to the topics that they are specialized in and chapter four highlights that politicians themselves indicate that it would be illogical and not very collegial to talk about housing if your specialization is education.

Chapter four also indicated that politicians are very sure that the people who follow them on social media know what they are specialized in because they often post about their specialized topics. We could therefore assume, that the followers of the Facebook pages of politicians initially decided to follow them not only because they are interested in the topics that the party



of the politicians own but also because of the topics that the individual politician is specialized in, which would make sense if we take another look at table 1, where citizens indicated that they want to stay up to date on the work of the politicians that they follow. This would work as a two-step process. First, someone decides their party choice based on which party owns the issues that they find important. In a second phase, citizens then can look for which politicians from their preferred party are specialized in the topics that they find important. For instance, someone's party choice is the green party because they find the environment an important issue. Second, if they also think mobility is important, they will consequently start following the mobility expert of the green party. All in all, the claim is that the followers of politicians' social media pages do so partly because of the issues that the party of the politicians own and partly because of the issues that the politicians themselves are specialized in. The same argument can then be made that the followers prefer social media content about the specialized issues of the politicians. In turn, when they encounter this type of content, they will engage more with the Facebook posts. Moreover, we could also argue that these specialists serve as more credible sources of information. Politicians serve as experts on the topics that they are working on and are specialized in (Vos, 2016). We know from previous research that people share content online that they think is useful for their network, such as movie or restaurant reviews, so their friends can make better decisions (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Wojnicki & Godes, 2008) as well as content that improves their self-presentation. This entails content that makes them appear knowledgeable in the eyes of the people they share the content with. Thus, we can expect citizens to use credible sources and experts in order for the information that they share to be more useful as well as enhance their self-presentation because they come across as more knowledgeable (Rui & Stefanone, 2013). This would thus also increase the amount of audience engagement on those posts that are about the specialized topics of politicians, leading to the following hypothesis:

H2: People will engage more with Facebook posts about the specialized issues of the politician.

### **6.2.5 Mass Media attention**

People vary in the importance that they attach to specific issues; some issues are more important to one person and less important to someone else. People can attribute importance to certain issues for multiple reasons. The issue public hypothesis already offers three reasons why some issues can become more important to someone (Converse, 1964; Krosnick, 1990). First, an issue is important to someone if that issue has a direct implication on their life. Put differently, the

issue of education will be very important for someone who is a teacher because that issue impacts their life greatly. This is thus a reason that is motivated by self-interest. Second, people tend to identify strongly with certain groups. Issues that are important to the group that someone identifies with will also become more important to that person. For instance, Krosnick (1990) explains how “people who strongly identify with Catholics are likely to develop important attitudes toward abortion, an issue on which the Catholic Church has publicly committed itself to a strong stand” (p.73). Finally, issues that are relevant to someone’s basic social and personal values are deemed more important. To give an example, someone who strongly believes that it is one’s duty to support those in need, will find the issue of social welfare more important. These are just three indicators that highlight that issue importance is not the same for every person.

However, external cues also impact the importance that is attributed to a topic. Namely, issues become more important to people when there is an increase in attention from the media, which is called agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Several scholars have built upon this premise and have come up with new concepts, such as that of political waves. The political process consists of a number of cycles in which politicians, the media and the public focus their attention on a select number of topics and events for a limited period of time. These cycles are called political waves and are marked by a substantial increase in media coverage of an issue and the amount of attention citizens and politicians give to the topic (Wolfsfeld, 2001; Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006). After a certain period of time, these waves either die out or are replaced by new political waves. In essence, this means that at certain moments, certain topics become more important to the media, citizens and politicians. This increase in importance both means that citizens want more information on the issue as well as that politicians will post more about the topic. In order to seem responsive to and concerned about the most important issues at the moment, politicians will address the issues that are highest on the public and media agenda. This is called ‘riding the wave’ (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994). Put differently, politicians will address issues that receive a lot of media attention more, which consequently also leads to more public attention. As was explained earlier, people often look for information that is relevant to them; thus, this increase in attention means that these issues have a higher chance of becoming ‘top of mind’, and people will want to get information about it (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). We can expect that during such periods of political waves, a Facebook post by a politician about the salient topic will result in more engagement, leading to the third hypothesis:

H3: People will engage more with Facebook posts about issues that are salient in the media.

### 6.2.6 Election periods

In the fifth chapter of this dissertation, we showed that election times and routine times do, in fact, differ from one another. Indeed in election times, followers of the Facebook pages of politicians engage more with the Facebook posts that they encounter than during routine times. The reasoning is that people have a greater need for information during election times and will appreciate all types of political content. However, seeing as our understanding of how campaign periods influence the online interaction between citizens and politicians is limited, we pose the following research question:

RQ1: How do election campaigns impact the effects of issue ownership, issue specialization and media salience on the amount of user engagement?

## 6.3 Data & Method

In order to test the hypotheses, I rely on data from the Facebook posts of 118 Dutch-speaking Belgian politicians between the first of January 2018 and the first of July 2019. Originally, all members of the Flemish parliament (124) and Dutch-speaking members of the federal parliament (87) were considered for this study. In order to collect the Facebook posts of the politicians, I used CrowdTangle, an application designed by Facebook to collect Facebook posts from publicly available pages<sup>27</sup>. Not all politicians have public pages, thus, as a result, not every politician could be included in the study. Moreover, I decided to drop all members of the Green party because their number of posts was very small. Additionally, we do not have specialization data of all politicians. All in all, this resulted in 118 politicians being included in the present study.

In order to label each Facebook post with issue topics, I used the CAP classification that distinguishes between 21 major topics<sup>28</sup>. Because of the large amount of data, I opted for an automatic coding process. First, four student coders were trained to label Facebook posts with a certain issue. They achieved a Krippendorff's alpha of 0.815. Second, the codes were first

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<sup>27</sup> For more info see <https://www.crowdtangle.com/>

<sup>28</sup> For more info see <https://www.comparativeagendas.net/>

manually assigned to the posts by the four annotators. We only based our codes on the textual information contained in a post and not images or videos. A machine learning model, specifically a support vector machine, was simultaneously trained using the coded posts to propose a topic code to the human coders to streamline the process. A pretrained BERT language model was trained for the task of recognizing the topic of the post. For an overview of the precision and recall per topic, see appendix T. In the next step of the automatic coding process, every post was assigned a score between 0 and 100 on how confident the trained model was about each of the topics. Each post was labelled with a topic on which it scored higher than 70. This means that one Facebook post could be labelled with more than one topic code. However, if a post did not score at least 70 on any of the topics, it was removed from the dataset because it could not confidently be classified. In the end, this resulted in 10,211 (out of 19,690) Facebook posts that were analyzed in the study.

To measure the issue strategies of politicians, we used several indicators. First, the specialization of a politician can be measured by either looking at in which committees politicians are active (objective specialization) or by asking them directly what their specializations are (subjective specialization). However, research has previously indicated that both of these measures are very similar and are thus interchangeable (Peeters et al., 2019). In our study, we opted to favour subjective specialization, this is less restrictive than objective specialization. Politicians can also be interested and specialize in issues outside of their parliamentary work. Moreover, if a politician is seated in multiple committees, they might not specialize equally in all of these policies. Therefore, asking them directly provides us with the most robust measurement. For all the different major CAP codes, members of parliament were asked a yes/no question about whether they considered themselves to be an expert on that topic. This data was collected as part of the POLPOP project that conducted a survey and a follow-up interview with all (Dutch-speaking) parliamentarians elected in either the Flemish parliament or the federal parliament, with a response rate of 75 percent. The specific wording of the question was: *“Politicians’ specialization does not always match their committee memberships. Therefore we would like to ask you in which of the following policy domains you consider yourself to be a specialist. Tick as many domains as you want.”*. The variable issue specialization comprised of either ‘posted about a topic they are specialized in (1) or ‘posted about a topic they are not specialized in (0).

Next, issue ownership was operationalized by asking citizens in a survey<sup>29</sup> which party they instinctively thought about when hearing a specific issue. Respondents were presented with 11 important issues<sup>30</sup> that often appear in the public debate. A dummy variable was created that indicated whether or not any of the topics in the Facebook post was owned by the party of the politician. The remaining topics that were not included in the survey were more technical policy issues that do not have a clear owner, such as spatial planning. Therefore, no party was considered to own those issues. We considered a party to own a topic by using the measure proposed by Dejaeghere and van Erkel (2017). Their indicator was that a party had to score more than 25 percent on an associative issue ownership question that was asked to citizens and that no other party is allowed to score more than 12,5 percent. We did not use the second rule because we believe that an issue can be owned by multiple parties (Geys, 2012) and coded a party as owning an issue when more than 25 percent of people thought about the party when seeing the issue. For an overview of which parties owned which issues, see appendix.

Lastly, the saliency of the issue in the media was operationalized as follows: first, using a Dutch dictionary based on the issue codebook of CAP (Sevenans et al., 2014), we coded all online newspaper articles from thirteen different news outlets<sup>31</sup>. Sevenans and colleagues showed that using dictionaries can produce reliable, valid and comparable measures of policy and media agendas (see also Peeters et al., 2019). A text was labelled as the issue from which category it had the highest count of words. For instance, if a text had 8 words from the ‘education’ topic and 3 words from the ‘environment’ topic, that text was classified as ‘education’. In the case of a tie between issues, multiple topics were assigned to the text with a weight of 1/number of ties. If an article did not contain at least two words from one category, it was dropped. The reason mass media attention was not labelled in the exact same way as the Facebook posts is because the media data were collected as part of the study in chapter 3, where we used a different labelling strategy.

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<sup>29</sup> This data was collected as part of the NWS Data project. The survey was performed by Dynata among 1340 Flemish respondents.

