

Loudest at the Edges: Belgian Politicians on Facebook and the 2019 Election

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Abstract

Belgium's federal election of 26 May 2019 saw large gains for Vlaams Belang on the Flemish radical right and for the PVDA-PTB on the radical left. I use 95,373 posts from the Facebook pages of 121 Belgian politicians, mostly members of the 2019 Chamber of Representatives and federal ministers, from January 2014 to September 2020, collected through CrowdTangle. In the month before the election, the pages of Vlaams Belang politicians drew 48% of all interactions on these pages, against 12% of the national vote. Three pages, those of Tom Van Grieken, Theo Francken and Dries Van Langenhove, drew 62% of all interactions between them. Dutch-speaking politicians' pages drew nine times as many interactions as French-speaking politicians' pages, so I compare parties within each language community. Among Dutch-speaking parties, Vlaams Belang drew 2.7 times its share of the vote and the PVDA 1.9 times, while N-VA drew about its share and Christian Democrats, Liberals and Greens drew about a fifth or less. Among French-speaking parties, the PTB drew 2.9 times its share, the PS about its share (1.1) and the MR a little less (0.8). Over time, engagement moved from N-VA, whose State Secretary for Asylum and Migration, Francken, had the largest page in 2016 to 2018, to Vlaams Belang, whose share of all interactions rose from 1% in 2014 to 47% in 2019 and 56% in 2020. The list does not include several party leaders, so the results describe the politicians in the list, not whole parties.

1 Introduction

The Belgian federal election of 26 May 2019 was held on the same day as the regional and European elections. Vlaams Belang, which stands only in Flanders and Brussels, rose from 3.7% to 12% of the national vote for the Chamber, second only to the N-VA in votes, and the radical-left PVDA-PTB rose in both language communities ([FPS Interior, Belgium 2019](#)).

This paper asks three descriptive questions about the Facebook pages of Belgian politicians. How did each party's politicians' share of engagement compare with the party's vote in the month before the 2019 election? How concentrated was that engagement on a few pages? And how did engagement shift between parties from 2014 to 2020?

The paper is one of a series using the same CrowdTangle export, collected during my doctoral research

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(Hotham 2021). It complements studies of populist parties across Europe (Hotham 2026a), of the radical right in the Nordic countries (Hotham 2026b) and of leaders and party pages in Britain (Hotham 2026c).

2 Background

Parties now use Facebook continuously (Larsson 2016), and politicians use their own pages to reach audiences directly (Stier et al. 2018). Personal and self-centred posts tend to draw more engagement (Metz et al. 2020; Bene et al. 2022), and populist parties have been described as having an “elective affinity” with social media (Gerbaudo 2018). Belgium adds a feature most countries lack: two largely separate party systems and media spaces, one Dutch-speaking and one French-speaking, competing in a single national election.

3 Data and methods

3.1 Pages and posts

The data are all posts from a CrowdTangle list of Belgian politicians’ pages, exported on 28 October 2020 (CrowdTangle Team 2020). The list contains 122 pages. Almost all belong to members of the Chamber of Representatives elected in 2019 or to federal ministers. I assigned each page to a party using the published membership of the Chamber for 2019–2024, and for pages not found there, 2014–2019. I leave out one page of a politician who was not a member in 2019 and treat Jean-Marie Dedecker, elected as an independent on N-VA’s list, as independent. Dries Van Langenhove, the founder of the group Schild & Vrienden, was elected as an independent on Vlaams Belang’s list and sat with its group; I count him with Vlaams Belang. I keep posts from 1 January 2014 to 30 September 2020. After removing 24 duplicate posts (same page, time and text) and posts outside this period, the sample is 95,373 posts from 121 pages with 47.2 million interactions (Table 1). Interactions are the sum of reactions, comments and shares. Timestamps are in UK time, one hour behind Belgium.

The list does not include several party leaders who were not members of the Chamber, including Bart De Wever (N-VA) and Paul Magnette (PS), or party pages. The number of pages also differs by party relative to its seats. The results therefore describe the politicians in the list, not whole parties.

