

Social Media Lab SML (2022 - 2026)

The Social Media Lab (SML) is an initiative of [Caroline Close](#) (ULB), [Lucas Kins](#) (ULB), [Awenig Marié](#) (ULB), and [Laura Jacobs](#) (UAntwerp). The SML aims to be a permanent observatory of the communication of political parties on social media platforms.

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Context

Social media platforms have become a powerful tool for political communication globally (Farkas & Bene, 2020; Gilardi et al., 2021; Kruschinski & Bene, 2021), but also in Belgium (Peeters et al., 2022). Social media play a crucial role in connecting “traditional” media, citizens and the political world. As a result, they are increasingly used by political parties for campaign purposes, to inform the public about their activities and programme, to set the political agenda and to maintain contacts with civil society and journalists. Similarly, civil society, media professionals and citizens use social media to be informed about political decisions, express their opinion and interact with political actors, such as party presidents, parties and government officials.

Recent research in political communication has increasingly examined both the digital communication strategies of political actors (the supply side) and the ways in which citizens react to these messages (the demand side). In the Belgian context, political parties and their presidents are central actors of democratic representation: they recruit political elites, form governments, shape policy and pass legislation. Through their communication on social media, they also play a key role in agenda-setting by influencing media coverage and shaping public debates on societal issues. Yet, despite this central role, relatively few studies in Belgium have systematically analyzed how these actors communicate using social media. Understanding the evolution of political discourse and public opinion thus requires close attention to these digital communication messages, as they reflect the strategies, priorities, and ideological positioning of political elites.

Despite the importance of these issues, and while research is flourishing at the international level, scientific knowledge on the Belgian case is still lacking. In the aftermath of the 2019 elections, interest in the use of the multitude of social media platforms by parties and politicians has increased, particularly as a result of the established link between the electoral success of parties such as the Vlaams Belang (right-wing populist) or the PTB (left-wing populist), sometimes attributed to their more effective digital communication strategies. Nevertheless, scientific attention has mainly focused on the campaign (Lefevere et al., 2020), even though communication on social media is characterized by a logic of “permanent campaign”, or even “permanent communication” (Elmer et al., 2018; Severin-Nielsen et al., 2025).

Research objectives and questions

The Social Media Lab (SML) aims to be an observatory of political communication on social media in Belgium. Our research questions are multiple, and are at the crossroads of studies on political parties, political communication, and public opinion research:

1. How do political parties, and political elites at large, take advantage of online communication tools? What are the [preferred platforms](#)? How do political parties manage their communication on social media, [internally](#)? To what extent is communication on social media (de)centralized? What are the [differences between and within political parties](#) in terms of the use of social media? What strategies outside and during election campaigns?
2. How do political [parties and their \(co-\)presidents](#) communicate on social media? Which [issues](#) are highlighted? Which [social groups](#) are political parties targeting? To what extent do political actors use [negative or positive communication](#) in their publications? Which parties are [attacking the most](#), and what parties are most attacked? And on what issues? Does the content of communication on social media vary according to the context (electoral campaign, non-campaign, pre- or post-election)?
3. What are the effects of political parties' online communication, especially on citizens? What pattern(s) can be discerned in terms of citizens' reactions (likes, shares) to (different types of) political party publications? What are the effects of negative/positive communication on citizens' attitudes and affects (trust, polarization)?

Results, publication and promotion

Since 2022, the Social Media Lab has systematically collected all publications on X (formerly known as Twitter) from the official accounts of political parties and their (co-)presidents (13 parties represented in the Chamber after the 2019 election). These publications are then coded (with the help of paid students) according to a set of variables related to the above research questions (content, engagement). The SML team can make this data available, on request, to researchers collaborating with Cevipol, as well as to students of the Philosophy and Social Sciences faculty as part of their master thesis (reach out to lucas.kins@ulb.be). Our extended network also includes other researchers within the Cevipol and at the University of Antwerp working on similar topics. In the context of the multiple elections of 2024, the members of the SML regularly participated in activities to disseminate their results to the general public and put their expertise at the service of civil society, upon request. A list of publications is provided below.

Conference presentations and working papers

Kins, L., Professionalized digital campaigns? Analysing tasks distribution and attitudes of digital communication staff in Belgian parties, [ECPR General Conference 2022](#), Innsbruck.

Paulis, E., Jacobs, L., Kins, L., Claessens, P., Un cadastre des parlementaires belges sur les réseaux sociaux, [Conférence « Parlements et parlementaires dans les médias »](#), Brussels.

Kins, L., Jacobs, L., Massive attack? Negative campaigning in online political communication of parties in Belgium: Bringing in the role of issue ownership and competition, [PolitologenEetmaal 2022](#), Nijmegen; CPSA 2023 Annual Conference/ICA 2023, Toronto.

Close, C., Rangoni, S., Kins, L., Representative democracy under attack? Analyzing political parties and MPs' discourses in French-speaking Belgium, [CPSA 2023](#), Toronto.