<sup>30</sup> The topics included: Macroeconomics, civil rights, healthcare, education, environment, energy, migration, mobility & traffic, law & crime, social affairs and culture

<sup>31</sup> This included all online articles of De Standaard, Het Nieuwsblad, Gazet van Antwerpen, Het Belang van Limburg, De Morgen, Het Laatste Nieuws, De Tijd, Metro, Knack, Trends, Humo, Krant van West-Vlaanderen & De Zondag

We calculated the percentage of articles that included each topic. We did this on a weekly level, which gave us data for more than 70 weeks. In order to find weeks where a topic received more attention than it does in an average week, we relied on the detection of outliers. Weeks, where a topic scored more than three standard deviations higher than average were considered as weeks where the topic ‘spiked’. We use the concept of a data pulse (see Jungherr and Jürgens, 2013). The data pulse can be classified as the state of a system at a given time determined by known aspects. In other words, it is the ‘normal’ state of a media environment. When we compare empirical data to the data pulse, we can see if it deviates from the data pulse. If it does deviate, we know we have a peak in attention. So with this method, we do not measure unexpected events but events with unexpected high attention. These events break the data pulse, so to speak. If a politician posted about such a topic during those spike weeks or when the data pulse was broken, it scored a ‘1’ on our issue salience dummy variable.

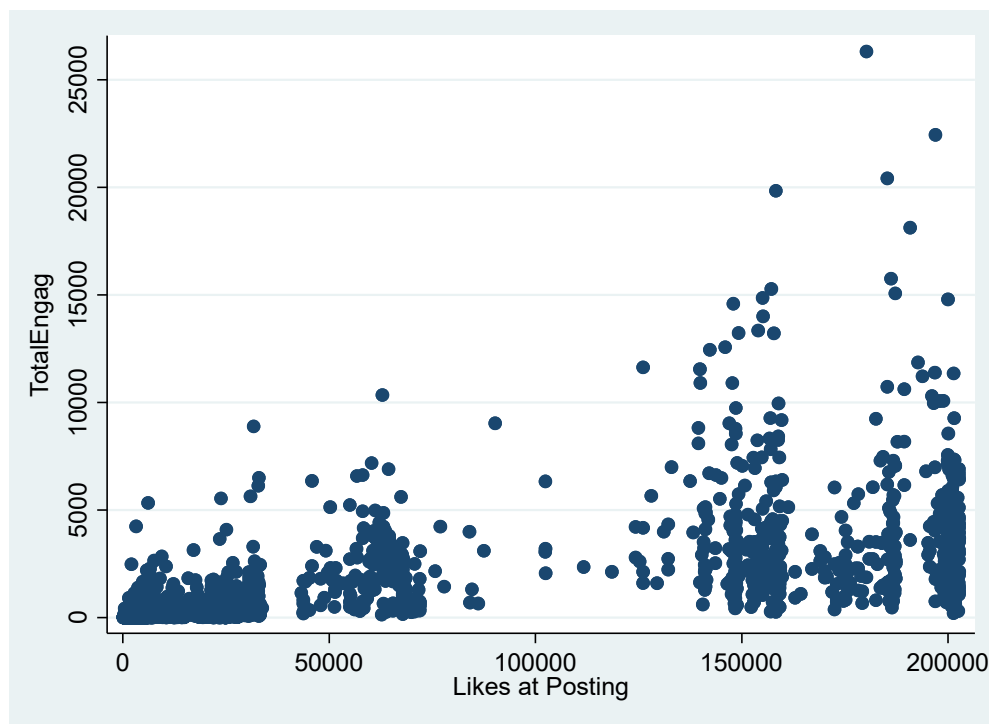
Multiple control variables were also added. First, we control for the number of likes a page had when the post was created. This was included to account for the overall popularity of politicians on Facebook. Second, we added the number of posts a politician made during our 1.5 year time period and divided this by a 1000. Third, we included the type of post because previous studies have shown that adding visuals or video can lead to more user engagement (O’Connell, 2020). CrowdTangle tracks what type of post is being made, including status, photo, link, video, live video, live video complete, native video and YouTube. We recoded all types of video into one category, resulting in 4 types. Lastly, party dummies were included to control for party differences.

## 6.4 Results

In order to get a better understanding of the data, we plotted the amount of engagement a post got against the amount of likes the page that posted it had. Figure 7 shows us that the dataset is skewed in two ways. First, it shows that most posts only received very little audience engagement. Most Facebook messages that politicians post do not go ‘viral’ and only receive limited amounts of engagement. The second skewness can be found in the number of page likes. There seem to be two groups of politicians in the dataset based on the number of likes the page of the politicians got. Nevertheless, these pages with large amounts of likes also seem to post very frequently. If we run a correlation between the number of likes a page has and the number of posts a page has made during the one and a year under study, we find that there is a strong

positive correlation of 0.6 ( $p < 0.001$ ). A final result that this figure shows is that, not surprisingly, the amount of engagement is very closely tied to the number of page likes, with a correlation of 0.7 ( $p < 0.001$ ). This entails that controlling for the number of page likes is paramount if we want to draw meaningful conclusions later on in this result section.

Figure 7: Total engagement crossed with page likes



Since this study is about issues, we analyze the topics the politicians in this study talked about in the year and a half under study. Note that these percentages do not add up to 100 because a post could contain more than one issue. The percentages thus indicate in how many of the posts that topic was present. Table 2 shows a wide variety of issues being discussed, with the top issue appears to be mobility and traffic, which is present in 12 percent of all posts, followed by migration and social affairs, both with around 10 percent. The least popular topics to talk about were foreign affairs (1.6%), science and technology (1.3%) and defence which is present in less than 1 percent of all posts. Table 2 also shows a large variation in the average engagement score per topic. Interestingly, we see that the top three topics that are present do not all receive a lot of user engagement. For instance, migration and law & crime are the two topics that get the most reactions, comments and shares, while the topic of mobility and traffic is among the three lowest scoring topics, only followed by spatial planning and culture.

The same thing was done with regards to the issue attention of each party. In order to get a better understanding of the issue, focus on the parties (table can be found in Appendix U). The issue attention of most parties is spread out across all issues, with most issues appearing in less than 10 percent of all Facebook messages of the party members. Only for the extreme right-wing party Vlaams Belang, we can see a diverging pattern; for the party members of VB, we notice that two issues stand out from the rest: namely migration and law & crime. These are two issues that can be historically attributed to this party as the issue owners, so it comes as no surprise.

*Table 9: Percentage of issues in all posts and mean audience engagement (N=10,211)*

Topic	% in all posts	Mean audience engagement
Mobility & traffic	11.7%	66.2
Migration	10.3%	1243.8
Social affairs	9.9%	242.6
Education	9.4%	170.5
Law & crime	8.7%	763.8
Gov. Affairs	8.2%	439.2
Environment	5.2%	233.0
Employment	5%	341.3
Macroeconomics	4.7%	433.8
Spatial planning	4.6%	59.4
Civil rights	3.4%	534.8



Culture	2.7%	90.9
Energy	2.5%	289.9
Health	2.4%	183.3
Agriculture	2.4%	141.6
Housing	2.3%	67.9
Domestic commerce	2.3%	147.6
Foreign trade	1.7%	582.1
Foreign affairs	1.6%	251.6
Science & technology	1.3%	87.1
Defence	0.8%	372.25

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For a more formal test of the hypotheses, I ran fixed effects negative binomial regressions with the audience engagement scores as dependant variables (see table 2). I use this type of analysis because our Facebook posts are nested in politicians and because our engagement scores are, in essence, count variables with a skewed distribution. All the results in the table are incidence rate ratios. In the previous chapter, we discerned between the three types of audience engagement. In the present study, we have a combined audience engagement score. The reasoning is that we first ran our analyses on the separate engagement scores. Nevertheless, differences between the types were virtually absent (see appendix V), leading us to add them together and providing us with the possibility of presenting multiple models using the same dependent variable.

What do the results show? First of all, issue specialization does not seem to have any significant positive effect on audience engagement. Before adding the control variables, issue

specialization even has a significant negative effect, which would indicate that citizens engage less when a post is made about the topic the politician is specialized in. However, after adding the control variables, this significant effect disappears, meaning that people engage equally as much with posts that are about the specialization as with posts that are not. We thus, do not find evidence that supports hypothesis 2. Next, the results show that the effect of issue ownership on the audience engagement is also absent. Before adding control variables, issue ownership has a significant positive effect, nevertheless, when we add the page likes, this effect disappears. This could mean that it is mostly the more prominent figures in a party with lots of page likes who benefit from posting about the issues that their party owns. Consequently, we do not find evidence that supports hypothesis 1. Finally, media issue salience has a significant positive effect across the board. If citizens encounter Facebook posts by politicians about a topic that has received a lot of media attention that week, the amount of audience engagement goes up. The followers tend to engage around 15 percent more with those types of Facebook posts. As an example, major events in the time period under study are the (youth) climate marches or the Marrakech pact on migration that led to the fall of the federal government. Thus, if a politician posted about one of those events in the week that they took place, those posts received more audience engagement. As a result, we do have evidence that supports hypothesis 3.

As for our control variables, we find three significant effects. As the previous chapter already has indicated, citizens engage more with the Facebook posts of politicians during election times. Our final model shows that the average engagement goes up by 13 percent. Next, the amount of likes a page has positively affects the number of reactions a Facebook post gets. This was already hinted at in figure one and is confirmed by the negative binomial regression. It is not a surprise that a page with 25,000 page likes receives, on average more likes on their posts than a page with only 2,500 likes, simply because the number of people who get exposed to the posts is higher. Finally, the type of Facebook post matters. Facebook posts that consist of photos consistently do better than any other type. It scores on average around 13 percent more engagement than statuses and posts with links and 5 percent more than posts with videos.

Table 10: Fixed effects negative binomial regressions on total engagement

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Personal issue specialization	0.94**	0.95**	0.97	0.97	0.96
Party issue ownership	1.04*	1.04*	1.02	1.02	1.02
Mass media attention	1.14***	1.15***	1.15***	1.15***	1.15***
Election period		1.17***	1.16***	1.15***	1.13***
Election*specialization					1.10*
Election*ownership					0.98
Election*media salience					1.13
Page Likes			1.00***	1.00***	1.00***
Number of posts			1.01	1.04	1.04
Type of post (ref = Photo)					
Status				0.87**	0.87**
Link				0.88***	0.88***
Video				0.95*	0.95*
Party (Ref = N-VA)					
Open VLD				1.04	1.04
CD&V				1.00	1.00

sp.a				1.03	1.03
Vlaams Belang				0.93	0.93
Intercept	1.23***	1.21***	1.15***	1.21***	1.21***
N (total)	10,211	10,211	10,211	10,211	10,211
N (Politicians)	118	118	118	118	118
AIC	114642	114590.4	114529.4	114478.6	114478.7

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001

I performed two checks in order to test the robustness of the main findings. To verify whether a negative binomial regression is actually the best suitable method, a linear multilevel regression was performed. The linear regression reveals a similar tendency (Appendix W). Namely, both issue specialization and issue ownership do not have a significant effect on audience engagement, whereas media salience does have a significant positive effect. To even further test the robustness of the analyses, I also logarithmically transformed the dependent variable and ran a linear multilevel regression. These results can also be found in appendix W. Again, a similar trend appears: media salience is the only issue strategy that has a significant effect on our dependent variable.

