



HAL
open science

Bringing the campaign closer to the voters: Facebook in partisan-managed campaigning in France

Marie Neihouser, Julien Figeac

► To cite this version:

Marie Neihouser, Julien Figeac. Bringing the campaign closer to the voters: Facebook in partisan-managed campaigning in France. *Communications*, 2024, Online First, 10.1515/commun-2022-0106 . halshs-04435123

HAL Id: halshs-04435123

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04435123v1>

Submitted on 2 Feb 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**Bringing the campaign closer to the voters: Facebook in
partisan-managed campaigning in France.**

Marie Neihouser

Post-doctorante

LERASS, Université de Toulouse Paul Sabatier

neihouser.marie@gmail.com

Julien Figeac

Chargé de recherche

LISST, CNRS

julien.figeac@cnrs.fr

Reference

Neihouser M., Figeac J. (2024). Bringing the campaign closer to the voters: Facebook in partisan - managed campaigning in France. *Communications. The European Journal of Communication Research*, Online First
(<https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2022-0106>).

Abstract:

During presidential campaigns, party members often operate Facebook pages or groups concurrently with the official communications of their respective political parties. However, there is limited evidence regarding the true motivations of these partisans and how their efforts supplement the online strategies of the parties. Our study is based on interviews conducted with party members who ran Facebook pages to support a candidate during the 2022 French presidential campaign. It sheds light on how they managed their Facebook pages, often autonomously, to serve as supplementary tools to their grassroots tactics and ultimately to bring the campaign closer to the voters. This finding highlights the emergence of a hybrid model of online campaign organization, the partisan-managed campaigning model, which challenges both the traditional top-down model, wherein the campaign is managed by the central party, and the more recent citizen-initiated campaign model.

Keywords:

Digital Campaign – Facebook – Party members - Online practices – Local supporters.

Bringing the campaign closer to the voters: Facebook in partisan-managed campaigning in France.

Over the years, political parties have built extensive and robust online networks of activists at both the national and regional levels. These activists are encouraged to use various social media platforms, particularly Facebook, which is popular among the elderly in France¹—a demographic known for high voter turnout (Braconnier et al., 2017). During electoral campaigns, they manage a diverse range of Facebook pages and groups with varying degrees of autonomy from the parties' official communications. Although these candidate support pages are relatively heterogeneous in terms of subscriber numbers and publication frequency, they have remained underexplored in academic literature. Nonetheless, they play a crucial role in the digital action repertoires of partisan communities, which include political parties and their activist networks that contribute to electoral campaigns with varying levels of autonomy. This is especially true in France, where campaign legislation is relatively strict.

Facebook's partisan communities comprise a variety of actors (parties, activists, candidates, etc.), enabling each campaign team to enhance its presence on social media. Some pages are managed by long-time activists as part of their ongoing engagement within the party, often at a local level. These pages assist central campaigns in executing and disseminating their ideas and strategies (Howard, 2005), and occasionally exhibit a more activist spirit characteristic of citizen-initiated campaigns (Gibson, 2015).

¹ On Facebook, 35% of daily visitors are over 50 years old in France. In addition, 10.8% of the platform's active users are over 65 years old. Source : <https://blog.digimind.com/fr/agences/facebook-chiffres-essentiels#demographieFR>.

Previous research primarily focused on analysing these pages through a content analysis of their publications (Koc-Michalska et al., 2021; Figeac et al., 2020) or by examining the online strategies of central campaign teams (Kreiss, 2012 and 2016). However, there is limited evidence of how these "local" and "activist" Facebook pages effectively contribute to online campaigns. In this article, we try to understand how the party members pages complement or differ from the strategies of the political parties' Facebook pages during the 2022 French presidential campaign.

Our findings are based on a sample of interviews (n = 24) with the Facebook page managers of the main political parties. These interviews lead us to emphasize how these party members run their Facebook pages using a hybrid organisational model. On the one hand, they adopt a top-down model, following party directives on how to run the campaign in the regions, by being present in various public spaces to distribute leaflets for example. On the other hand, they need to show autonomy in order to successfully run the campaign, adapting it to the specific characteristics of the local electorate. This is all the more central in the use of Facebook and social media, which receive very little supervision by the central committees of the parties due to a lack of resources. This is the reason for our emphasis on a partisan-managed model of campaigning in this text in order to account for the practices of party members and their constrained empowerment in the absence of directives from the parties.

1. Towards a partisan-managed model of online campaigning

1.a Controversy about the organisational models on online campaigning

Two main organisational models emerge in the studies on online campaigning. On the one hand, scholars argue that digital technology reinforces a campaign's centralization (Gerbaudo, 2019; Penney, 2017). Political choices are made by the team of campaign

leaders before the grassroots activists - online or offline – are required to apply them. In this case, Facebook – and the activist pages - are rather used by the parties in a classic top-down model (Klinger, 2013).

On the other hand, Enos and Hersh (2015) show, for example, that candidates' supporters are relatively unreliable intermediaries in relaying messages from the party leadership. Zittel (2009) and Kreiss (2014) point out that the desires and needs of party authorities and of their base can be relatively contradictory. This leads scholars to emphasize a “citizen-initiated” campaign model (Gibson, 2015) by showing that digital technology allows grassroots activists to organise themselves independently, away from the control of the campaign leadership.