3.2 Comparisons

I compare each party’s politicians’ share of interactions in the 30 days before 26 May 2019 with its share of the vote (FPS Interior, Belgium 2019). Because Dutch-speaking politicians’ pages drew far more engagement than French-speaking ones, the main comparison is within each language community, using each party’s votes in that community. The PVDA-PTB stands as one party in both communities; I assign its politicians to the PVDA (Dutch-speaking) or the PTB (French-speaking) by the community in which they stood, and use the PVDA’s and the PTB’s separate vote totals. Every other party stands in only one community, so its community vote is its national vote, including Brussels. For the PVDA-PTB I count its votes in Flemish constituencies as the PVDA’s and those in Wallonia and Brussels as the PTB’s; Nabil Boukili, elected in Brussels, is counted with the PTB. Vote shares are renormalised so that the parties compared sum to 100%. The window ends at midnight UK time on 25 May, 1 a.m. on election day in Belgium. As checks, I use windows of 14 and 60 days, a national comparison across all parties, and

Table 1. Pages in the sample by party, January 2014 to September 2020. Seats are those won in the 2019 Chamber election.

Party	Seats 2019	Pages	Posts	Interactions (m)	Most-engaged page
N-VA	25	22	16,362	15.11	Theo Francken
VB	18	15	12,956	19.52	Tom Van Grieken
PS	20	16	11,987	1.47	Ahmed Laaouej
CD&V	12	12	7,606	0.48	Koen Geens
PVDA-PTB	12	6	13,880	5.51	Raoul Hedebouw
Open Vld	12	10	5,890	1.15	Maggie De Block
MR	14	13	13,158	1.02	Sophie Wilmès
sp.a	9	7	5,103	2.16	John Crombez
Ecolo	13	6	1,611	0.03	Julie Chanson
Groen	8	7	2,774	0.56	Kristof Calvo
cdH	5	4	2,309	0.11	Maxime Prévot
DéFI	2	2	1,448	0.05	Sophie Rohonyi
Independent	–	1	289	0.03	Jean-Marie Dedecker
Total	150	121	95,373	47.2	

comparisons using only each party’s most-engaged page or three most-engaged pages, which reduce the effect of differences in how many pages each party has.

4 Results

4.1 The 2019 election

In the 30 days before the election, Vlaams Belang politicians’ pages drew 48% of the interactions on all party-affiliated pages in the list, against 12% of the vote of the parties compared, a ratio of 3.8 (Table 4). The engagement was concentrated on a few pages. Tom Van Grieken, the party’s chair, drew 28% of all interactions, Theo Francken of N-VA 17.5% and Dries Van Langenhove 16.5% (Table 2). Together these three pages drew 62% of all interactions. The next three were the PVDA-PTB president Peter Mertens (9.7%), the PTB spokesman Raoul Hedebouw (4.0%) and the sp.a chair John Crombez (3.9%). No page of a politician from the Christian Democrats, the Liberals, the Greens, the MR or the PS drew more than 1.3%.

The language gap was large: in the month before the election, Dutch-speaking politicians’ pages drew 1.67 million interactions and French-speaking politicians’ pages 0.18 million. Within the Dutch-speaking parties (Figure 1, Table 3), Vlaams Belang drew 53% of interactions against 19% of the Dutch-speaking parties’ vote, a ratio of 2.7, and the PVDA 11% against 6%, a ratio of 1.9. N-VA drew about its share (0.95), mostly (79%) through Francken’s page. The Christian Democrats (0.18), Liberals (0.22), sp.a (0.46) and Greens (0.07) drew far less. Within the French-speaking parties, the PTB drew 44% against 15%, a ratio of 2.9. The PS drew about its share (1.10) and the MR a little less (0.83), while Ecolo, with only two active pages and 757 interactions in the month, drew almost nothing. The list covers few of Ecolo’s and Groen’s MPs’ pages, so their ratios are especially uncertain. These ratios change little with

Table 2. The eight most-engaged pages in the 30 days before the 2019 election. Share is the page’s share of interactions on all pages in the list.