Finally, in order to test our fourth hypothesis, three interaction effects were added between elections and the three main independent variables (issue specialization, issue ownership and media salience). The final model shows that citizens do not engage more with posts about the issues that the party of the politicians owns or with posts that are more salient in the news. However, the analysis does indicate that people want content about the issues that the politician is specialized in. During election campaigns, the audience engagement will be, on average, 13 percent higher. If this post is then also about an issue the politicians in question are specialized in, this adds another 10 percent more audience engagement. We could thus say that the heightened interest in politics by the public seems to be mostly at play for the issues that the politicians that they follow are specialized in. All in all, we do not find evidence to support hypotheses 4a and 4c, but we do find support for hypothesis 4b.

## 6.5 Discussion and conclusion

In recent years we have seen an increase in the amount of literature that tries to explain which factors increase the user engagement of the social media messages of politicians. The aim of this study was to analyse the effects of different issue strategies on the user engagement of the Facebook posts of politicians. The claim of this chapter was that followers of the Facebook pages of politicians would engage more with posts about the issue that the party of the politician owns, with posts about the specialization of the politician and that the followers would be more willing to engage with Facebook posts about issues that were more salient in the week that the post was made.

The main finding of this study is that the issue strategies that politicians employ actually have relatively small effects compared to other factors. Both issue ownership and issue specialization do not significantly impact if citizens engage more with the content that they see from politicians. This could entail that it is much less a matter of what you talk about but rather how you talk about something, for instance, in an emotional way (as the previous chapter has shown). Alternatively, maybe citizens prefer a more diverse issue attention strategy from the politicians that they follow. As our results show, media saliency does have a positive effect. We could thus say that riding the wave is a useful way for politicians to attract more audience engagement on their Facebook posts. When politicians break away from their usual pattern of talking about the topics that they are specialized for instance, we see that this seems to be appreciated by their followers. All in all, there seem to be different factors at play in why citizens choose to interact with the social media messages of politicians instead of issue ownership and issue specialization. The argument that the followers expect content about the owned issues of the party and the issues that the politicians are specialized in does not seem to hold.

Nevertheless, we do find an interaction effect between the issue specialization of the politician and election times. In other words, in times when attention to politics is at an all-time high, people do seem to want to interact with Facebook posts about the specialization of the politicians that they follow. A possible explanation could be that when citizens normally encounter posts from politicians on their newsfeed, they are not triggered to interact with them and prefer other types of content. However, during election times, political information

becomes more relevant, and people engage more with content that shows the expertise of the politicians.

This chapter adds to the existing literature in multiple ways. First, the present chapter is one of the first, to the best of my knowledge, that has studied the effects of issues on the user engagement of social media messages of politicians. Previous literature was more focussed on factors such as privatized posts, emotional language or the effects of visuals. In this study, however, I also looked at the actual content, i.e. the issue of the Facebook posts, and three important indicators which are related to the issue, namely issue specialization, issue ownership and media salience. This way, I hope to have broadened our understanding of what type of political content citizens want to interact with on social. Second, this study also has widened our knowledge of the workings of election periods and, more broadly, campaigns. The heightened attention to politics translates itself into an increased need for political information, not only from the traditional media but also on social media. Citizens ‘reward’ political information from the politicians that they follow by engaging more with the content.

Nevertheless, the present study does have some limitations that could be addressed in further research. First, as useful as automatic coding is, it has shortcomings. The more training data a machine learning model has on a specific label, the better it will be in recognizing that specific label. Thus, this could mean that the model is better in allocation specific labels due to the fact that they were more prominent in the training data, such as migration. This might lead to an overrepresentation of those topics because they are better recognized, while other topics might (wrongfully) remain unlabelled, such as foreign trade. Second, this study is based on little over half of all politicians that were eligible to be included in this research. The main reason is that with CrowdTangle, you can only collect data from publicly available pages. For the timespan of the study, a large amount of Dutch-speaking Belgian politicians worked with a private profile as opposed to a public page. Still, we do believe that the politicians from whom we did have data were a sufficient group. We were interested in authoritative practices, and the large majority of politicians that were omitted were backbenchers or politicians that were inactive on social media.

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### 7.1 Two central questions

With social media becoming more and more important for political information and with citizens choosing to follow the accounts of specific politicians, it is key to know what information politicians actually display on their 'socials'. The aim of this dissertation was to uncover to what extent the issue attention of politicians is driven by issue specialization, issue ownership and mass media attention and if these three strategies lead to more interaction from the audience on social media. In order to investigate these two questions, I studied the social media messages of Dutch-speaking Belgian politicians and conducted in-depth interviews with politicians of all major Flemish parties. The different studies allowed me to answer these two questions.

The answer to the first question is that the primary issue strategy of politicians on social media is to emphasise the issues that they are specialised in and, to a lesser extent, the issues that their party owns and issues that are salient in the news. Politicians try to signal their specialisation to the public, journalists, their party and other stakeholders through their social media messages. Politicians claim issues as their own by consistently posting about a particular issue. This allows politicians to build up a reputation and a network among the stakeholders on the issue but also to be a credible source for their followers. This might, in turn, result in more followers because people might want to stay updated on the politician's work. In that regard, the strategy of issue specialisation affects getting people to follow you on social media.

Nevertheless, I do have to nuance the term issue strategy. As the fourth chapter has shown, it is not entirely correct to call it a strategy or at least not a strategy focused on immediate public success. Strategy implies that this is part of a well-thought-through tactic and that in the case of politicians, everything is premeditated to persuade people, to win votes. However, this does not seem to be the case. Often politicians choose to make a social media message about an issue because it feels natural, because it is expected of them or because they are even forced to do so. These reasons can still be called rational or strategic, but they make clear that persuading the electorate and winning votes are not the only drivers.

The answer to the second question is clear: looking at individual posts, and how well they perform in terms of audience engagement, I find that the issue strategies do not have much effect. Indeed I even find evidence that suggests that citizens appreciate content that deviates from the regular pattern of content about the specialisation of politicians, which is what politicians mostly post on social media.

In the rest of the concluding chapter, I will discuss my findings more in-depth. I will go over some of the implications these findings have and conclude by highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the dissertation as well as recommendations for future research.

## **7.2 Supply-side: What do they talk about?**

The dissertation's first step (and study) was to identify which issues politicians talk about on social media (chapter 3). In order to do this, we analysed more than a year's worth of tweets from over one hundred Dutch-speaking Belgian politicians. Additionally, and as a point of comparison, also the media agenda of politicians in (online) news media and their parliamentary initiatives and questions were studied. We expected three issue strategies to impact the issue attention of politicians.

First, issue specialisation; by consistently communicating about specific issues, politicians try to signal their expertise towards the public, journalists, and their party's selectorate. Signalling their expertise is beneficial because it leads to more visibility, which means more name recognition and possibly a better position on the ballot list, reinforcing their electoral and parliamentary position. Second, issue ownership; we know from previous studies that parties benefit significantly from increased saliency for the issues that they own (Petrocik, 1996). It is thus also beneficial for individual party members if the issues that their party owns become salient. During elections, a vote for the party indirectly is a vote for the members of that party. Third, media salience; multiple events happen every day, and journalists decide which events they choose to report on based on numerous journalistic principles (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). An increase in media attention for a specific issue means that citizens perceive this issue as more important, more pressing (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This increase in saliency in the media also incentivises politicians to pay attention to the topic and ride this wave of increased media attention to the issue. Politicians do this to appear responsive and up to date on current

events. Moreover, it can lead to media appearances and thus more visibility among the general public for the politicians (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994; Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006a).

These were our assumptions when going into the first study of this dissertation. One of our hypotheses was confirmed, politicians pay more attention to issues that they are specialised in. Issue specialisation affects politicians' issue attention on the social media agenda, parliamentary agenda and politicians' media agenda. Thus, politicians try to signal their specialisation through all of their communication channels. Issue ownership and media attention had less consistent effects on the issue attention of politicians. Issue ownership was only a driver of the issue attention of politicians on Twitter. This could be explained by the fact that politicians can retweet messages and share the Tweets of the account of their party. Media salience only affected the media agenda of politicians. We could argue that if an issue becomes more salient in their outlet, journalists will want experts to comment on what is happening. Previous studies have already pointed out that journalists use politicians as expert sources (REFS).

Nevertheless, the first study indicates that politicians are consistent across these three agendas to some extent. It provides evidence that politicians try to push their own issue profile by communicating on the same issues on multiple channels. Additionally, this entails that the three agendas under study depend on one another. Because of the division of labour in parliament, politicians do not work on every policy issue (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2011). It comes naturally that politicians communicate about their parliamentary work; thus, the overlap is created. Moreover, if politicians tweet about their parliamentary work, it sometimes gets picked up by the media, resulting in an overlap and hence more consistency. Alternatively, journalists can report on the parliamentary work of politicians, which politicians then want to showcase by sharing said article where their work is mentioned. All in all, this implies that the agendas influence one another mutually, which leads to overlap and more consistency. So, the mutually reinforcing workings of parliamentary, Twitter and mass media communication may especially reinforce a politician's issue profile, it may strengthen the connection between them and the issues they work on.

