

**The coming of age for paid digital campaigning:
Equalization or Normalization in the 2019 Belgian federal elections?**

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Structured abstract

Purpose - Paid digital campaigning tools play an increasingly pivotal role in individual election campaigns worldwide. Extant literature often juxtaposes the equalization theory, which argues that these tools create a level playing field, and the normalization theory, which contends that strong and resource-rich politicians benefit most from digital tools. This article informs this debate by looking at it from a campaign expenditure perspective beyond the Anglo-American bias of most research on the subject.

Design/methodology/approach – We use an original dataset on campaign expenditures and resources of 1,798 candidates running for 13 Belgian parties in the 2019 federal parliamentary election. Relying on multilevel statistical models, we link the candidates' digital campaign expenses to their incumbency status, which is expected to affect digital campaigning.

Findings - While earlier work on majoritarian cases often showed contradicting results, this study on the Belgian flexible-list proportional representation (PR) case provides strong support for the equalization theory by demonstrating that incumbents are not only less inclined to spend on digital tools than challengers, but also spend a smaller part of their budget on these tools.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the literature by exploring the equalization versus normalization debate from a campaign expenditure perspective using a made to purpose dataset in a non-Anglo-American context.

Key words: campaign finance, digital campaigning, equalization vs normalization, incumbents, list PR, Belgium

Introduction

“Political ads are an important part of voice, especially for local candidates, up and coming challengers, and advocacy groups that may not get much media attention otherwise. Banning political ads favors incumbents and whoever the media covers” (Romm, 2019, §41).

Whether this statement, used by Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg to defend Facebook’s policy on political advertisements, holds true, is part of a seminal debate within political science. Do digital campaigning tools have the capacity to level out the electoral playing field? Since the end of the twentieth century, two diametrically opposed theories, equalization and normalization, are at the heart of this debate (Jacobs and Spierings, 2016, p. 7). Equalization theory argues that digital tools are easily accessible and relatively cheap. They offer opportunities for minor and marginalized political actors to disseminate their campaign messages despite limited access to traditional media (Corrado and Firestone, 1996; Gibson and Ward, 2000, p. 173; Gibson and Mcallister, 2015; Norris, 2003; Xenos and Foot, 2005). In contrast, normalization theory states that these new tools will mainly benefit wealthier and stronger candidates (Jacobs and Spierings, 2016; Lusoli, 2005; Margolis *et al.*, 1999; Margolis and Resnick, 2000).

Most studies on digital campaigning examine Anglo-American cases with majoritarian electoral systems and liberal campaign financing rules, which result in enormous financial resources invested by parties and candidates (Corrado and Firestone, 1996; Foot *et al.*, 2009; Fowler *et al.*, 2021; Gainous *et al.*, 2018; Gibson and McAllister, 2006; Gulati and Williams, 2013; Hindman, 2008; Gulati and Williams, 2007; Margolis *et al.*, 1999; Small, 2008; Southern, 2015; Williams and Gulati, 2012, 2018; Xenos and Foot, 2005). This is in sharp contrast to other established democracies. Although proportional representation systems offer a better chance for challenger candidates and parties to win seats, which in turn encourages them to campaign online (Vaccari, 2013, p. 128), research on these systems remains scarce. The same holds for electoral contexts with more stringent campaign-finance regulations (Jacobs and Spierings, 2016, pp. 4–5). Moreover, research results have been inconsistent as some studies find support for equalization (e.g. Gibson and Mcallister, 2015; Norris, 2003; Samuel-Azran *et al.*, 2015; Southern and Lee, 2019; Xenos and Foot, 2005), while others bring evidence that point to normalization (e.g. Klinger, 2013; Margolis *et al.*, 1999; Margolis and Resnick, 2000; Southern, 2015; Van Aelst *et al.*, 2017). These mixed results often depend on the campaign tool under scrutiny, as most studies focus on the use of websites or one specific social media platform, such as Twitter or Facebook (Gibson and McAllister, 2006; Samuel-Azran *et al.*, 2015; Spierings and Jacobs, 2014; Sudulich and Wall, 2009, 2010; Suiter, 2015). The choice to focus exclusively on one of these platforms is surprising, as parties and candidates will be inclined to use a mixture of online tools (Klinger, 2013).