Page	Party	Posts	Interactions	Share (%)
Tom Van Grieken	VB	207	519,503	28.0
Theo Francken	N-VA	133	323,695	17.5
Dries Van Langenhove	VB	160	305,434	16.5
Peter Mertens	PVDA-PTB	129	179,694	9.7
Raoul Hedebouw	PVDA-PTB	174	73,695	4.0
John Crombez	sp.a	83	72,933	3.9
Wouter Vermeersch	VB	47	27,023	1.5
Ahmed Laaouej	PS	60	23,650	1.3

windows of 14 or 60 days.

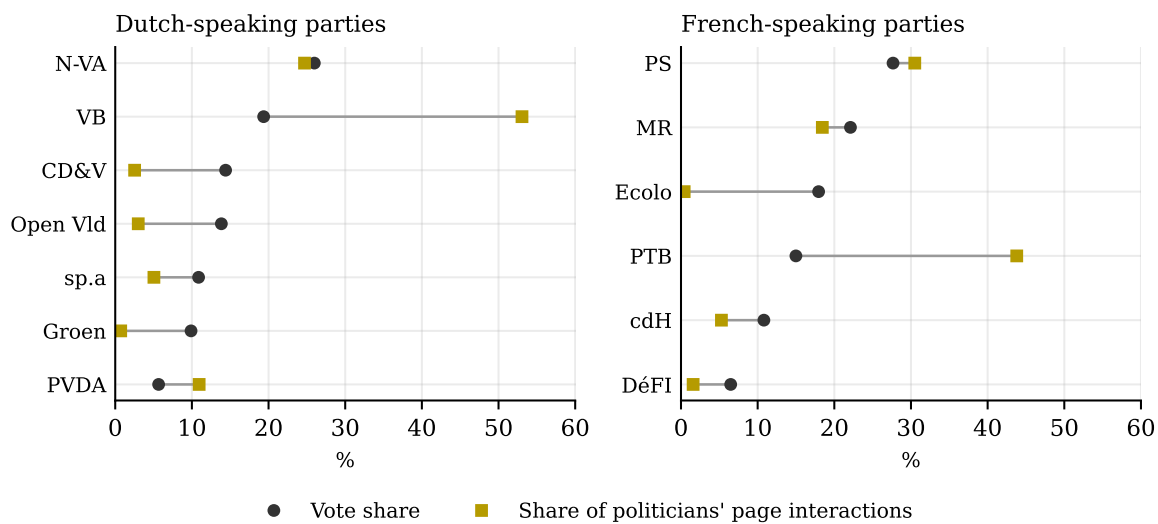


Figure 1. Share of interactions on each party’s politicians’ pages in the 30 days before the 2019 election, and vote share, within each language community. Vote shares are renormalised among the parties of each community.

The national comparison, and the comparisons that keep only each party’s top page or top three pages, give the same four highest ratios, Vlaams Belang, the PVDA-PTB, N-VA and sp.a (Table 4). Vlaams Belang’s ratio is between 3.5 and 4.0 under every check, and the PVDA-PTB’s between 1.5 and 1.7. N-VA’s is between 1.2 and 1.6 nationally because the French-speaking parties, which drew little engagement, are included.

4.2 From N-VA to Vlaams Belang

Figure 2 shows each party’s share of all interactions by year. In 2014 and 2015 the PVDA-PTB’s politicians drew the largest share (46% and 32%), reflecting how few of the other pages were yet active. From 2016 to 2018 N-VA’s politicians drew the most, reaching 63% in 2017. Almost all of that came through Francken, the State Secretary for Asylum and Migration from 2014 to 2018, whose page drew 3.3 to 3.5 million interactions a year in 2017 and 2018 (Figure 3). Vlaams Belang’s share then rose quickly, from 9% in 2017 to 38% in 2018, 47% in 2019 and 56% in the first nine months of 2020. Van Grieken’s page drew 0.03 million interactions in 2015, 2.9 million in 2018, 3.6 million in 2019 and 6.4

Table 3. Facebook and vote shares within each language community, 30 days before the election. Active pages are those with at least one post in the window. Ratio is Facebook % divided by vote %.