### **7.3 Why do they talk about those issues?**

The first study taught us that issue specialisation is the most important driver of politicians' issue attention on social media but in Parliament and the traditional media as well. Nevertheless,

I could only make theoretical assumptions as to why politicians would greatly emphasise these issues. Thus, in the next phase of the dissertation, in chapter 4, I interviewed politicians to ask them directly why they chose to create messages about those specific issues. In order to get clear answers, I used photo-elicitation (Harper, 2002), meaning that I showed politicians pictures of actual social media messages they posted online. This enabled me to ask what the thought process was in concrete examples when they actually created the message. I discern four reasons politicians focus on their specialised issues in their social media communication: *Issue profile*, *comfort*, *window of opportunity* and *party arrangements*. Issue profile consists of two parts. First of all, politicians want to claim specific issues as their specialisation by paying a lot of attention to these issues online. Second, politicians want to maintain this claim over these issues by continuing to emphasise these issues and showcase to all available stakeholders in the issue that they care and work on them. This clear focus on those issues can be related to public expectations. If something happens in the media on the topic a politician specialises in, they feel like they must post about it because that is what their followers and the stakeholders expect. These two parts are what I call, respectively, an offensive and defensive issue profile strategy. Comfort signifies that politicians often feel most at ease talking about the issues they are specialised in because they feel like they fully grasp all complexities and know the full context of the most important aspects of the topics they work on. Thus, it is often a matter of whether the politician feels credible and a reliable source of information when talking about an issue. In the same vein, politicians indicate that they refrain from making social media messages about issues they are not specialised in and would be more inclined to retweet their colleagues from their party that work on the issue. The window of opportunity refers to the theory by Kingdon (1995), where he explains how sometimes windows open for political actors to take action. These windows of opportunity also pertain to the online communication of politicians; often, unexpected events happen that present politicians with an opportunity to push their specialised issues. Politicians are often best suited to grasp these opportunities for the issues they specialise in because they know all the ins and outs of those issues. They can link them to other aspects and problems in society, etcetera. Thus politicians actively scan newspapers and social media to find these windows and capitalise on them. Finally, in parliament, the institutional context forces politicians to specialise. It is not feasible to work on every issue. Thus, politicians of a parliamentary party group are allocated to different committees in parliament, enforcing a division of labour across all available MPs. Moreover, there seems to be an unspoken rule that one does not work on the topics of a colleague within the same party. This also translates to social media, where every politician will only concern themselves with

their own issues and refrain from making posts about topics they do not work on. In the cases that they do 'trespass', they often retweet or share the message of their colleague.

Interestingly, this division of labour also ensures that backbench MP's have difficulties in maintaining a generalist profile. In political science, researchers often make the distinction between generalists and specialists. However, during the interviews, it became apparent that this distinction is not immediately relevant for regular parliamentarians. The interviewees indicated that they are often too busy to deal with issues outside of their own specialisations, thus not allowing them to follow up on other issues. As a result, the parliamentary party group leader and the party leader remain the generalists par excellence.

## **7.4 Demand-side: How does the (online) public respond?**

Analysing which issues politicians talk about on social media and why they choose to do so was only the first main goal of the dissertation. The second main goal was to examine if this strategy of politicians was successful. In other words, is this the type of content by politicians that their followers on social media want to see? In order to investigate this premise, I used the audience engagement of politicians' social media messages as a proxy. User engagement is grasped by the metrics that we can see on each social media message. On Facebook, they typically fall into three categories: likes (or more general reactions), shares and comments. I assumed that more audience engagement meant that this was content that followers were interested in or triggered a response. Of course, user engagement does not necessarily imply support. People can leave negative or hate comments underneath social media messages. However, at the same time, we can argue that most of the people who encounter the social media messages of politicians are followers of their social media accounts or public pages. In fact, when asked why they choose to follow politicians on social media, the two main reasons people come up with are that they want to stay informed about the work of the politician and because they support them. Thus, we can assume the large majority of audience engagement to be a sign of support and/or an indication that they like this type of content.

This dissertation devotes two chapters to investigating which factors increase the audience engagement of politicians' Facebook posts. In chapter 5, we investigated general factors, such as the degree of positive and negative emotional language, the effect of elections and personal versus political content. In chapter 6, I specifically zoomed in on the impact of the three



aforementioned issue strategies: issue specialisation, issue ownership and media salience on the amount of audience engagement a Facebook post made by a politician received, while taking the number of posts, the number of followers, the status of the politician and the party of the politician into account.

What did these studies tell us about the audience engagement of the Facebook posts by politicians? First, if politicians want to score a lot of reactions, posting personal content is the way to go. Our analyses show that posts with private content score 16 percent more reactions than posts that are purely about policy or campaign posts (such as asking citizens to vote for them or announcing their place on the ballot list). This is a phenomenon that politicians themselves notice as well. When I asked politicians what they thought leads to more audience engagement on their social media posts, almost all politicians mentioned personal content. Pictures of them eating ice cream and being at an amusement park with their children are the posts that score best.

Nevertheless, this shows only half of the picture. While private content, such as social media messages showing their family, is the best at garnering reactions, which is also the type of audience engagement most easily given, they score worst in terms of shares, which is not easily given. Our results show that privatised social media messages receive 42 percent fewer shares than political content on average. This makes sense; people are more inclined to share content that, for instance, is useful for their network or helps them profile themselves (Berger & Milkman, 2014). Sharing a picture of a politician eating ice cream does not have the same value. Second, to examine the effect of how politicians formulated their social media messages on audience engagement, we analysed the effect of positive and negative emotional words in the Facebook posts made by politicians. First of all, on average, there are more positive than negative words in the online communication of politicians, even though this is very skewed. Second, both positive and negative emotional language positively affect audience engagement. On average, the effects of negative emotional language seem to be more pronounced than those of positive emotional language. We could thus say that citizens react less to more neutral social media messages.

A final more general factor in the analyses was the effect of election periods. Even though multiple scholars have posited the notion of a permanent campaign (Larsson, 2014) with politicians being consistently active on social media (Haman & Školník, 2021), we cannot

ignore the significance of elections. Elections are the pinnacle of democracy and, in turn, cause increased attention to politicians by the media and increased public interest in politics (Van Aelst & De Swert, 2009). Do citizens exhibit different interaction behaviour during the last four weeks before an election? Two election periods were present within our research timeframe, local elections and a 'big' election day where citizens had to vote for the regional, federal and European elections. As a whole, elections seem to boost both the amount of social media messages that politicians put out and increase all types of audience engagement. For example, on average, we see an increase of 17 percent more comments, 27 percent more reactions and 35 percent more shares. This means that citizens are more appreciative of content by politicians or that they more actively search for content by politicians.

Regarding the type of post (i.e. private versus political), we predominantly see the same pattern: private posts get more reactions, but political content receives substantially more shares in campaign times. Regarding emotional language, one trend is visible; namely, politicians use less emotional language in campaigns, both positive and negative. If politicians do use emotional language in the run-up to an election, it has a smaller effect on user engagement than in routine periods. This means that the distinction between routine and election periods is empirically necessary and that time does matter.

All in all, through this first step, we now understand which general factors impact the audience engagement of the Facebook posts by politicians. However, the main focus of this dissertation is centred around the issue emphasis strategies of politicians. Thus, in the next step, I examined the effects of issue emphasis on audience engagement to see if these strategies are successful. From chapters three and four, we know that politicians mostly talk about the issues they specialise in on social media and, to a lesser extent, the issues their party owns. Nevertheless, this dissertation found that these strategies only have marginal effects on voters in routine periods. Both issue ownership and issue specialisation do not significantly impact the number of interactions a Facebook post generates. However, riding the wave does positively impact audience engagement. If politicians post about more salient issues in the news, they will garner more appreciation from their followers on social media. The preference for salient topics could entail that citizens reward politicians if they go off-topic and talk about something else than their specialisation for a change.

Additionally, it seems that citizens care more about how something is said, for instance, in a more emotional way. Thus our initial expectation that issue specialisation and issue ownership lead to more audience engagement does not hold. As was mentioned before, citizens actually follow politicians because they want to stay up to date on the work of the politicians. However, this does not motivate citizens to also interact with Facebook posts. Content that is out of the ordinary, such as content about issues that are being discussed in the news or when politicians use more emotional language, might be more refreshing and might trigger the followers more to interact with it because it stands out more compared to posts that deal with the same issues as usual.

Be that as it may, during periods of heightened attention to politics, such as elections, we do see an increase in appreciation for content about the specialisation of politicians. Political information becomes more relevant for citizens during the run-up to an election. Not only will they be more responsive to information about politics, but they will also actively look up information pertaining to politics. Citizens want to be informed in order to make a well-considered vote-choice at the ballot box. The different effect points again to the importance of empirically distinguishing between routine and election periods.

## **7.5 Implications**

My research has implications for both scientific research on political communication as well as for society at large. On a scientific note, my dissertation has broadened our knowledge of the communication of politicians and its effects. There is a long tradition of studies on how political parties behave and to which issues these parties pay attention. This PhD shows the importance of focussing on individual politicians. My research has demonstrated that even in a system with strong parties, there are differences between members of the same party. This can be explained by the fact that politicians compete both with politicians from other parties as well as with politicians from their own party. And thus, I find further evidence that political parties are not overbearing entities but rather collections of politicians that have similar, yet not identical, preferences.

In the introduction, I mention McNair's (2017) definition of political communication, which includes the statement that it is communication with the purpose of achieving specific objectives. This dissertation has shown an additional way how politicians use communication

to achieve their goals, namely selective issue emphasis. This follows the trend of politicians trying to build a ‘personalized’ profile (Van Aelst et al., 2012); thus, it makes sense for research to shift its attention to individual politicians and how their communication deviates or is in line with the party at large.

Broader speaking, throughout the dissertation, there is a tension between the behaviour of politicians and the result of that behaviour, namely, politicians do something (posting about the issues that they specialize in), but it does not seem to pay off (it does not raise audience engagement). Maybe politicians are not as rational as we think they are? Or there might be different mechanisms at play? We should start by asking ourselves the question of whether issue specialisation is a good strategy for politicians? My results point to a nuanced answer to the question. If we look at short-term gains, we can definitely say no. When politicians talk about the issues they specialise in on social media, it does not perform exceptionally well in terms of audience reactions. These audience metrics matter because they can help spread the message of the politicians among citizens that do not follow them, and they can be an indicator of what type of content their followers want to see. Even more so, when politicians do not post about their specialised issues and talk about salient issues in the media or their personal life, the amount of audience engagement suddenly goes up. Consequently, engaging with the public on social media by posting about your specialised issues does not particularly work in the short term.

