Paid digital campaigning during the 2018 local elections in Flanders: Which candidates jumped on the bandwagon?

Gunther Vanden Eynde, Gert-Jan Put, Bart Maddens and Gertjan Muyters
KU Leuven

Abstract

This research note investigates the role of paid digital campaigning in the 2018 local elections in Flanders. We make use of the official declarations which candidates are legally required to submit. In these declarations, candidates indicate whether and how much they invested in online campaigning tools during the four months preceding the elections. We collected data on a sample of 3.588 individual candidates running in the 30 municipalities of the Arrondissement Leuven. A multilevel logistic regression model shows that the odds of spending on digital campaigning increases amongst incumbent aldermen and local councillors. The latter finding supports the normalisation thesis of digital campaigning. The results also show that scale is important: the more potential voters a candidate has, the higher the odds that the candidate invests in digital tools.

Introduction

This research note investigates which election candidates have invested in digital campaign tools during the 2018 local election campaign. The use of personal websites and social media in electoral contexts has strongly gained popularity among parties and politicians, as these instruments are relatively inexpensive and easily kept up to date (Androniciuc & Moreno, 2018; Carlson, Djupsund, & Strandberg, 2014; Sudulich & Wall, 2009, 2010; Suiter, 2015). Particularly in countries with strict campaign finance regulations and low spending caps, digital tools seem an interesting expansion for candidates who are looking to run prominent but at the same time cost-effective election campaigns.

While there have been many studies on how actively candidates are using digital campaign tools, a different question is which type of candidate will be inclined to spend campaign budget on these tools. In this note, we juxtapose two competing theories from the political communication literature to explain digital campaign spending: on the one hand, the equalisation thesis contends that these online instruments level out the playing field among candidates and parties (e.g. Gibson & Mcallister, 2015). The normalisation thesis, on the other hand, argues that these tools require professional follow-up and maintenance in order to be effective, and therefore reinforce already existing inequalities in the campaign arena (e.g. Southern, 2015; Strandberg, 2009). We contribute to this ongoing scholarly debate by presenting the – to our knowledge – first study on paid digital campaigning at the level of local elections.[1] This study's scope is limited to paid digital campaign for two reasons. First, in contrast with free digital campaign tools, candidates using paid applications of digital campaigning are able to (micro)target their audience of choice during the campaign (Baldwin-Philippi, 2017). Amalgamating paid and free digital campaigning would complicate the exercise of pinpointing which candidates are making use of these more advanced micro-targeting campaign tools, Second, although digital campaigning tools have been a highly salient topic of public and political debate during recent Belgian election campaigns, very little is known empirically about their diffusion and usage by individual election candidates.

We analyze campaign expenditure data on candidates running for local office in the 30 municipalities of the administrative Arrondissement Leuven.[2] This is a novel and previously untapped dataset with information on the age, sex, local office status and campaign expenses of 3.588 election candidates on 165 different party lists. The empirical section presents the results of a multilevel logistic regression analysis which models the candidates' inclination to pay for digital campaigning. We take advantage of the substantial variation in population size of these municipalities to estimate the effect of scale on the likelihood to invest in digital campaigning. Moreover, as the party composition of the 30 municipal executive coalitions varies considerably, we are able to tease out the effect of local offices (i.e. mayors, aldermen, local councilors) over all the Flemish party candidates. The analysis includes party dummies to remove any unobserved heterogeneity related to running for any of the specific parties.

1. Equalisation versus normalisation: two contrasting theories

The increasing use of online campaign instruments led to the development of the equalisation thesis within the field of political communication research. The main argument is that online campaigning opens new possibilities to reach potential voters, thus counterbalancing the lack of access to mainstream media encountered by, in particular, smaller (opposition) parties and lesser-known candidates (Gibson &

[1] Other studies on digital campaigning on the local level exist (see for example Kišić, 2018; Sobaci et al., 2016; Murár, 2011), but these focus on the effect of digital campaigning on electoral performance and not on paid advertisements or digital campaign expenditure.

[2] Every Belgian province contains one or more electoral arrondissements. The exact number differs between provinces. The province of Limburg, for example, contains only one electoral arrondissement whereas the province of West-Flanders has four (Fiers & Van Hecke, 2017).

Mcallister, 2015; Norris, 2003). Taking into account the positive effect of media coverage on a party or candidate's electoral performance (Maddens, Wauters, Noppe, & Fiers, 2006), it can be argued that the additional communication possibilities, provided by the internet, level out the playing field of political communications. Earlier empirical studies found support for this equalisation thesis (Gibson & Mcallister, 2015).