- Kins, L., Concern, indifference or something else? Analysing attitudes of party staff towards digital campaign tools in Belgium, [CPSA 2024 Annual Conference](#), Montreal.
- Kins, L., Jacobs, L., Close, C., Sticking to issues: How competition for ownership drives negativity in Belgium on X beyond elections, CPSA 2025 Annual Conference, Toronto.
- Kins, L., van Haute, E., Exposing Inter-Party Animosity in a Consociational Democracy: Thorn in the Side or Fatal Blow?, CPSA 2025 Annual Conference, Toronto.
- Marié, A., Kins, L., Close, C., From party lines to personal strategies: Understanding negativity in Belgian MPs' social media communication, 9th Conference of the Standing Group on Parliaments, Barcelona.
- Marié, A., Kins, L., Close, C., Jacobs, L., Political Elites on X (Twitter): a longitudinal study examining negativity across the electoral cycle in Belgium (2022-2025), ECPR General Conference 2025, Thessaloniki.
- Grippa, P., Goovaerts, I., Close, C., The Polarizing Effect of Political Attacks: How Elite Discourse on Social Media Fuels Affective Polarization, PoliticologenEtmaal 2025, Groningen.

Articles and book chapters

- Kins, L., Jacobs, L., (forthcoming). Négativité et campagnes permanentes dans la communication partisane sur Twitter en Belgique, In : Elections et réseaux sociaux dans une perspective comparée, Presses Universitaires de Vincennes.
- Kins, L., Close, C., Jacobs, L., (forthcoming). La communication des partis d'extrême droite sur les réseaux sociaux en Belgique, In : L'extrême-droite en Belgique, Academia.
- Close, C., Jacobs, L., Kins, L., Paulis, E., (forthcoming). Partis politiques et réseaux sociaux en Belgique : une communication polarisante ? Analyse de la plateforme X, In : La démocratie à l'épreuve de la polarisation, Academia.
- Close, C., Jacobs, L., Kins, L., (2024). Comment les parts politiques francophones séduisent ou divisent sur le réseau social X, [Revue Politique](#).
- Close, C., Jacobs, L., Kins, L., (2024). Favoring ingroups, derogating from outgroups: how populist parties in Belgium polarize on social media. [Acta Politica](#), (online first)
- Kins, L., Close, C., Jacobs, L., (2024). Hoe spreken politieke partijen ons aan op X, [Samenleving en politiek](#) (31) 6.
- Sbaraglia F., Close C., Kins L., (2024). Elections 2024. La lutte contre la pauvreté dans les discours et programmes des parts politiques francophones en Belgique, [Pauvreté](#).
- van Haute, E., Close, C., & Kins, L. (2024). Les stratégies du Vlaams Belang en termes d'organisation et de communication. [Les cahiers du libre examen](#).

Reports

- Kins, L., Marié, A., Jacobs, L., Close, C., (2025). Politicians in the spotlight: the personalization of Belgian parties' communication on X, [Social Media Lab@ULB](#).
- Marié A., Kins, L., Close, C., Jacobs, L., (2024). All about the economy? Issue emphasis in Belgian parties' communication on X before and during the 2024 election campaign, [Social Media Lab@ULB](#) & [NotLikeUs](#).

van Haute, E., & Kins, L., Close, C. (2024). Analyse du positionnement des parts belges francophones autour des thématiques de biodiversité, agriculture, aménagement du territoire et énergie. [Natagora](#).

Close, C., Kumar, T., Kins, L., Jacobs, L., (2023). Les parts politiques et leurs président-e-s sur Twitter : quelles tendances un an avant l'élection de 2024, [Social Media Lab@ULB](#).

Media

15/04/2025

[Le Vif](#): "Tweeter pour exister : comment les partis exploitent leurs personnalités sur les réseaux sociaux ?"

31/01/2025

[Le Vif](#): "Programmes et électeurs sont plus à droite : pourquoi la droitisation du MR est un fait démontré scientifiquement"

29/11/2024

[Het Laatste Nieuws](#): "Universiteiten onderzoeken gedrag van politici op X: 'Economie belangrijkste thema, klimaat verwaarloosbaar'"

[La Libre](#): "Les tweets politiques ont principalement mis l'accent sur l'économie pendant les élections"

[Trends](#): "Une campagne électorale 2024 sous le signe de l'économie, si on en croit les tweets (X's) des personnalités politiques"

[Dernière Heure](#): "Les tweets politiques ont principalement mis l'accent sur l'économie pendant les élections"

[Gazet van Antwerpen](#): "Onderzoek UAntwerpen toont aan dat Belgische politieke partijen X strategisch gebruiken"

[Het Nieuwsblad](#): "Onderzoek UAntwerpen toont aan dat Belgische politieke partijen X strategisch gebruiken"

[The Brussels Times](#): "Economy was the main focus of Belgian election campaign, research shows"

07/06/2024

[Knack](#): "Onderzoek ULB en UAntwerpen: 'Vlaams Belang en PVDA sturen hoogst aantal polariserende tweets'"

23/05/2024

[Le Vif](#): "A l'attaque! Voici les partis les plus offensifs sur X, et leurs cibles favorites"

[l'Echo](#): "Élections 2024 : malgré les attaques des élites politiques, les électeurs belges restent plutôt tolérants"

22/05/2024

[De Morgen](#): "Vooral de Vlaams Belang-kiezers worden verfoeid. Maar dat maakt hen weinig uit"

11/12/2023

[Le Vif](#): "En retrait, le PTB ? Comment l'extrême gauche opte pour une stratégie électorale défensive"

19/07/2023

[Knack](#): "Studie ULB en UAntwerpen: Kwart van tweets verstuurd door partijen en politici zijn aanvallen"

Financing

This project is supported by the Philosophy and Social Sciences Faculty (*Crédits de recherche*, 2022-2023; 2025-2026), by the ULB Research Department (*Fonds d'Encouragement à la recherche*, 2024-2026) and by an ARC fund (*Action de Recherche Concertée*, 2024-2027).