The result is a big paradox because politicians keep exhibiting this behaviour of focussing on their specialised issues on social media. Thus, why do politicians keep doing it? There might be two potential answers to that question. A first answer might be that politicians simply are not interested in audience engagement and that studying likes, shares, comments and so on is not a good measurement of, for instance, the success of their online communication. Nevertheless, during the interviews, almost all politicians stressed the importance of audience engagement and that it is something they keep in the back of their minds. Therefore, this explanation does not really hold. A second answer might be found in payoffs in the long run. Even though there are few immediate gains when they post a message about their specialisation on social media, politicians build up a certain reputation by consistently posting about it. It is crucial for politicians to build up this reputation of being the specialist of their party in specific policy fields. First of all, to signal their expertise towards journalists. If certain events happen, journalists look for expert sources to comment on what is happening and give context. Thus, it

is essential for journalists to know who the expert sources are for specific issues. Consequently, if politicians can convincingly signal that they are their party's specialists, it means potential media appearances, which is more visibility for the politicians. As I have extensively covered in my dissertation, visibility is essential for politicians; thus, being recognised as a specialist and appearing in the news is key. Additionally, specialisation and media appearances help politicians in being taken more seriously and legitimise the point they are trying to make. By consistently paying attention to certain issues, politicians can showcase their expertise and slowly but surely, start being associated with those issues. This might not necessarily work in the short term with the public, but it does work with journalists and, by extension, other societal groups in the long run. This is further exemplified by the fact that talking about issue ownership also does not work for politicians. The same logic can be applied here as well. Politicians do not necessarily post these social media messages with the general audience in mind but might rather do this in order to please their party selectorate.

Furthermore, building a long term reputation is also essential within their parties for politicians. At the start of a new term, parliamentary party groups come together and divide all committees among all available elected MPs, resulting in a division of labour. Some policy issues are more popular among MPs than others, and it is not uncommon for multiple politicians to want to handle the same issue. During the interviews, multiple politicians said that seniority and expertise in an issue is often the single most important deciding factor. Thus, if politicians have already been able to establish their expertise and specialisation, it helps them in getting to tackle their preferred issues.

In sum, the online issue strategies of politicians are not only intended to influence the public but also to reach journalists, interest groups and high ranking members of their party. Nevertheless, we must not underestimate the influence social media metrics can have on politics. Being able to reach audiences in an approachable and accessible way and proficiently engaging with citizens is also an important skill for politicians. Social media metrics can provide a good measure if politicians are successful in this regard. Social media allow politicians to create supporter bases and let citizens know what they are working on. Regular citizens might otherwise not know what is going on in parliament; thus, social media can also help bridge the gap between politicians and citizens. Therefore, we could also say that it is important that politicians can keep their followers engaged and interested. Additionally, party leadership might be monitoring which of their members are active and clear communicators.

MPs who fit this profile might find themselves higher up on the ballot list because their name recognition is higher or because they might be more effective in the campaign, as they are strongly skilled in communication. Hence, achieving higher numbers of audience engagement on social media posts can be valuable to politicians. My research shows that content about politicians' private life does very well in that regard. Therefore, finding a good mix between private and specialised content seems to be an opportune strategy for politicians. The only question that does remain is what the most profitable combination is between private and substantial content, between current topics and topics they personally 'own'. Or, in other words, how often should politicians deviate from their regular regime of posting about specialised issues.

## **7.6 Strengths and limitations and further research**

Of course, the present research has several limitations. Accordingly, this leaves room for recommendations for future research. I will end this chapter by discussing the strengths but also the limitations of the dissertation and indicate how future researchers can handle these limitations.

First of all, the generalizability of my dissertation. In order to understand the intricacies of the issue attention of MPs on social media and their effects on audience engagement, I studied the case of Belgium and, more specifically, Dutch-speaking Belgian politicians. Although Belgium is a good case, given the fact that politicians are incentivised to pursue individual vote-seeking strategies, it is still only one country. This does raise the question of to what extent my findings are applicable to different countries. I argue that at least two central mechanisms can be considered universal. First of all, I find that the institutional context forces Belgian parliamentarians to specialise. There exists a division of labour where not every politician works on every issue. Politicians then communicate about the issues that they are specialised in. In other words, we can expect that in other parliamentary systems with multiple parties, such as the Netherlands or Sweden that have this same division of labour, to exhibit the same pattern. Second, in political systems with strong parties, i.e. partitocracies, the party will exert a strong influence on politicians to make sure they do not trespass on their party members' issues. At the same time, politicians are incentivised to actively communicate about their specialised issues to show their expertise to the top of the party who compose the ballot list. Belgium is not the only country in the world that is a partitocracy and where there is a division of labour in

parliament. However, in some contexts, my findings might not be applicable. Majoritarian systems such as, for instance, the United States or the United Kingdom might find different results when doing similar research. Therefore, I would recommend future researchers to compare countries with different parliamentary systems.

Secondly, through this dissertation, I have uncovered a lot about the so-called 'supply side', or in other words, which issues politicians pay attention to on social media and why they choose to do so. However, my research has maybe uncovered fewer aspects of the demand side (what is the content that citizens want to see from politicians on social media). I believe that to fully grasp the complexities of this demand-side, we need more experimental research. I would advise the following experiment. The experiment I would propose could expose citizens to different types of social media messages by politicians in terms of issues, types (private – political), composition (photo – video – plain text) and the number of audience engagement (low – high) and then investigate which characteristics of the post are best remembered or from which types of posts citizens learn the most. Interaction might be less meaningful if citizens do not remember anything afterwards from the post. Unfortunately, conducting experiments exceeded the scope of my dissertation. Nevertheless, I hope that other researchers will explore the demand-side more thoroughly.

Third, we must not forget the power social media algorithms have over the content that we see on the platforms (REFS). In my dissertation, I study audience engagement; it is, however, important to note that engagement is also partially determined by visibility, or, differently put, how many people encounter the message politicians create. This visibility, in turn, is, for a large part, dependent on the algorithm of the platform. Therefore, it is important to understand that audience engagement is not something an author of a post has full control over.

Finally, I would like to highlight some strengths the present dissertation has. First of all, the combination of data we have collected is impressive. In our project, we used the state of the art to collect over 50,000 Facebook posts, 50,000 Tweets, 10,000 parliamentary initiatives and mass media data which were all automatically labelled, and combined this with qualitative interview data analyses. By combining all these different types of methodologies and datasets, we get a rich insight into the dynamics and processes which are at the root of the social media posting behaviour of politicians. I study the actual behaviour of politicians and not solely what politicians say that they do. In chapter 3, for instance, we analyse what politicians post on social

media and see which factors impact this behaviour. Nevertheless, I combined quantitative research with qualitative research by asking politicians directly about their behaviour to understand why they act the way they do. I believe that combining research methods provides us with a much stronger understanding of the research subject and that the two enhance each other.

As a final remark, I want to briefly elaborate on what my findings mean for democracy. Nowadays, pundits often like to point out the negative side of social media, where politicians might become more superficial and sensational in search of likes. My research actually shows that this is not the case. In most instances, politicians talk about their work and policy regarding the issues they are specialised in. This is a good thing from a democratic point of view. The people that we elect for parliament are specialists who know what they are talking about, and they actively try to communicate their point of view to the public, maybe in the hopes of educating them. Thus, we could say that politicians are doing what they are supposed to do: gather information, build up contacts with relevant interest groups in the field, and put forward policy solutions based on evidence and correct information. It would be concerning if politicians would only be swayed by the issues of the day and post superficial social media messages about their private life to garner likes. By providing the public with different substantiated policy proposals, citizens can more accurately decide which parties fit them best.

This is not to say that there are no reasons for concern. Even though politicians talk about the issues that they are specialized in, it does not mean that they are spreading information that is factually true. It is noticeable how disinformation on social media has become a real threat to democracy in recent years. Citizens and political actors (knowingly) spread information online that is factually false, purposefully manipulated or decontextualised (Humprecht et al., 2021; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Therefore, it is still imperative that everyone who uses social media assesses the information they see with a critical eye. Future studies should check whether the information on issues politicians share on social media is actually true or not and how often politicians share misinformation. Additionally, the rise of Instagram and especially Tiktok have presented politicians with a challenge. Whereas the social media that I studied rely more on text, both Instagram and Tiktok primarily rely on visuals, such as pictures or videos, where it might be harder to fully explain an issue's intricacies. I think we must be careful that this does not result in a 'dumbing down' of politics where politicians go for quick soundbites or hollow slogans and where the content goes lost. It would be best if politicians find ways to translate their expert knowledge on issues to these new formats.



After this dissertation, I am still convinced that social media can help to inform voters on issues that matter. Before I started researching this topic, I was rather pessimistic about the social media communication of politicians. I had heard about excessive micro-targeting, politicians bickering with each other, politicians attacking one another, people such as Donald Trump going rampant on Twitter, etcetera. Overall you could say that my view of politicians on social media was not great, and this is a sentiment that is still prevalent among a lot of citizens to this day. However, studying what politicians actually do on social media for over 4 years drastically changed my view on the matter. The politicians that I spoke with put effort into their social media communication and did not just post superficial content to score easy like. I got the feeling that they do really hope that citizens actually read their messages and learn something from the content they put out. Even though social media can still be a big cesspool of negativity, hate speech and disinformation, it makes me optimistic seeing these politicians trying their best to not follow these trends.