The normalisation thesis (Margolis, Resnick, & Wolfe, 1999), on the contrary, counters the equalisation thesis by arguing that richer and more established political parties and candidates have a comparative advantage over smaller parties as concerns the development and maintenance of professional websites (Southern, 2015, p. 15; Strandberg, 2009, p. 837). Van Aelst, van Erkel, D'heer and Harder (2017, p. 726) focused on Twitter instead of websites and also found support for the normalisation thesis. This suggests that the latter is not only relevant for the use of websites but also for social media campaigns.

However, regardless of the normalisation thesis' seemingly dominant position (Southern & Lee, 2018, p. 2), Norris (2003, p. 23) found counterevidence when looking into political party websites in 15 European Union (EU) member states. She argues that it is not necessary for websites to be expensive in order to be functional. Furthermore, a recent study by Southern and Lee (2018, p. 16) has provided new evidence in favour of the equalisation thesis. Twitter as well as Facebook appear to be less popular among incumbents. The above demonstrates that the normalisation versus equalisation debate is ongoing and that further research is necessary.

2. Data

We have used the official campaign expenditure declarations that candidates and lists are legally required to submit at the court after the elections. These forms contain detailed information with regard to how the total campaign budget has been spread over different campaign instruments during the four months preceding the elections. Legally, the election campaign starts four months prior to election day. During this period, a campaign spending cap applies, as well as strict limitations regarding the use of certain campaign instruments (for more details see Maddens et al., 2019). The following three expense categories reported on these forms involve digital campaigning: 2e (e-mails and non-commercial sms-campaigns); 4c (online advertisements or online campaigns); 5b (production costs for a website or a webpage designed specifically for electoral purposes).

We registered this information with regard to 3.588 candidates on 165 party lists in the 30 municipalities of the Arrondissement Leuven. As the declaration forms of 143 candidates on 7 lists were incomplete, our analysis is limited to 3445 candidates on 158 party lists. Only 398 or 11,6% of them used part of their campaign budget for digital campaigning tools.

We created a dummy variable to establish whether or not individual candidates have spent a part of their budget on digital campaign instruments. When a candidate declared having spent money on one of the digital campaign instruments as mentioned on the official document (categories 2e, 4c and 5b), this variable is coded as 1. In the other cases it is coded as 0. This binary variable is the dependent variable in our multilevel logistic regression model.

A first independent variable is the age of the individual candidates. Six dummy variables have been created, each representing a different range (18-25; 26-35; 36-45; 46-55; 56-65; 66-95). In the statistical model, we use a dummy-structure in which the dummy variable that represents the range 36-45 years old is used as the reference category. The second independent variable reports whether or not the individual candidate is an incumbent. Four different positions are taken into consideration, namely

the positions of mayor, alderman, local councillor and social welfare councillor, candidates without a prior position being the reference group. We created a dummy variable for each of these positions. A third independent variable of interest is the candidate's position on the ballot list. Due to variation in the number of candidates on the list, we follow a percentile approach similar to Marcinkiewicz and Stegmaier (2015), standardizing the list position variable between 0 (first candidate on the list) and 1 (last candidate on the list). The number of registered voters in the different municipalities is the fourth independent variable in our statistical model. Because 2,7% of the candidates ran for election in their respective municipality as well as in the provincial election, we included a dummy variable indicating whether or not a candidate also runs in the provincial elections. This is important information because these candidates have a higher spending cap as their target electorate is bigger. Lastly, we included the different political parties of the candidates as well as candidates' sex in our model as control variables. Therefore, we created a dummy variable per political party as well as a dummy reporting the sex of the candidates. In the dummy-structure, CD&V has been used as reference category because this party has the biggest number of candidates in our dataset.

Finally, our dataset is hierarchically structured with candidates nested within municipalities, and our set of independent variables comprise both candidate- and municipality-level (i.e. registered voters) predictors. Therefore, we need to estimate a multilevel model which enables us to correctly examine the effect of a municipality-level predictor on a micro-level outcome (digital campaign spending by candidates). We run a varying intercept model whereby the intercept is modelled as a random effect of municipalities.

3. Predicting the likelihood of digital campaign expenditure by individual candidates

11,6% of the candidates in our sample has invested in digital campaigning. 12,4% of the male candidates did so, against only 10,6% of the female candidates. Paid digital campaigning also seems to differ according to local political office: 20,7% of all mayors and 21,1% of the aldermen spend on online campaigning tools compared to 16,5% of the local councillors and 13,6% of the social welfare councillors. We also notice differences between age categories: 12,6% of the candidates aged between 18 and 25 years old, 13,7% of those aged between 26 and 35 years old and 13% of the 36 - 45 year olds used paid online campaigning tools, whereas only 8,2% of the candidates aged between 46 and 55 years old and 8,5% of the 56 to 65 year olds. Finally, as little as 6,7% of the oldest candidates in our dataset (66 – 95 year old) spend part of their campaigning budget on digital campaigning. Not all of these bivariate differences hold when we include all of these variables in our statistical model.