Gibson's (2020) four phase model offers a more fundamental explanation for the seemingly contradictory results. This model posits that the use of online campaigning tools follows a cyclical pattern. While these tools contribute to equalization in the experimental phase, digital campaigning gradually leads to normalization as political actors become more professionalized in applying them, and as their financial cost increases substantially. The cycle repeats itself as soon as innovative technology appears on the scene, leading to experimentation and subsequently campaign professionalization combined with increased financial cost. Gibson’s model also highlights that financial resources and campaign spending levels play a crucial role when it comes to explaining the prevalence of digital campaigning tools. Their relatively low price levels compared to other classic and conventional campaigning tools are frequently mentioned as a defining characteristic (see for example Gibson and Ward, 2000, p. 174; Jacobs and Spierings, 2016, p. 20; Norris, 2003, p. 25). Yet the research on the level of financial resources which candidates and parties allocate to digital tools during election campaigns is limited (Williams and Gulati, 2017, p. 127).

This article aims to fill this critical gap in the literature by investigating digital campaign expenditures in a country election case under preferential-list electoral rules. More specifically, we leverage a novel data set on individual candidates' campaign expenses in the 2019 Belgian federal parliamentary election. In contrast with the widely studied Anglo-American cases, Belgium applies a flexible-list PR electoral system combined with strict campaign expenditure rules. The disclosed information regarding campaign expenses, allowed us to build a unique dataset about the digital expenses of the 1,798 candidates running in the 2019 federal election. For the first time, we can investigate digital campaigning on the basis of highly detailed information containing the exact amounts spent by individual candidates on different campaigning tools.¹ This rich dataset allows us to answer the following research question: Are challengers more inclined to invest in digital campaigning than incumbents, both in terms of the odds of spending and the share of total expenditures on these tools?

1. *Equalization versus normalization theory: arguments and hypotheses*

After a number of candidates successfully experimented with digital campaigning during the 1998 congressional elections in the United States, Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) prudently stated that “cyber politics” might, one day, become part of the political communication’s toolbox. Recent empirical work by Lilleker *et al.* (2015) confirmed that online and traditional campaigning instruments now find themselves on an equal footing. However, the question remains how online tools affect the nature of election campaigns in terms of closing the gap between incumbent candidates on the one hand and often resource-poor challengers with limited access to mainstream media on the other hand. Extant literature on digital campaigning has developed two contradicting theories to address this question. Both the equalization and normalization theory focus on electoral competition and ask whether digital tools create a more level playing field (Lusoli, 2005, pp. 153–156).

Early research found support for the equalization theory, which argues that the relatively cheap and easily accessible online communication tools succeed in levelling out the playing field for minor candidates and smaller parties with less access to mainstream media (Gibson and Mcallister, 2015, p. 529). The internet seemed to offer a strategy to bypass this problem by providing online possibilities to share messages with potential voters (Gibson and Mcallister, 2015, p. 529; Jacobs and Spierings, 2016, p. 7; Norris, 2003, p. 34). This claim was contradicted by ensuing research arguing that the high maintenance costs of professional websites makes them less affordable for smaller parties and resource-poor candidates (Margolis *et al.*, 1999). Consequently, these online tools seem most beneficial for richer and more established parties and candidates who often also benefit from an incumbency status and easier access to the media (Gibson and Mcallister, 2015; Southern, 2015; Strandberg, 2009). This constitutes the main argument and led Margolis *et al.* (1999) to coin the normalization theory, which contends that larger political parties and powerful, experienced candidates have the resources to hire digital campaign specialists. Furthermore, these parties and candidates also have more campaigning experience which can be an advantage when incorporating new campaigning tools (Jacobs and Spierings, 2016, p. 7; Small, 2008, p. 52).²

Norris (2003, p. 23) criticized these earlier single-country studies and conducted a comparative study on 15 EU member states. No important differences were detected between websites of smaller and bigger parties as regards the richness of the content, concluding that websites need not be expensive, reviving the equalization theory. Although these findings provided more nuanced evidence for website related studies, more recent research suggests equalization theory may have more promise amidst the

¹ The scope of this study is limited to what marketers call *paid media* (online and offline commercial advertisement) and the non-free applications of *owned media* such as websites or printed material such as flyers (Macnamara *et al.*, 2016, p. 377). This allows us to contrast paid digital campaigning instruments and paid traditional tools.

² Our study is limited to relational normalization (Schweitzer, 2011, pp. 311–314) because we only look into the power relations between political actors. The actual content of online campaigning falls out of the scope of our research.

emergence of social media because these tools are cheaper than websites and require less expertise (Androniciuc and Moreno, 2018; Carlson *et al.*, 2014; Jacobs and Spierings, 2016, p. 7; Sudulich and Wall, 2009, 2010; Suiter, 2015).