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## Hoofdstuk 8 Appendices

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### 8.1 Appendix A

Issue attention on total media agenda

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Issue	% Attention on total media agenda
Law & Crime	14.0%
Mobility & traffic	13.5%
Foreign affairs	11.7%
Culture	10.3%
Health	6.9%
Government affairs	6.7%
Education	5.9%
Employment	4.0%
Defence	3.2%
Domestic commerce	3.0%
Environment	2.9%
Migration	2.7%
Civil rights	2.6%
Macroeconomics	2.4%
Energy	2.4%
Housing	2.2%
Agriculture	2.1%
Science & technology	1.9%
Social affairs	1.1%
Spatial planning	0.5%

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## 8.2 Appendix B

Specialization distribution across parties (part 1)

	Macroeconomics	Civil rights	Healthcare	Agriculture	Work	Education	Environment	Energy	Migration	Mobility & traffic
N-VA (N=52)	21.2%	7.7%	11.5%	7.7%	11.5%	15.4%	5.8%	9.6%	17.3%	19.2%
VLD (N=16)	31.3%	0.0%	12.5%	6.3%	12.5%	12.5%	12.5%	12.5%	6.3%	25.0%
CD&V (N= 33)	21.2%	12.1%	12.1%	6.1%	15.2%	18.2%	12.1%	9.1%	21.2%	27.3%
sp.a (N=23)	17.4%	8.7%	21.7%	4.3%	17.4%	21.7%	17.4%	8.7%	8.7%	21.7%
Groen (N=13)	15.4%	30.8%	15.4%	7.7%	15.4%	23.1%	7.7%	15.4%	15.4%	23.1%
VB (N=7)	42.9%	0.0%	14.3%	14.3%	28.6%	14.3%	14.3%	28.6%	71.4%	14.3%

Specialization distribution across parties (part 2)

	Law & crime	Social affairs	Housing	Domestic commerce	Defence	Science & technology	Foreign affairs	Functioning of democracy	Spatial planning	Culture
N-VA (N=52)	19.2%	19.2%	15.4%	17.3%	5.8%	11.5%	19.2%	26.9%	11.5%	11.5%
VLD (N=16)	12.5%	18.8%	18.8%	12.5%	18.8%	12.5%	12.5%	25.0%	18.8%	6.3%
CD&V (N= 33)	15.2%	18.2%	18.2%	12.1%	6.1%	12.1%	27.3%	21.2%	21.2%	12.1%
sp.a (N=23)	13.0%	26.1%	13.0%	4.3%	17.4%	13.0%	17.4%	21.7%	13.0%	17.4%
Groen (N=13)	7.7%	15.4%	7.7%	0.0%	7.7%	7.7%	15.4%	23.1%	7.7%	15.4%
VB (N=7)	14.3%	28.6%	14.3%	0.0%	14.3%	0.0%	0.0%	14.3%	0.0%	0.0%

## 8.3 Appendix C

Regressions with objective specialization

	Model 1: Media agenda	Model 2: Twitter agenda	Model 3: Parliamentary agenda
Objective Specialization	2.10	1.81***	5.80***
Issue ownership	-.02	.05***	-.03*
Media		.23***	.23***
Twitter	.53***		.48***
Parliament	.30***	.27***	
Party (ref=N-VA)			
Open VLD	-.45	.73	.22
CD&V	.25	.05	-.20
Sp.a	.16	.11	.39
Groen	-.43	.61	.39
Vlaams Belang	-.82	1.12	.53
Total media attention	.26**	.09	.12
Intercept	-.31	.37	.31
N (total)	2900	2900	2900
N (Politicians)	144	144	144
AIC	21,729.04	19,315.6	20,927.95

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001

## 8.4 Appendix D

**Macroeconomics:** Inflation, economic, productivity, VAT, taxes, government spending, income, GDP, ministry of finances

**Civil rights:** Gender, antisemitism, burqa, LGBT, diversity, foster parent, ethnicity, gender quota, free speech, press freedom

**Health:** cancer, abortion, pharmacy, prescription, medicine, drug use, HIV, heart attack, hospital, psychiatry, therapy, STD, flu, smoking, organ donors, alcohol abuse

**Agriculture:** farms, wheat, pig, beef, acres, tractor, food inspection, food quality, fishing, animal welfare, slaughter house, shrimp

**Employment:** pension, employee, intern, minimum wage, salary, work environment, strike, labour unions, work accident, job student

**Education:** high school, teacher, diploma, education, kindergarten, school, student, curriculum, bullying, university, learning disability, skipping classes

**Environment:** climate change, pollution, emission, air quality, drinking water, greenhouse gasses, deforestation, CO<sub>2</sub>, littering, sewers, nature conservation

**Energy:** Oil, nuclear energy, wind turbine, power outage, coals, oilrig, fuels, electricity, geothermic, hydraulic, Fukushima, gas plant

**Migration:** asylum, migrant, foreigner, newcomer, illegals, integration, citizenship, refugee, residence permit, nationality

**Mobility & traffic:** airlines, highway, public transport, pedestrian, car, driver's license, bicycle path, tram, train, bus, traffic jam, pedestrian crossing

**Law & crime:** crime, gangster, blackmail, extortion, murder, jailer, prison, police, fraud, suicide, domestic violence, gun control

**Social affairs:** foodbank, poverty, children day-care, maternity leave, social exclusion, social welfare, retirement home, home care, volunteer work

**Housing:** apartment, homeless, rent prices, public housing, urban development, squatting, construction permit, housing, rental property

**Domestic commerce:** banks, bankruptcy, investment, mortgage, entrepreneur, exchange market, shareholder, copyright, consumers, life insurance

**Defence:** war, soldiers, army, NATO, navy, espionage, peace mission, fighter plane, veterans, nuclear weapons, military

**Science & technology:** computer, internet, robots, satellites, space travel, telecommunication, European space agency, astronaut, weather forecast, technology, google

**Foreign affairs:** foreign aid, G20, genocide, ambassador, diplomat, whale hunt, famine, IMF, doctors without border, Schengen, brexit

**Government affairs:** elections, national holiday, royal family, mailman, government company, political mandate, compulsory voting, municipal administration, confederalism

**Spatial planning:** forest management, dikes, floods, national park, mineral resources, nature reserve, habitat, water company

**Culture:** art, artwork, literature, TV-station, games, festival, public broadcaster, monument, museum, radio station, culture sector, cinema



## 8.5 Appendix E

Aggregate share of issue attention on three individual agendas

	Media	Twitter	Parliament
Mobility & traffic	12.90%	9.70%	12.70%
Law & crime	10.30%	8.00%	6.90%
Government affairs	9.90%	5.80%	4.50%
Employment	7.70%	7.70%	6.40%
Education	6.40%	9.20%	7.40%
Health	6.30%	5.80%	7.40%
Culture	5.40%	3.50%	2.90%
Social affairs	5.00%	4.20%	3.80%
Civil rights	3.60%	5.60%	2.50%
Environment	3.50%	4.10%	2.60%
Macroeconomics	3.40%	7.50%	5.90%
Migration	3.40%	5.30%	5.20%
Housing	3.40%	1.30%	2.50%
Energy	3.40%	3.10%	3.20%
Defence	3.10%	2.40%	2.20%
Foreign affairs	2.90%	1.80%	4.80%
Agriculture	2.70%	2.70%	5.00%
Domestic commerce	2.40%	2.60%	5.30%
Spatial planning	0.70%	0.40%	1.90%
Science & technology	0.60%	0.70%	1.20%

## 8.6 Appendix F

T-test Individual attention vs. Party attention, Owned issues

	Specialized	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	p
Media	No	499	6.66	8.02	.00
	Yes	105	14.03	19.16	
Twitter	No	499	5.14	5.07	.00
	Yes	105	11.29	13.79	
Parliament	No	499	6.69	8.32	.00
	Yes	105	14.03	19.42	

T-test Individual attention vs. Party attention, Non-owned issues

	Specialized	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	p
Media	No	1953	5.27	7.91	.00
	Yes	323	13.09	19.01	
Twitter	No	1953	3.29	4.20	.00
	Yes	323	9.38	14.33	
Parliament	No	1953	5.69	7.99	.00
	Yes	323	13.61	19.08	

## 8.7 Appendix G

Multilevel regressions with total number of documents

	Model 1: Media agenda	Model 2: Twitter agenda	Model 3: Parliamentary agenda
Specialization	2.35**	3.70***	5.66***
Issue ownership	-.02	.05***	-.03*
Media		.22***	.23***
Twitter	.52***		.46***
Parliament	.30***	.26***	
Party (ref=N-VA)			
Open VLD	-.57	.67	-.12
CD&V	.18	.03	-.36
Sp.a	.01	-.04	.01
Groen	-.57	.49	.02
Vlaams Belang	-1.11	.80	-.28
Total media attention	.25**	.08	.09
Total documents	.00	.00	.00
Specialization*Total documents	.01	.00	.00
Intercept	-.17	.24	.80
N (total)	2900	2900	2900
N (Politicians)	144	144	144
AIC	21,727.71	19,262.62	20,949.97

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01;\*\*\*p<.001

Multilevel regressions without other two agendas

	Model 1: Media agenda	Model 2: Twitter agenda	Model 3: Parliamentary agenda
Specialization	11.17***	9.11***	12.59***
Issue ownership	0.00	0.04**	-0.01
Party (ref=N-VA)			
Open VLD	-0.15	0.64	0.19
CD&V	-0.01	-0.14	-0.41
Sp.a	0.07	0.01	0.07
Groen	-0.16	0.55	0.29
Vlaams Belang	-0.78	0.63	-0.10
Total media attention	0.49****	0.28*	0.34**
Intercept	0.75	0.97	1.46
N (total)	2900	2900	2900
N (Politicians)	144	144	144
AIC	22,690.91	20,384.56	21,924.27

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001

## 8.8 Appendix H

### Interview information

	Date	Duration	Party
Interview 1	3/03/2021	55m36s	N-VA
Interview 2	12/03/2021	1u0m1s	CD&V
Interview 3	4/03/2021	40m51s	CD&V
Interview 4	1/03/2021	39m38s	Open VLD
Interview 5	3/03/2021	39m53s	Open VLD
Interview 6	2/03/2021	33m16s	Vooruit
Interview 7	1/03/2021	50m52s	Vooruit
Interview 8	5/03/2021	57m57s	Groen
Interview 9	3/03/2021	52m39s	Groen
Interview 10	2/04/2021	55m50s	Vlaams Belang
Interview 11	10/03/2021	59m29s	Vlaams Belang
Interview 12	16/03/2021	51m38s	N-VA

## **8.9 Appendix I**

### **Codebook**

#### **1. Timing**

All matters concerning the timing of posting social media messages.

#### **2. Generalist vs. specialist**

All matters concerning being either a specialist or a generalist and the reasoning behind it.