We ran a multilevel logistic regression model to assess the impact of the mentioned independent variables on the decision to spend on digital campaigning. As the dataset contains a considerable number of missing values on the age variable, the number of observations in our model decreases to 2.051 candidates.[3] 10,3% or 211 of these spent part of their budget on digital campaigning. The estimated model was statistically significant (Wald $Chi^2(18; N(level1)=2016; N(level2)=30$ muncipalities) $=106.15$; $p < .001$) and thus, the model was able to make a distinction between candidates who did and did not spend financial means on digital campaigning.

Table 1 summarizes the results of the multilevel logistic regression model explaining digital campaign spending. We find that age, being an alderman or local councillor during the previous term, the

3 This number decreased further to 2.016 because both the PVDA as well as the Vlaams Belang dummy has been omitted because all their candidates in the model scored 0 on the dependent variable which predicts failure perfectly.

number of registered voters and running for the provincial election all significantly affect the likelihood to spend on digital campaigning. Firstly, our model indicates that the odds of a candidate aged between 56 and 65 years old spending on digital campaigning are 49,2% smaller than the odds that a candidate aged between 36 and 45 years old (reference category) does so. This chance is even 52% smaller in the case of the eldest candidates in our sample (66-95 year olds). However, we did not find a statistically significant effect for candidates younger than our reference category nor for candidates who are only slightly older (46-55 year olds). This finding does not give a clear indication that younger candidates spend more on digital campaigning than their older counterparts. It seems that only the highest age categories in our sample make less use of online instruments.

Secondly, our analysis shows that a candidate who held the position of alderman in the previous legislature was 2,5 times more likely (+148%) to have spent on digital campaigning than a candidate who did not have a mandate. A candidate who was a member of the city council prior to the elections was two times (+120%) as likely to spend on online campaigning tools than a candidate without a mandate. The fact that a candidate held the position of Mayor or social welfare councillor does not make a statistically significant contribution to the model and thus has no effect on the dependent variable.

Thirdly, our model indicates that an extra registered voter increases the odds that a candidate spends money on digital campaigning tools with 0,007%. This appears to be a small effect but 1.000 extra registered voters increase this chance with 6,7% and 10.000 extra registered voters increase this chance with 91,6%. In this respect, it is important to realise that the number of registered voters in the Arrondissement Leuven varies between 4.193 and 67.605 voters depending on the municipality where a candidate runs for election. This effect is also confirmed by the significant influence of the independent variable that reports whether or not a candidate also runs for the provincial election. A candidate who does, is five times (+404%) more likely to spend on digital campaigning. These candidates try to reach the 375.234 registered voters in their constituency for the provincial elections. This indicates that the tendency to spend on digital campaigning tools increases with the number of potential voters.

Lastly, we look at the position on the list (list percentile) and the different control variables. A candidate's position on the list did not have a statistically significant effect on digital campaign spending. The significantly negative effect of three of the party dummies is due to the fact that CD&V (which forms the reference category), has a relatively high percentage of candidates who spend on digital campaigning. This finding can be explained by the fact that the party organisation of the Flemish Christian-democrats is not only strongly embedded in the local civil society, but also invests much more than the other political parties in their overall local campaign in the arrondissement of Leuven.[4] Finally, a candidate's gender did not have a statistically significant effect.

4 For the total campaign expenditure per party in the arrondissement of Leuven, see Put, G-J., Maddens, B., Vanden Eynde G., & Muyters, G. (2018). De kostprijs van lokale verkiezingscampagnes: een vergelijking tussen 2012 en 2018. *Vives Briefing, 7*. Retrieved from: https://feb.kuleuven.be/VIVES/publications/briefings/Briefings/2018/briefing-201807-kostprijs-lokale-verkiezingscampagnes

Table 1: Multilevel Logistic Regression Predicting Likelihood of Digital Campaign Expenditure