However, Gibson (2020) shows that digital campaigning follows a cyclical pattern and introduces the four phases-model to explain the often contradicting findings in earlier research. Challengers and less resourceful candidates are more likely to experiment with innovative campaign tools than incumbents or well-funded candidates, leading to empirical support for the equalization theory in the earliest, experimental phase. As soon as digital campaigning tools become more professionalized, these also become more expensive and lead to normalization as incumbents and richer candidates will benefit most from them. This cycle repeats itself for each new digital campaigning tool which enters the scene. The emergence of web 1.0 tools, such as e-mail and websites, led to the first experimental phase triggering challengers to integrate these new online tools in their campaign in the 1990s, explaining support for the equalization theory found in the earliest studies (e.g. Gibson and Ward, 2000; Margolis and Resnick, 2000, pp. 15–16; Norris, 2003). In a second phase, the application of such tools becomes more professionalized. This leads to more complexity and higher financial costs, and thus a normalizing effect of online campaigning (e.g. Margolis *et al.*, 1999; Margolis and Resnick, 2000, pp. 15–16; Schweitzer, 2011; Southern, 2015; Strandberg, 2009).

The arrival of web 2.0 instruments such as cheap and easily accessible social media platforms created new opportunities for challengers who are willing to experiment with innovative tools, leading to the third phase characterized by the renewal of the equalization effect (e.g. Carlson *et al.*, 2014; Southern, 2015). As soon as more complex applications of these web 2.0 tools became possible, politicians and parties were in need of campaign professionals. This increased the financial cost and decreased the accessibility of these tools. As a consequence, online political communication entered the fourth phase which was accompanied by a normalization effect (Gibson, 2020, pp. 38–39). This model explains the seemingly contradictory results from earlier work and differences between countries, which are located at different stages of the cycle.

To date, most studies have focused on Anglo-American countries with majoritarian electoral systems and liberal campaign finance regulations (Corrado and Firestone, 1996; Foot *et al.*, 2009; Fowler *et al.*, 2021; Gainous *et al.*, 2018; Gibson and McAllister, 2006; Gulati and Williams, 2013; Hindman, 2008; Gulati and Williams, 2007; Margolis *et al.*, 1999; Small, 2008; Southern, 2015; Williams and Gulati, 2012, 2018; Xenos and Foot, 2005). We argue that the equalization dynamic will be stronger in countries with more restrictive political finance regimes. If there is a legal spending cap for campaign expenses, candidates will be forced to make hard choices and to allocate their budgets strategically over different types of campaign tools.

These spending constraints will be even stronger for challengers than for incumbents. A large literature on U.S. legislatures shows that incumbents raise substantially more money than their contenders (e.g. Ansolabehere and Snyder, 2000; Hogan, 2000). In PR systems as well, incumbents have been found to outspend challengers (Maddens *et al.*, 2006). This is due both to an advantage of incumbents with regard to private funding (e.g. Fouirnaies and Hall, 2014) and to the fact that incumbents generally obtain more transfers from the party (Cheibub and Sin, 2020; Put *et al.*, 2022). Given their smaller budget, challengers will be more incentivized than incumbents to allocate their expenses as cost effective as possible. Digital tools offer them an opportunity to reach a large number of voters in a relatively cheap way. In other words, the equalization dynamic implies that digital campaigning makes it possible for challengers to campaign at least as efficiently as incumbents with fewer means.

In addition, it has already been shown that challengers are more likely to experiment with innovative campaigning tools (Gibson, 2020). This will probably be particularly the case in the third phase of

Gibson's model, during which experimentation is key. Challengers can be expected to be more inclined to take this leap in the dark, as they have less to lose. For all these reasons, we expect that challengers will be more likely to resort to paid digital campaigning tools than incumbents. Therefore, we make two hypotheses:

H1: The odds of spending on digital tools will be higher for challengers than for incumbents.

H2: Challengers invest a larger part of their budget in paid digital campaigning tools than incumbents.

While hypothesis H1 deals with the probability of utilizing paid digital tools during the campaign, hypothesis H2 focuses on the share of their total budget which candidates invest in paid digital tools. With regard to the translation of the equalization theory to the share of digital investment, one could formulate the alternative hypothesis that incumbents and challengers are in fact expected to invest an equal part of their budget in digital tools. But, as explained above, during Gibson's third phase which is characterized by experimentation with social media, we expect challengers to be more prone to invest in digital campaigning. In this sense, the expectation that challengers invest a larger part of their budget than incumbents represents a stricter test of the equalization theory than the alternative hypothesis.