#### **3. Origin and interest of specialisation**

All matters concerning how the specialisation of the politician came to be and their interest in their specialised issues.

#### **4. PPG arrangements on issues**

All matters concerning how different issues/committees are allocated within the PPG and by extension how this then translates to specialisation, such as being the spokesperson and weighing in on the viewpoints of the party.

#### **5. Awareness of specialisation among public**

All matters concerning to what extent citizens and social media followers know what he specialisation of the politician is.

#### **6. Arrangements on the party level**

All matters concerning agreements on the party level about which issues politicians are allowed to talk about on social media.

#### **7. Consulting party specialist**

All matters concerning whether or not they consult the party specialist when they communicate about a topic that is not their specialisation.

#### **8. Reason to post about a specific event or case**

All matters concerning the reason why the politician decided to post about the specific case of the social media message at that moment.

#### **9. Public on different social media platforms**

All matters concerning the (different) public on different social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram).

#### **10. Technical aspects different social media platforms**

All matters concerning the technical aspects of different social media platforms, such as things that are possible or not possible on one platform or limitations of certain platforms.

#### **11. Preference for specific social media platform**

All matters concerning the preference for 1 specific platform.

#### **12. Audience engagement as yardstick**

All matters concerning whether or not they see social media as a yardstick of their performance

#### **13. Importance of audience engagement**

All matters concerning to what extent politicians are preoccupied with the audience engagement of their social media messages.

#### **14. Factors that lead to more audience engagement**

All matters concerning which factors politicians think lead to more audience engagement.

#### **15. Factors that lead to less audience engagement**

All matters concerning which factors politicians think lead to less audience engagement.

#### **16. Reacting to comments**

All matters concerning responding or not responding to comments.

#### **17. Hate/negative comments**

All matters concerning negative or hate comments and how they deal with it/

#### **18. Revising or deleting social media messages**

All matters concerning revising or deleting social media messages.

#### **19. Influence media attention on whether or not they post something**

All matters concerning the ‘riding the wave’ behavior of politicians or if media attention about an issue makes them post about it.

#### **20. Added value of sharing newspaper articles**

All matters concerning the added value sharing newspaper articles has according to the politicians

#### **21. Reaction of public on sharing newspaper articles**

All matters concerning what the public does with the shared article according to the politicians, such as whether or not they actually click on it.

#### **22. Timing of sharing newspaper articles**

All matters concerning when they decide to share a newspaper article, such as if they are mentioned in the article.

#### **23. Parliamentary work**

All matters concerning translating their parliamentary work to social media.

#### **24. Issue ownership**

All matters concerning the issue(s) that the party of the politician owns and how this effects them, for instance do they feel like they have to post about it even though it is not their specialisation.

#### **25. Issue profile**

All matters concerning creating an issue profile and the importance thereof.



## **26. Local level**

All matters concerning the local mandate of the politicians and the effect on their social media.

## **27. Staff members**

All matters concerning whether or not they use a staff member for their social media.

## **28. Reaching the public**

All matters concerning if they reach the public or not.

## **29. Political use of Instagram**

All matters concerning how Instagram is used in politics.

## **30. Privatised social media messages**

All matters concerning posting about private matters on social media

## **31. Crossmediality**

All matters concerning the different use of different platforms, such as linking from one platform to the other or tailoring a message to a specific platform.

## **32. Importance party puts on social media**

All matters concerning how important social media presence is to the party of the politician, for instance does the party offer assistance or encourages politicians to use social media.

## **33. Other parties**

All matters concerning the functioning and behavior of other parties

## **34. Intra-party competition on issues**

All matters concerning completion about issues within the party.

## **35. Private Facebook profile**

All matters concerning a public page versus a private profile on Facebook.

**36. Feelings about social media**

All matters concerning how politicians feel about social media.

**37. Issue saliency public**

All matters concerning the importance of an issue in the minds of the broader public.

**38. Spontaneous vs. thought through**

All matters concerning the spontaneity of posting on social media.

**39. Different use Facebook & Twitter**

All matters concerning using Facebook and Twitter in a different way.

**40. Facebook ads**

All matters concerning using advertisements on Facebook and sponsored messages.

## 8.10 Appendix J

### Interview questions

#### *General questions*

- In political science we often make a distinction between on the one hand generalists, politicians that do not focus on a limited number of issues, but rather a wider range of issues. And specialists on the other hand, who are concerned with a small set of issues. Do you consider yourself to be more of a specialist or a generalist?
- What are the issues you are specialised in?
- Does your specialisation coincide with the committees in which you are seated in parliament?
- How did your specialisation come to be?
- Did you have an impact on the committees in which you are seated?
- Are you the spokesperson for your party when it comes to the issues you are specialised in?
- To what extent can you weigh in on your party's viewpoints concerning your specialised issues?
- To what extent do you think the public knows which issues you are specialised in?
- How often do you scroll through Facebook?
  - Never – Monthly – Weekly – Daily – Multiple times per day
- How often do you scroll through Twitter?
  - Never – Monthly – Weekly – Daily – Multiple times per day
- How often do you scroll through Instagram?
  - Never – Monthly – Weekly – Daily – Multiple times per day
- How often do you scroll through Reddit?
  - Never – Monthly – Weekly – Daily – Multiple times per day
- How often do you scroll through other social media?
  - Never – Monthly – Weekly – Daily – Multiple times per day
- How often do you post something on Facebook?
  - Never – Monthly – Weekly – Daily – Multiple times per day
- How often do you post something on Twitter?
  - Never – Monthly – Weekly – Daily – Multiple times per day

- How often do you post something on Instagram?
    - Never – Monthly – Weekly – Daily – Multiple times per day
  - How often do you post something on Reddit?
    - Never – Monthly – Weekly – Daily – Multiple times per day
  - How often do you post something on other social media?
    - Never – Monthly – Weekly – Daily – Multiple times per day
  - Do you post your messages on social media yourself or do you have a staff member who helps you?
  - Are there arrangements on the party level about social media?
    - About which topics you can or cannot talk?
- 1.

*Questions regarding the shown post*

- Why did you decide to make a message about this specific case?
  - What was the cause to react to this case?
  - Is this case special? Why?
  - Is this how you normally work?
  - To what extend does your local mandate impact your issue choice?
- You also posted this message on Twitter/Facebook. Do you usually post the same message on both platform?
  - Do you use the platforms in a different way?
  - Do you have a preference?
- Did you contact anyone before making this post?
- Is the amount of engagement score on this post more than you expected or less than you expected?
  - Do you often look at the engagement score of your social media messages?
- I saw that this post was underperforming/overperforming. Why do you think that is?
  - Do you feel that you generally know which factors influence the amount of audience engagement a post will get?
- This post did worse/better on Twitter/Facebook. Why do you think that is?
- Do you normally read the comments underneath your posts?
  - Do you react to comments?

- This post had X amount of critical comments, you did not respond to them. Do you normally go into discussion with people who respond negatively or do you generally ignore them?
- Suppose you had received negative comments to this post, would you have deleted it?

If about specialised issue

- You made a post about the issue you are specialised in, is that a deliberate strategy?
- Suppose an issue is high on the agenda, but it is not an issue you are specialised in. Would you still communicate about your specialised topic on social media?

If about ownership issues (and not specialised)

- Issue X is not your specialisation, but it is *the* issue of your party. Do you feel that you have to talk about that issue every now and then because it is the core issue of your party?
- Did you talk with the party specialist before posting this on social media?
  - How does the party specialist feel about you talking about their topic on social media (not a retweet or shared message)?
  - How does the party feel about you talking about something that is not ‘your’ topic on social media?

If it is a shared newspaper article

- I noticed that you yourself were mentioned in the article. Do you generally share articles in which you are mentioned on social media?
- What do you think is the added value of sharing a newspaper article as opposed to just a post or a tweet?

## 8.11 Appendix K

Standardized average engagement per classification of post (N = 34,408)

	Reactions	Shares	Comments
Political	-0.10	0.06	0.01
Private	0.15	-0.12	-0.05
Campaign	0.12	-0.06	0.00

## 8.12 Appendix L

Included politicians per party

		N-VA	Open VLD	CD&V	sp.a	Groen	Vlaams Belang	Indep.	Total
Included	No	34	26	20	15	15	1	2	113
	Yes	49	17	33	17	0	8	0	124
Total		83	43	53	32	15	9	2	237

## 8.13 Appendix M

### Descriptives independent variables 1

		Mean likes	Mean shares	Mean comments	Count
High profile	MP	78.31	9.87	8.71	24371
	High Profile	1097.31	168.81	140.47	10037
Elections	No	382.93	58.04	47.75	30526
	Yes	317.52	42.01	42.34	3882
Party	N-VA	711.90	74.75	76.32	10466
	Open VLD	72.08	12.28	9.96	4512
	CD&V	72.22	4.69	7.03	7273
	sp.a	202.34	34.89	32.91	5057
	Vlaams Belang	506.71	124.86	79.00	7100
Type of post	Campaign	275.58	19.22	27.24	8362
	Private	462.76	27.06	40.62	6356
	Political	389.86	81.37	57.70	19690

## 8.14 Appendix N

### Descriptives independent variables 2

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Page likes	104	341,061	24,891.52	50,144.80
Number of Posts	1	2514	963.73	844.83
Negative emotionality*	0	33	1.25	1.86
Positive emotionality*	0	59	2.61	2.93

\*before logarithmic transformation



## 8.15 Appendix O

Correlations emotionality and dependent variables

	Reactions	Shares	Comments	Positive emotionality	Negative emotionality
Reactions	1				
Shares	0.49***	1			
Comments	0.77***	0.49**	1		
Positive emotionality	-0.03***	0.01*	0.01	1	
Negative emotionality	0.05***	0.06**	0.10***	0.36***	1

## 8.16 Appendix Q

Fixed effects negative binomial regressions on number of reactions, shares & comments with interactions