	B (*S.E.*)	**Odds Ratio (*S.E.*)**	**95% C.I. for Odds Ratio**	
Age 18-25	.3284 (*.3157*)	1.3888 (*.4385*)	.748	2.579
Age 26-35	-.0295 (*.2761*)	.9709 (*.2681*)	.5651	1.6681
Age 46-55	-.512 (*.2616*)	.5993 (*.1567*)	.3589	1.0006
Age 56-65	**-.6774*** (*.2794*)	**.5079**** (*.1419*)	.2938	.8782
Age 66-95	**-.7348*** (*.3545*)	**.4796*** (*.1700*)	.2394	.9608
Mayor	.4206 (*.606*)	1.5229 (*.9229*)	.4643	4.9947
Alderman	**.908**** (*.2959*)	**2.4793**** (*.8047*)	1.3124	4.6839
Local councillor	**.7869**** (*.2467)*	**2.1965**** (*.5419*)	1.3544	3.5623
Social welfare councillor	-.1156 (*.3476*)	.8908 (*.3097*)	.4507	1.7608
Open Vld	-.3071 (*.2639*)	.7356 (*.1941*)	.4385	1.234
N-VA	-.221 (*.2083*)	.8017 (*.167*)	.533	1.2058
Groen	**-4.472***** (*1.0279*)	**.0114***** (*.0117*)	.0015	.0857
sp.a	**-1.9765***** (*.4765*)	**.1386***** (*.066*)	.05446	.3525
Local lists	**-2.5372***** (*.6535*)	**.079***** (*.0517*)	.022	.2847
Registered voters	**.0000651***** (*.000025*)	**1.000065***** (*.000025*)	1.000016	1.000114
Provincial council candidate	**1.6166***** (*.3935*)	**5.0358***** (*1.9818*)	2.3285	10.8906
List percentile	-.0059 (*.0031*)	.9941 (*.0030*)	.988	1.00018
Sex (female)	-.3169 (*.1767)*	.7284 (*.1288*)	.5151	1.03
Constant	-2.9573*** (*.556*)	.052*** (*.0289*)	.0175	.1545
Random-effects Parameter			**95% C.I.**	
Muncipality var(constant)	2.2661 (*.8535*)		1.0832	4.7409

*Note: N=2016; number of groups=30; *** p < .001 **p < .01 *p < .05; the range age 36 - 45 year olds has been used as the reference category as well as CD&V. PVDA as well as Vlaams Belang have been omitted because all their candidates in the model scored 0 on the dependent variable which predicts failure perfectly.*

Conclusion

Paid digital campaigning cannot (yet) be considered a commonly adopted campaign method in the Belgian local election context. Only 11,6% of the local election candidates in our sample of 30 Flemish municipalities has invested in digital campaigning. The empirical analysis of this research note has demonstrated that local office status matters.

We find that aldermen and local councilors are more likely to spend a share of their budget on digital campaigning tools than candidates without local office. In addition, we bring evidence that scale makes a large difference as well: candidates running for local election in larger municipalities and cities are more inclined to invest in digital campaigning than their counterparts in small municipalities. The significant effect of simultaneously running for provincial election confirms that the more voters a candidate is catering to during the campaign, the higher the odds that the candidate is paying for digital tools.

Confronting these findings with the theoretical arguments provided by the equalisation and normalisation theses, we conclude that our analysis provides more support for the latter. Particularly those candidates who already hold local office at the time of election are likely to invest in digital campaign tools. This is at odds with the equalisation argument, which would predict that especially unknown candidates who lack access to mainstream media use digital campaign tools to obtain visibility, creating a level playing field. However, as mentioned and motivated in the introduction, we did not take the freely available digital campaigning instruments into consideration as campaign expenditure is at the heart of our research. This is a limitation of our study and the comparison between free and paid digital campaigning instruments presents an interesting avenue for future research.

Arguably, the role of traditional media is more limited at the local level than in a national election context (Maarek, 2011). It is also relevant to point out that the discrepancy between the notoriety of incumbents and challengers (i.e. non-incumbents) might be more outspoken during local campaigns. Arguably, incumbents have a competitive advantage over challengers because they can use previous achievements to signal their political credibility and to strengthen their position in the municipality. Challengers, on the other hand, have nothing to show for yet and need to come up with an effective campaign strategy to compensate this. These elements even strengthen the expectation of the equalisation theory that challenger candidates will be more inclined to use high-quality personal websites and micro-targeting via social media to overcome their disadvantage vis-à-vis incumbent candidates. However, the results show the contrary and suggest that those local politicians who are already relatively well-known and invest more in traditional campaign tools (Put, Maddens, & Smulders, 2015) were quicker to jump on the bandwagon of paid digital campaigning.

It might be the case that this finding is related to the relatively poor 'quality' of election candidates in the lower sections of the local party lists. These lists contain many slots and local party selectorates often struggle to find sufficient numbers of candidates. Still the parties want to fill up all the slots as they believe that more candidates on the list will lead to more votes for the party. This obviously leads to large numbers of passive candidates. Southern and Lee (2018) demonstrated that these 'no-hoper candidates' are not very motivated to run active campaigns, let alone invest money in their candidacy.

Nevertheless, the empirical exercise in this research note clarified the role that digital campaigning is currently playing in Belgian election campaigns. In sum, the share of candidates paying for these tools was relatively low in the 2018 local elections. The local context is interesting, as parties might use these campaigns to experiment with the newest applications of social media and website building platforms in

preparation for larger-scale national elections. This was especially true for a local election which was organized eight months before the concurrent federal, regional and European elections of 26 May 2019.

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