2. *The Belgian federal election context*

Elections in Belgium are organized using a flexible-list proportional representation (PR) electoral system. Voters are allowed to cast either one or more preferential votes for candidates on the same list, or a list vote by which they endorse the order of candidates as determined by party elites prior to the election. As in other flexible-list PR systems, intra-party seat allocation depends on the number of preferential votes candidates receive and their pre-election rank order. Candidates who reach a certain threshold of preferential votes are automatically elected (Renwick and Pilet, 2016). Nevertheless, the electoral system clearly gives an advantage to the highest ranked candidates on the list as a large share of voters cast list votes (Bol *et al.*, 2018), half of which are distributed over candidates according to their order on the list. As a result, only few candidates overcome the list order and get elected based on their preferential votes instead of a higher ranked candidate (De Winter, 2005). However, party elites take stock of preferential vote-earning capacities of candidates during previous elections to allocate list positions in future elections (Andre *et al.*, 2017; Put *et al.*, 2021). Candidates with strong preferential vote records are rewarded with higher positions. This mechanism incentivizes individual candidates in flexible-list PR contexts to invest resources in individual election campaigns, even from lower positions on the list.

The 150 members of the Belgian federal parliament (MP) are elected in 11 constituencies ranging in DM from four seats in the constituency of Luxembourg to 24 in the constituency of Antwerp. There is a five percent threshold per district, but the effective threshold is substantially higher in the smallest districts, such as Namur (10,7%), Walloon-Brabant (12,5%) and Luxembourg (15%) (Maddens *et al.*, 2021, p. 564). The Belgian electoral districts are also characterized by some variation with regard to the number of registered voters. A detailed overview of the district level characteristics can be found in the supplementary material section A.1.

The case of the Belgian 2019 election is substantively interesting for a number of reasons. First of all, Belgium is a good example of a country with strict campaign rules, imposing spending caps as well as restricting the use of certain tools such as ads on radio and television. Belgium has some of Europe's most restrictive campaign regulations, along with Greece, and France, where commercial online and offline ads are forbidden altogether (Gibson, 2020, pp. 51, 215; Lilleker *et al.*, 2015, p. 753). In contrast, Germany and the Netherlands can be found on the other end of the continuum with very liberal campaign expenditure rules and less restrictions (Maddens *et al.*, 2017, p. 168). In Belgium, campaign expenditures are curtailed by a legally imposed spending cap. The maximum amount which candidates are allowed to

spend depends on their list position. Candidates who hold the top positions on the list have a higher spending cap than challengers who occupy lower positions. The spending cap of top candidates depends on the number of registered voters in the electoral district. The spending cap of lower ranked effective candidates is limited to €5,000.³ As a result, candidates strongly differ in terms of the amount of campaign budget they are allowed to spend.⁴ The parties' electoral result in the district during the previous election determines the number of candidates at the top of the list who can benefit from this higher spending cap (Maddens *et al.*, 2019, pp. 74–76). The spending cap does not determine the actual available campaign budget of the different candidates. A candidate's campaign budget instead depends largely on personal wealth and the amount of financial support received from the party organization. The available budget is independent of the spending cap, but it is self-evident that a wealthy candidate will more easily reach some of the higher spending caps of more than €50,000 than other candidates.

Such strict campaign spending rules incentivize electoral candidates to run their individual campaign and utilize their restricted budget as efficiently as possible. Therefore, online campaign instruments which are easily accessible and relatively cheap are an attractive option (Androniciuc and Moreno, 2018; Carlson *et al.*, 2014; Sudulich and Wall, 2009). Furthermore, the existence of a spending cap which is substantially higher for top positions on the list makes paid digital campaigning an interesting alternative for challengers.

These new inexpensive online applications hold the potential for challengers to counter the normalization entrenched into the Belgian system. In 1989, campaign spending caps were adopted with the intent to stop the trend of ever more expensive election campaigns and to equalize the playing field for electoral candidates (Maddens *et al.*, 2019). However, the introduction of a system with variable spending caps - including higher caps for the highest positions on the party lists - seems to have generated a reverse effect. After all, in the Belgian flexible-list PR electoral system, those top positions are typically occupied by incumbents and high potential candidates (Maddens *et al.*, 2019). This allows incumbent candidates to outspend challengers and to dominate the election campaigns. In practice, the system seems to benefit those who are already in power, which can be seen as a form of intrinsic normalization built into the Belgian campaign finance rules. Thus, the emergence of digital campaigning tools provides an opportunity for challengers to overcome this structural disadvantage.

This was particularly the case in the 2019 election, when online campaign advertising was legally allowed for the first time. During prior election campaigns, paid digital advertising was banned along with radio and television commercials. While the latter prohibition was retained, the ban on digital advertisements was lifted (Maddens *et al.*, 2019, p. 73). Therefore, Belgium can most probably still be situated in the experimental third phase of the four-phase model as proposed by Gibson (2020). As argued earlier, in this phase, digital campaigning tools still have an equalizing potential.