	Reactions	Shares	Comments
Classification of post (ref=Private)			
Campaign	-0.08***	0.01	-0.04
Political	-0.13***	0.38***	0.14***
Negative emotionality	0.00	0.05**	0.01
Positive emotionality	0.02***	0.02*	0.01
Elections	0.24***	0.27***	0.16**
Political*Elections	-0.02	-0.02	-0.02
Campaign*Elections	-0.03	0.04	0.09
Negative emotion*Elections	-0.03*	-0.04**	-0.01
Positive emotion*Elections	-0.01	0.00	-0.01
Political*Negative emotion	0.04***	0.00	0.08**
Campaign*Negative emotion	0.02	0.03	0.05**
Political*Positive emotion	-0.01	0.00	-0.02
Campaign*Positive emotion	0.01	-0.2	0.03*

Political status (High profile)	-0.08***	0.14***	0.59***
Page likes	0.03***	0.02***	-
Number of post	0.04**	-0.02	-
Type of post (ref = Photo)			
Status	-0.17***	-0.13**	0.18***
Link	-0.22***	-0.07*	-0.02
Video	-0.11***	0.23***	0.05**
Party (Ref = N-VA)			
Open VLD	-0.02	-0.00	-0.51***
CD&V	0.03	0.15***	-0.36***
sp.a	0.14***	0.20***	-0.10
Vlaams Belang	0.02	0.18***	0.07**
Intercept	0.00	-1.29***	-0.84***

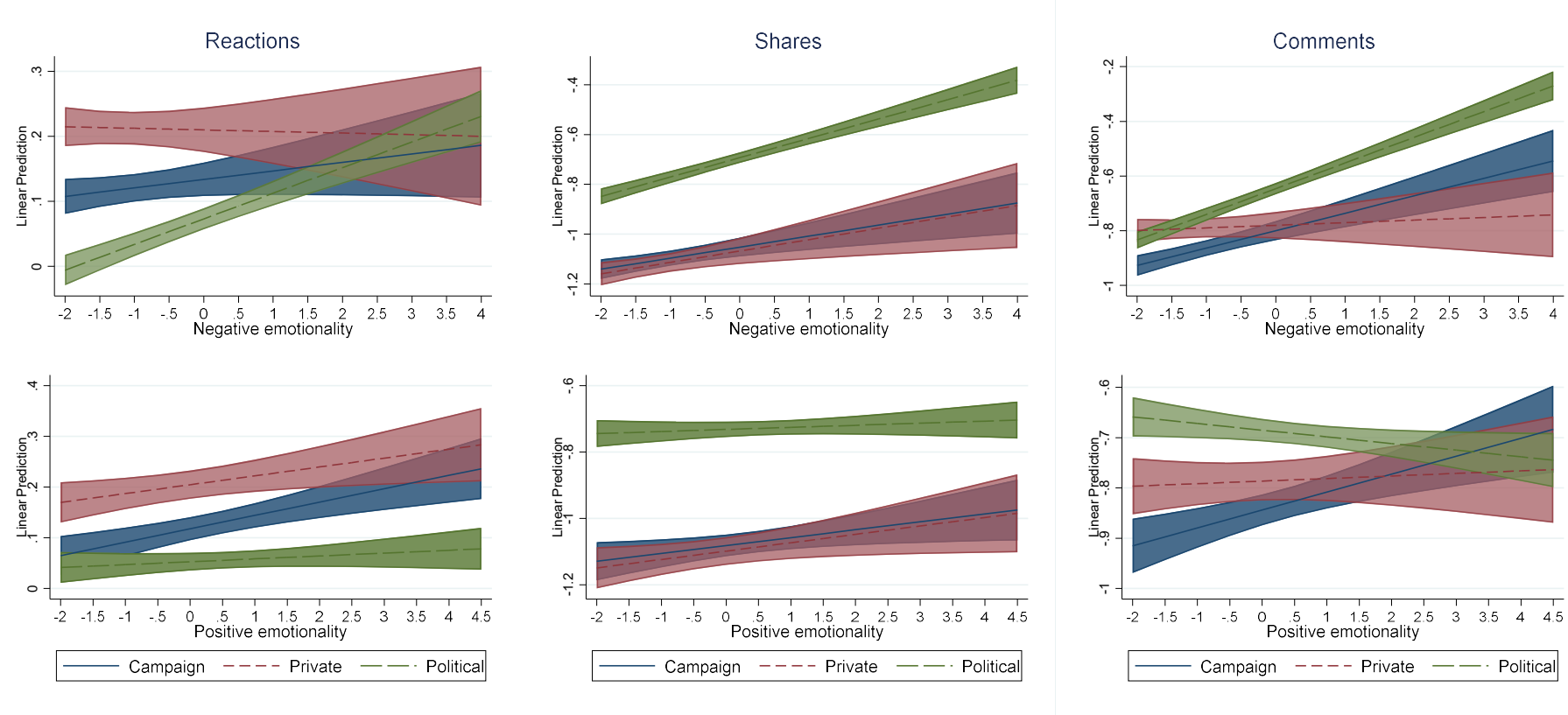
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\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001

Page likes and number of posts made was not included in the comments model because of modeling issues

# 8.17 Appendix R

Reactions, shares and comments between types of post for high and low emotionality



## 8.18 Appendix S

Issue ownership across parties

Party	Mobility & Traffic	Education	Macroeconomics	Civil rights	Migration	Law & Crime	Health	Energy	Social affairs	Environment	Culture
N-VA	39.6%	14.8%	27.5%	32.3%	63.4%	46.5%	10.9%	14%	16.9%	5.3%	16.7%
VLD	11.1%	8.6%	29.7%	6.1%	2.6%	8.3%	30.9%	25.2%	10.5%	2.2%	21.6%
CD&V	13.3%	64.8%	23.8%	12.3%	3.4%	23.7%	24%	9.4%	25.8%	5.6%	35.7%
sp.a	5.6%	8%	11.9%	17.7%	5.3%	3.4%	8.7%	4.4%	36.5%	1.5%	12%
VB	2.2%	1.8%	4%	16.3%	20.9%	17.1%	3.5%	3.1%	5.3%	1.7%	2.4%

## 8.19 Appendix T

Code	Precision	Recall
Macroeconomics	0.67	0.66
Civil rights	0.72	0.63
Health	0.74	0.59
Agriculture	0.75	0.58
Employment	0.74	0.67
Education	0.83	0.81
Environment	0.82	0.75
Energy	0.85	0.75
Migration	0.80	0.83
Mobility & traffic	0.81	0.79
Law & crime	0.73	0.77
Social affairs	0.69	0.71
Housing	0.74	0.57
Domestic commerce	0.59	0.39

Defence	0.76	0.46
Science & technology	0.44	0.26
Foreign trade	0.05	0.52
Foreign affairs	0.53	0.36
Gov. Affairs	0.53	0.67
Spatial planning	0.51	0.49
Culture	0.73	0.55

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## 8.20 Appendix U

	N-VA	Open VLD	CD&V	Vooruit	Vlaams Belang
Macroeconomics	2.5%	7.6%	3.3%	9.2%	4.4%
Civil rights	3.4%	7.5%	2.8%	1.7%	3.6%
Health	2.8%	4.8%	2.6%	1.9%	0.5%
Agriculture	3.3%	2.8%	2.5%	2.4%	0.4%
Employment	2.6%	8.9%	5.6%	9.5%	1.0%
Education	7.9%	5.5%	16.4%	8.5%	3.9%
Environment	4.3%	4.7%	4.6%	11.3%	1.9%
Energy	2.2%	8.0%	1.2%	3.3%	0.5%
Migration	14.3%	1.8%	1.1%	1.1%	34.1%
Mobility & traffic	8.1%	13.5%	18.8%	13.4%	3.6%
Law & crime	11.5%	5.2%	4.1%	3.5%	19.3%
Social affairs	10.3%	9.2%	10.0%	15.5%	3.7%
Housing	2.0%	2.8%	3.4%	2.2%	0.9%
Domestic commerce	2.1%	2.6%	4.1%	1.6%	0.2%



Defence	0.8%	0.5%	0.6%	1.4%	0.9%
Science & technology	1.2%	3.6%	1.5%	0.5%	0.2%
Foreign trade	1.7%	1.6%	1.3%	2.0%	1.9%
Foreign affairs	2.1%	1.6%	1.8%	1.0%	1.0%
Gov. Affairs	11.9%	4.8%	4.7%	4.0%	13.8%
Spatial planning	4.1%	3.6%	7.1%	5.5%	0.9%
Culture	3.2%	2.0%	3.5%	3.3%	0.3%
Herfindahl index	0.08	0.07	0.09	0.09	0.18

## 8.21 Appendix V

	Reactions	Shares	Comments
Personal issue specialization	0.97	1.01	0.94*
Party issue ownership	1.02	1.04	0.96
Media issue salience	1.15***	1.10	1.13*
Election period	1.15***	1.15***	1.07*
Page Likes	1.00***	1.00***	1.00***
Number of posts	1.04	1.01	1.05
Type of post (ref = Photo)			
Status	0.86***	0.88*	1.09
Link	0.86***	0.99	1.09***
Video	0.91***	1.18***	1.05
Party (Ref = N-VA)			
Open VLD	1.00	1.16*	1.08
CD&V	1.00	1.07	0.86**
sp.a	1.02	1.24***	1.15**

Vlaams Belang	1.05	1.09	1.05
Intercept	1.31***	0.46***	0.49***
<hr/>			
N (total)	10,211	10,211	10,211
N (Politicians)	118	118	118
AIC	10,9726.4	68,470.02	64,567.91
<hr/>			

## 8.22 Appendix W

	Mixed-effects ML regression	Log dependent variable
Personal issue specialization	20.42	0.01
Party issue ownership	-16.21	0.03
Media issue salience	113.90*	0.20***
Election period	-45.58	0.22***
Page Likes	0.02***	0.00***
Number of posts	-75.16***	1.08***
Type of post (ref = Photo)		
Status	69.72	-0.14**
Link	-11.23	-0.18***
Video	-38.87	-0.05
Party (Ref = N-VA)		
Open VLD	-133.97***	-0.11
CD&V	-135.00***	-0.04
sp.a	19.92	-0.03

Vlaams Belang	-19.24	0.58
Intercept	90.80***	3.12***
<hr/>		
N (total)	10,211	10,211
N (Politicians)	118	118
AIC	16,7333.5	27,996.01
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# Abstract

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To be written