Community	Party	Active pages	Posts	Facebook %	Vote %	Ratio
Dutch-speaking	N-VA	20	640	24.7	26.0	0.95
	VB	10	679	53.1	19.4	2.74
	CD&V	12	339	2.5	14.4	0.18
	Open Vld	10	277	3.0	13.8	0.22
	sp.a	6	183	5.0	10.9	0.46
	Groen	3	108	0.7	9.9	0.07
	PVDA	3	176	10.9	5.7	1.93
French-speaking	PS	13	389	30.5	27.7	1.10
	MR	12	454	18.4	22.1	0.83
	Ecolo	2	63	0.4	18.0	0.02
	PTB	2	205	43.8	15.0	2.92
	cdH	4	98	5.3	10.8	0.49
	DéFI	2	72	1.6	6.5	0.24

million in the first nine months of 2020. Van Langenhove's page, with little engagement before 2018, drew 2.0 million in 2019 and 2.5 million in 2020.

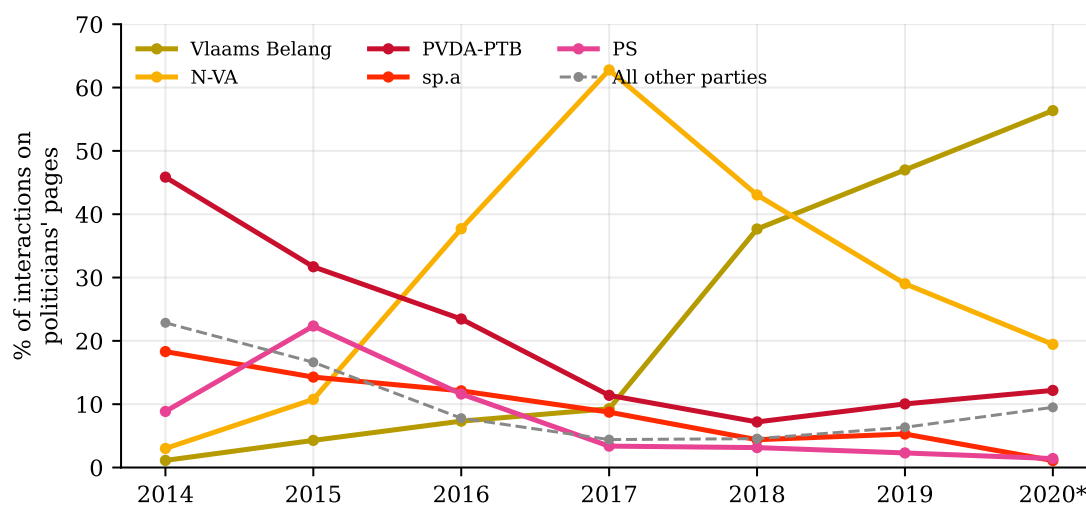


Figure 2. Each party's politicians' share of all interactions on the pages in the list, by year. *2020 runs to September.

Table 4. National comparison across all parties: ratio of Facebook share to national vote share under alternative windows and page sets. Vote shares are renormalised so that the parties listed sum to 100%.

Party	Main (30 days)	14 days	60 days	Top page per party	Top 3 pages per party
N-VA	1.33	1.23	1.43	1.64	1.24
VB	3.84	3.77	3.68	3.53	4.02
PS	0.30	0.34	0.30	0.20	0.24
CD&V	0.25	0.26	0.21	0.14	0.17
PVDA-PTB	1.58	1.71	1.49	1.69	1.70
Open Vld	0.30	0.39	0.29	0.22	0.27
MR	0.23	0.23	0.24	0.09	0.16
sp.a	0.65	0.64	0.87	0.88	0.69
Ecolo	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Groen	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.11	0.11
cdH	0.13	0.18	0.11	0.14	0.14
DéFI	0.07	0.08	0.05	0.06	0.07