³ Every list has a number of effective candidates and a number of successor candidates who replace the elected effective candidates in case they leave parliament before the end of the legislature. The spending cap of these successors is limited to €2,500.

⁴ For instance, candidates holding the top positions on the list in the largest electoral district (Antwerp) were allowed to spend €54,937 during the 2019 electoral campaign compared to €15,875 in the smallest circumscription (Luxembourg).

3. *Data and methods*

We collected campaign spending data on 1,798 candidates⁵ participating in the 2019 federal parliamentary election.⁶ All Belgian election candidates are legally obliged to submit a detailed declaration form for the expenses made during the official election campaign period. Since the 2019 election, this reporting period starts four months prior to election day⁷ and a spending cap applies during this time. These official documents contain information about the origin of the financial resources used to fund the electoral campaign as well as on the exact amount spent on different campaign instruments⁸.

The first dependent variable is a dummy that reports whether a candidate spent resources on online campaigning tools. The collected sample shows that 730 candidates did not spend anything on digital campaigning. This group includes 373 candidates without any campaign expenses, which are excluded from the analysis. This leads to a dichotomous dependent variable which will be analysed by means of a multilevel logistic regression model of the 1,425 candidates with non-zero expenses. The hierarchical structure of our data with candidates nested in 11 constituencies and the presence of a constituency level independent variable, requires the use of a multilevel estimation approach. We therefore estimate a varying intercept model, with the intercept being modelled as a random effect of the electoral districts.

The second dependent variable is the share of a candidates' total expenses spent on digital campaigning tools, and this within the restricted sample of candidates (N=1,095) who spent on digital tools. For these candidates, the amount spent on digital campaigning is divided by the total campaign expenditure. A value of one means that candidates spent their total campaign budget on digital campaign instruments (n=7). We estimate a multilevel regression model (estimation method = Maximum Likelihood (ML)) of the 1,095 candidates with non-zero digital expenses.

The independent variable of interest relates to the incumbency status of candidates, which indicates whether a candidate was a member of parliament (MP) or a member of government during the previous legislative term (1) or not (0). In addition, we take into account a set of control variables. First, we measure whether candidates hold a local political office in their municipality (1) or not (0). In preferential list PR systems, candidates with local political experience have a competitive advantage over other candidates (e.g., Tavits, 2010; Jankowski, 2016). Holding local office normally leads to a level of name recognition among the electorate and provides access to political networks which are unavailable to inexperienced challenger candidates.

Second, because of a possible effect of the economies of scale, it seems necessary to control for district magnitude (DM). As seats are allocated to the different constituencies in proportion to their population size, DM and the number of registered voters are strongly correlated. Investing in digital campaigning tools will be more cost effective in larger constituencies as more potential voters have to be reached. In

⁵ For 17 of the 1,850 candidates running for this election, campaign expense declarations were missing and the 35 candidates running for Vlaams Belang in the Walloon circumscriptions have also been omitted because of missing data.

⁶ We only take into account candidates of parties that won at least one seat in the federal parliament during the 2014 elections. These parties are: The Flemish Christian democratic party (CD&V), the Flemish socialist party (sp.a), the Flemish nationalists (N-VA), the Flemish liberals (Open Vld), the Flemish Greens (Groen), the Flemish far right (Vlaams Belang) and the unitary far left (PvDA-PTB). The Walloon Christian democratic party (cdh), the Walloon socialist party (PS), the Walloon liberals (MR and Défi), the Walloon Greens (Ecolo), the Walloon populist party (Parti Populaire).

⁷ During the official campaign, the use of certain campaigning tools are forbidden, e.g. commercials on television or radio, gadgets (Maddens *et al.*, 2019, pp. 72–73).

⁸ Three categories on this declaration form concern digital campaigning expenses: e-mail campaigns (category 2e), online advertisements or online campaigns (category 4a), and production costs for a website designed specifically for election purposes (category 5b). Candidates need to submit these campaign declarations within 45 days after the election (federal law 2003-04-02/34 art. 6.2°). Candidates who do not comply with this obligation risk criminal prosecution (federal law 2014-01-06/56 art. 14.3°).

that context, online campaigning tools become a relatively cheap alternative to the more costly traditional methods. For this reason, we include a variable reporting the DM, i.e., the number of seats allocated to the constituency. Third, the analysis also controls for the age of the candidates. We therefore included a dummy with six age categories (Age ≤ 25 ; 26 – 35; 36 – 45; 46 – 55; 56 – 65; 66 - 95). We used the age category ranging from 36 to 45 as the reference category. Fourth, we also include a dummy variable reporting the gender of the candidates (0=Female, 1=Male). Fifth, we control for the candidate's spending cap by including a variable reporting each candidate's spending cap (in euro). Sixth, we take into account the candidate's total campaign spending by calculating a relative measure for individual campaign expenditure, controlling for differences in district size.⁹ Finally, the multilevel regression model includes fixed effects for all parties participating in the election to control for unobserved heterogeneity between parties.¹⁰

4. Results

4.1. Preliminary analysis and descriptive statistics

When discussing the equalization dynamic between challengers and incumbents above, we started from the assumption, based on earlier research, that challengers have less means at their disposal than incumbents. Equalization would then imply that challengers undo this financial disadvantage by investing more in cost effective digital tools. Before we test the latter hypothesis, it is useful to check whether incumbents do indeed spend more than challengers in a first preliminary analysis. We use our relative measure for individual campaign expenditures as the dependent variable in this analysis.

This preliminary analysis confirms that incumbents spend substantially more on their campaign than challengers. The average incumbent spends €25,618 against only €3,789 for the average challenger. Of course, this spending gap is partly due to the fact that incumbents are overrepresented amongst the candidates with the highest spending cap. 50% of these candidates (N=212) are incumbent, against only 1.7% of incumbents amongst the candidates with the lower spending cap (N=1,213). But when this spending cap variable is controlled for in a multivariate model (Table I), there is still a significant difference between challengers and incumbents. The latter candidates spend significantly more than challengers, both when expenses are measured in amounts per registered voters as in absolute amounts.¹¹ The latter model can be found in the supplemental material section C.1.

⁹ The relative measure for individual propaganda expenses used in the models is calculated as follows. We first calculate the share which each candidate spends out of all the propaganda expenses made by all the candidates in the district. As this share is highly dependent on the number of candidates, we divide it by the expected share if expenses were distributed equally across all candidates in the district. Take for instance a district with only two candidates, the first of which spends 70% and the second one 30%. The standardized expense of the first candidate at the district level is then $70/50=1.4$, and of the second candidate $30/50=0.6$. In other words, this second candidate only spends 60% of what we would expect if propaganda expenses were distributed equally across all the candidates of the district.

¹⁰ This is not possible in the multilevel logistic regression model because parties of which all candidates spent on digital campaigning are omitted from analysis further reducing the number of observations.

¹¹ We report the results of the models containing only the non-zero expense candidates (N=1,425). However, we also estimated a model including both the zero-expense candidates and the non-zero expense candidates (N=1,798). This resulted in an even stronger statistically significant positive effect for incumbency which is not surprising as those who do not spend anything are mostly challengers.

Table I: Multilevel regression (estimation method = ML) predicting the candidate's relative campaign expenditure

	Odds ratio	se	sig.
<i>Candidate level variables</i>			
Incumbent	1.06	(0.12)	***
Local office	0.03	(0.06)	
Spending cap in euro (Standardized)	1.48	(0.03)	***
Gender (m)	0.07	(0.05)	
Age ≤ 25	0.08	(0.12)	
Age 26-35	0.04	(0.08)	
Age 46-55	-0.07	(0.08)	
Age 56-65	0.02	(0.08)	
Age 66-95	-0.02	(0.12)	
<i>Higher level variables</i>			
DM	-0.03	(0.01)	***
Intercept	1.78	(0.14)	***
Random effects parameter			
District var(constant)	3.55e-11	(1.82e-08)	
<hr/>			
Log Likelihood	-2,009.85		
Wald Chi ² (22)	5,499.58		***
N(level 1)	1,425		
N(level 2)	11 Electoral districts		

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; the age category ranging from 36 to 45 has been used as the reference category

77% of the 1,425 candidates included in our analysis spent resources on online campaigning tools.¹² Of the 127 incumbents, 89% allocated resources to digital instruments compared to 76% of the 1,298 challengers. Additionally, 81% of the local office holders and 76% of the non-local office holders spent on online campaigning. Turning to the proportion of the budget spent on digital tools, we find that the 1,095 candidates with non-zero digital expenses spend on average 16% of their budget on digital tools. Incumbents spent on average 13% of their resources online compared to 16% of the total budget spent in cyberspace by the challengers. While local office holders spent on average 15% of their resources on online tools, non-local office holders spent on average 17%.