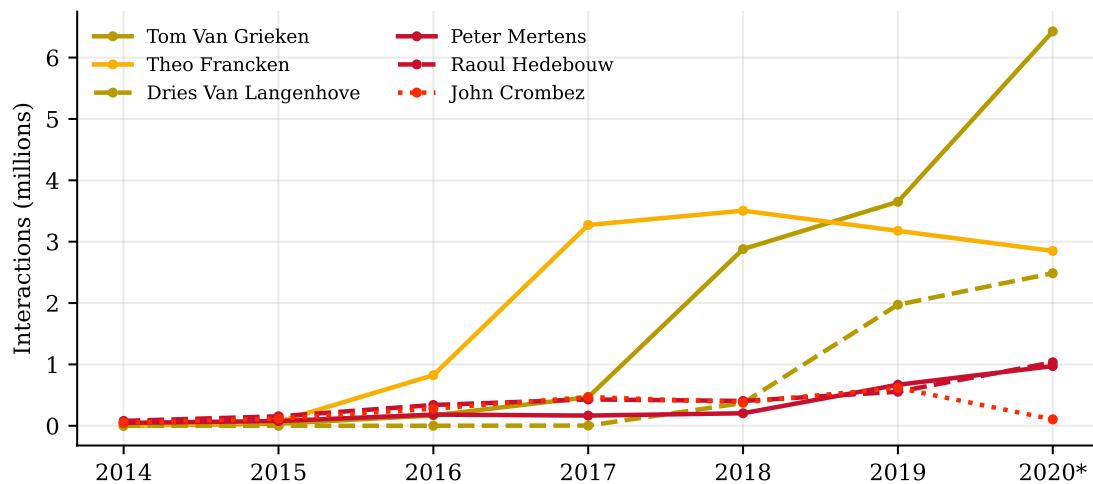


Figure 3. Interactions on the six most-engaged pages, by year. *2020 runs to September.

5 Discussion

Belgian politicians' Facebook engagement in 2019 was concentrated at the edges. In each language community, the radical parties drew roughly two to three times their share of the vote. N-VA and the PS drew about their share, and most other parties a fraction of theirs. Much of the engagement came through three pages, two of them Vlaams Belang's and the third Francken's, so the edges were not the only place engagement gathered. The shift from N-VA to Vlaams Belang over 2018 and 2019 coincides with N-VA's loss of votes and Vlaams Belang's gain at the 2019 election, but the data cannot say whether engagement led, followed or simply accompanied that movement.

The language gap is a reminder that Facebook engagement reflects audiences, not only parties. Dutch-speaking politicians' pages drew nine times as much as French-speaking ones in the month before the election. Comparing across the two communities without separating them would make every French-speaking party look marginal.

6 Limitations

The list is of politicians, mostly 2019 members of the Chamber and ministers, not of parties, and it leaves out several party leaders, including Bart De Wever and Paul Magnette, and all party pages. Because the list was built around 2019 membership, earlier years cover only the politicians who later sat in the Chamber, so the trends before 2019 partly reflect who was in the list. The number of pages per party varies relative to its seats; the top-page checks reduce but do not remove this. Van Langenhove sat with Vlaams Belang but was not a party member. CrowdTangle’s historical coverage is not guaranteed to be complete. Interactions are not support: they include engagement from opponents, from outside Belgium and possibly from paid promotion. One election is too few to generalise.

7 Conclusion

Before Belgium’s 2019 election, Facebook engagement on politicians’ pages was dominated by the radical right and, within each language community, the radical left drew well above its vote. Three pages drew most of the engagement, and engagement moved from N-VA’s best-known politician to Vlaams Belang’s over 2018 and 2019. Read alongside the vote, the data show where engagement was concentrated, not who would win: the parties other than Vlaams Belang, N-VA and the PVDA-PTB, most of which drew a fraction of their vote on Facebook, still won most of the seats.

Provenance and AI use

The data were exported from CrowdTangle in October 2020 for my doctoral research. This paper builds on my doctoral thesis (Hotham 2021). The analysis and writing were completed in 2026.

I wrote the text, with drafting and editing assistance from Claude (Anthropic), which also helped prepare the analysis code and review drafts. I checked the analysis and the text and take responsibility for both.

Ethics and data

The data are public posts by politicians. In line with CrowdTangle’s terms, I do not publish post-level data and I do not quote posts. Aggregated data are available from the author: interactions by party, page and year, and the election comparisons.

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