4.2. Main findings

The results of our multilevel logistic regression analyzing the odds of spending resources on digital campaigning tools (Table II) show that incumbency status has a statistically significant negative effect on the dependent variable. This confirms H1 which expected the odds of spending on digital tools to be higher for challengers than for incumbents. Online tools seem to be more popular amongst challengers, who appear more willing to experiment with these innovative tools. The findings therefore support the equalization theory, which is to be expected in the third phase of Gibson's model. Regarding the control variables, holding a local office does not affect the use of digital tools. Moreover, the negative effect of the spending cap shows that candidates with a lower spending cap are more inclined to choose digital tools which are cheaper than the traditional instruments. A candidate's total expenditure has a statistically

¹² A table summarizing these descriptive statistics can be found in the supplementary material section B.1. and B.2.

significant positive effect on the odds of spending on digital campaigning tools. This is not surprising, as the odds of reporting a digital expense will automatically increase with total expenses.

Table II: Multilevel logistic regression predicting the likelihood of digital campaign expenditure

	Odds ratio	se	sig.
<i>Candidate level variables</i>			
Incumbent	0.41	(0.17)	*
Local office	0.95	(0.15)	
Spending cap in euro (Standardized)	0.74	(0.10)	*
Relative expenditure in euro	2.45	(0.32)	***
Gender (m)	1.05	(0.15)	
Age ≤ 25	1.08	(0.35)	
Age 26-35	1.34	(0.29)	
Age 46-55	1.27	(0.26)	
Age 56-65	0.98	(0.21)	
Age 66-95	1.36	(0.44)	
<i>Higher level variables</i>			
DM	1.11	(0.06)	
Intercept	0.36	(0.3)	
Random effects parameter			
District var(constant)	1.10	(0.53)	
<hr/>			
Log Likelihood	-616.19		
Wald Chi ²	55.09		***
N(level 1)	1,425		
N(level 2)	11 Electoral districts		

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; the age category ranging from 36 to 45 has been used as the reference category

We apply a multilevel regression model in order to investigate whether challengers also spend a larger part of their budget on digital tools (Table III). Incumbency status again has a statistically significant negative effect on the dependent variable, indicating that incumbents allocate a smaller proportion of their budget to digital tools than challengers. Put another way, challengers appear to be less risk averse than incumbents when it comes to investing in new innovative digital/online tools. This again supports the equalization thesis and H2, which expects challengers to invest a larger share on paid digital campaigning tools than incumbents. The candidate's total expenditure is the only control variable with a statistically significant positive effect. Candidates with a higher total campaign budget invest a bigger proportion of their resources in digital tools. Local office does not have a statistically significant effect.

Table III: Multilevel regression (estimation method = ML) predicting the proportion spent on digital campaigning

	b	se	Sig.
<i>Candidate level variables</i>			
Incumbent	-0.04	(0.02)	*
Local office	-0.01	(0.01)	
Spending cap in euro (Standardized)	0.004	(0.007)	
Relative expenditure in euro	0.01	(0.004)	**
Gender (m)	0.01	(0.01)	
Age ≤ 25	-0.01	(0.02)	
Age 26-35	0.02	(0.01)	
Age 46-55	0.02	(0.01)	
Age 56-65	0.003	(0.01)	
Age 66-95	0.01	(0.02)	
<i>Higher level variables</i>			
DM	-0.003	(0.002)	
Intercept	0.39	(0.03)	***
Random effects parameter			
District var(constant)	0.0004	(0.0003)	
<hr/>			
Party dummies included	Yes		
Log Likelihood	714.46		
Wald Chi ² (24)	830.21		***
N(level 1)	1,095		
N(level 2)	11 Electoral districts		

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; the age category ranging from 36 to 45 has been used as the reference category

Conclusion and discussion

This paper contributes to the equalization versus normalization debate in several ways. Firstly, we turn away from the often-researched Anglo-American countries with majoritarian electoral systems and very liberal campaign spending regulation. Instead, we focus on Belgium which has a flexible-list PR electoral system and strict campaign expenditure rules, an institutional context which is typical among democracies on the European continent. Secondly, we look at digital campaigning from the perspective of the individual candidates' campaign expenditures using a made to purpose dataset.

The individual campaign expenditure data on the 1,798 candidates running for office in the 2019 Belgian federal parliamentary election shows that digital campaigning is an integral component of the candidate's electoral toolbox. As much as 77% of the 1,425 candidates reporting campaign expenses, spent a part of their resources on e-campaigning. Even so, the average candidate spends only 16% of the budget on digital tools. Clearly, at the level of the candidates, online and traditional campaigning instruments are still far from being on an equal footing, as posited by Lilleker *et al.* (2015). Our analyses found strong support for the equalization thesis with the odds of spending on digital tools being higher for challengers than incumbents. Also, challengers spend a significantly larger part of their budget on digital campaigning than incumbents. Challengers thus appear to have a stronger incentive to use paid digital campaigning tools than incumbents and to invest a larger part of their budget on these tools.

Our study sheds new light on the equalization versus normalization debate by focusing on the campaign expenditure perspective in a non-Anglo-American country with a flexible-list PR electoral system, as well as by taking multiple e-campaigning tools in account, but faces a number of limitations. Firstly, our study does not include the free digital media tools available to electoral candidates, as these were not reported in the campaign expense declarations. Future research could combine both paid and free online tools. Secondly, we only examined the 2019 federal parliamentary election. Longitudinal research is needed to assess whether Belgium followed Gibson's (2020) four phase model and where exactly the adoption of digital campaigning tools stands today. Given the strict campaign rules and prohibition of paid online advertisement prior to the 2019 election, we would place Belgium in the third phase of the model. As argued by Gibson, this phase involves an equalization dynamic, due to a high degree of experimentation with recently allowed web 2.0 techniques such as online targeted advertising.

Nonetheless, the Belgian case brings novel empirical insights on digital campaigning dynamics in European countries, which typically have strict campaign spending regulations and a high degree of public funding. In contrast to the widely studied Anglo-American cases, this is an institutional context which can be found in a number of other European democracies. Furthermore, the availability of detailed official campaign spending data made it possible to assess the importance which individual candidates attribute to the digital component of their campaign. In contrast to other studies, our study does not rely on survey data and does not suffer from bias related to self-reporting nor from problems due to low response rates.

To conclude, apart from contributing to the equalization/normalization debate, from a practical point of view, our study contributes to ongoing debates and initiatives about how best to regulate digital campaigning (expenditures). For now, Mark Zuckerberg's claim with regard to the equalizing potential of digital campaigning tools seems to hold in the Belgian context. Enhancing legal restrictions on online tools would affect challengers and might be especially beneficial for those in power generating a normalization dynamic. However, if Belgium follows the evolution predicted by Gibson's four face model, this equalizing effect will be short-lived anyway.

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**The coming of age for paid digital campaigning:
Equalization or Normalization in the 2019 Belgian federal elections?**
Supplementary File

Contents

A. Additional Information	19
A.1. District level descriptives.....	19
B. Descriptives.....	19
B.1. Percentage of candidates who spent on digital tools.....	19
B.2. Proportion spent on digital tools	19
C. Additional analyses.....	20
C.1. Multilevel regression (estimation method = ML) predicting the candidate's total campaign expenditure (in absolute numbers)	20

A. Additional Information

A.1. District level descriptives

Table 1: General district level descriptives

District	District Magnitude	Registered voters	Highest spending cap in euro
Antwerpen	24	1,341,450	54,937
Limburg	12	646,503	30,916
Oost-Vlaanderen	20	1,155,734	48,316
West-Vlaanderen	16	942,783	41,421
Vlaams-Brabant	15	832,401	37,192
Brussels	15	623,162	30,000
Brabant Wallon	5	296,769	18,653
Hainaut	18	942,789	41,136
Liège	15	794,378	35,989
Luxembourg	4	212,441	15,875
Namur	6	379,299	21,574

B. Descriptives

B.1. Percentage of candidates who spent on digital tools

	%	N
Incumbent	89	127
Non-incumbent	76	1,298
Total	77	1,425
Local office	81	791
No local office	72	634
Total	77	1,425

B.2. Proportion spent on digital tools

	Mean	N
Incumbent	0.13	113
Non-incumbent	0.16	982
Total	0.16	1,095
Local office	0.15	637
No local office	0.17	458
Total	0.16	1,095

C. Additional analyses

C.1. Multilevel regression (estimation method = ML) predicting the candidate's total campaign expenditure (in absolute numbers)

	Odds ratio	se	sig.
Candidate level variables			
Incumbent	3,811.25	(488.85)	***
Local office	345.03	(239.55)	
Spending cap in euro (Standardized)	7,567.54	(128.16)	***
Gender (m)	258.42	(221.85)	
Age ≤ 25	159.03	(495.47)	
Age 26-35	-123.55	(324.67)	
Age 46-55	-458.65	(311.54)	
Age 56-65	-131.74	(343.15)	
Age 66-95	-601.69	(513.25)	
Higher level variables			
DM	-45.20	(25.29)	
Intercept	7,121.83	(627.67)	***
Random effects parameter			
District var(constant)	15,466.01	(54,042.69)	
<hr/>			
Log Likelihood	-13,885.5		
Wald Chi ² (22)	7,398.81		***
N(level 1)	1,425		
N(level 2)	11 Electoral districts		

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; the age category ranging from 36 to 45 has been used as the reference category