Dommett, Kefford and Powers (2021) concluded that scholars have so far failed to agree on the topic, in particular because the answers are partially method-dependent. Indeed, most studies mobilize interviews with members of the partisan elite and of campaign management teams (Klinger and Russmann, 2017), or quantitative studies of content relayed on social media. But scholars rarely interview partisans, such as party members who try to run presidential campaigns at a local level, often without any directives from official party committees. As a result, partisan practices are not taken into account in most research protocols. (Dommett, Temple and Seyd, 2021). However, partisans play a very important role in many countries, particularly in France, where they run the presidential election as close as possible to voters in the regions, whether face-to-face or via social media. It is possible that the two main models of campaigning were based on specific contexts - mainly the United States and Great Britain. But what happens in other political systems in which more political parties take part in the election, where voting systems and electoral legislations are different, and where supporters manage the campaign independently of party directives?

We propose to address these issues using France as a case study in order to emphasize a partisan-managed model of online campaigning. This model differs from the “citizen-initiated” campaigning model (Gibson, 2015) because it does not refer to a desire for empowerment on the part of partisans who wish to act freely and independently of party directives. In France, party members are obliged to be autonomous to compensate for their lack of resources, particularly when it comes to running an online campaign. Therefore, this article aims to analyse this empowerment of French party members by focusing on how they run Facebook pages during political campaigns under multiple constraints. This partisan-managed campaign model differs from previous work on three points: partisans define specific purposes for the parties’ Facebook pages they run during the campaign according to their local audience; they manage their pages independently in the absence of clear directives from the parties, and finally they perform a specific type of political communication by targeting their local audience of supporters.

1.b Partisans and the political purposes of their Facebook pages

Previous research has shown that the Facebook pages of political parties can serve two opposing purposes. On the one hand, some scholars argue that online activists aim to disseminate their candidate's message following a top-down model (Howard, 2005; Gerodimos and Justinussen, 2015). On the other hand, other scholars emphasize participative practices (Heiss et al., 2019) by showing how they seek to build an online community, with a limited and local audience, for sharing information and answering questions about the candidate. Following this second perspective, we investigate here how French party members defined the political purposes of their Facebook page in order to determine whether they adopted a top-down or bottom-up political

communication model. What are party members' precise objectives when managing Facebook pages (RQ1)? To what extent do they follow party directives or manage these pages independently?

The answer to these questions depends on the research protocol. Indeed, scholars often infer the function of these pages by conducting interviews with campaign staff (Kreiss, 2012 and 2016) or by performing a content analysis of the Facebook posts published by the parties (Koc-Michalska et al., 2021). These methods target, firstly, the activities most closely supervised by parties and campaign committees and, secondly, online publications that emphasize citizens' autonomy without explaining it. In this study, we interviewed a sample of party members to analyze their motivations and their grassroots tactics for managing a Facebook page during the 2022 French presidential campaign. Is the use of Facebook part of a highly centralized campaign in which online party members follow the instructions of central teams? Or, on the contrary, do these activists enjoy greater autonomy in running their online communities at the local level? In this case, they would relay news related to the candidate they support that is relevant to local voters.

1.c Partisan autonomy in the management of Facebook pages

Since the early 2000s, presidential campaigns have become more professionalized using new digital strategies, a unique style of political communication which considers voters as consumers, and a specific distribution of power within the parties (Gibson and Rommele, 2001). Scholars analyse the professionalisation of political parties during campaigns (Tenscher et al., 2016), sometime by determining a professionalisation score (Gibson and Rommele, 2009). Alongside this professionalisation of party organisation, digital services and social media have enabled party supporters to play an

increasingly important role in campaigns, sometimes demonstrating true autonomy from the directives of the parties' central committees. However, the autonomy of these online activists involved in political campaigns is understudied.

The citizen-initiated campaign (Gibson, 2015) reflects this empowerment of citizens but is essentially based on the idea of their total autonomy from the parties. But what about the practices of local party members during traditional presidential campaigns?

These activists demonstrate more or less autonomy if they are involved in networks of supporters in large cities or if, on the contrary, they are relatively alone in rural areas.

Likewise, what is their level of autonomy when they run their Facebook page (RQ2)?

The empowerment of these actors varies depending on their resources and strategies.

Those with greater resources will be able to customize their editorial choices. They can create their own news and articles in order to disseminate relevant information to their followers. On the contrary, those with fewer resources will be obliged to relay the content proposed by their candidates' campaign committees. Therefore, the resources of the party members determine their editorial choices and the sophistication of their targeting techniques. This leads us to determine whether the party members have adequate tools and resources at their disposal to coordinate with their candidate's campaign team. We also look at how closely they follow party instructions disseminated via social media loops or activist applications (Bennett, 2016).

1.d The empowerment of partisans through the targeting of a local audience

The third characteristic we examine here is targeting. Previous research mainly focuses on how campaign managers use targeting techniques. From a candidate's perspective, running a targeted campaign is often aimed at sharing information to small groups (Hillygus and Shields, 2008) in order to address individualized content to the

supporters. These data-driven techniques of political communication have spread to all political parties, who now use a vast amount of personal data to try to mobilise their voters. This leads scholars to seek to understand the normative implications of these targeting techniques and to propose ways to regulate them (Kruikemeier et al. 2022). In France, electoral legislation is relatively restrictive regarding the use of personal data during political campaigns and using these techniques is illegal. Although the press has disclosed that this legislation is circumvented by the campaign committees of political parties, this is not the case for the activists who run Facebook pages during political campaigns. Compared to the parties' community managers, they are not able to implement sophisticated targeting techniques (Zuiderveen et al., 2018). They have fewer resources to help them manage their pages, identify visitor profiles, and target their audience. On the other hand, we can assume that they develop more artisanal targeting techniques to deliver personalized information to their audiences. Therefore, we ask to what extent Facebook page managers can effectively target their audience in the absence of party directives and in political contexts where audience targeting techniques are strongly regulated (RQ3)? What tools do they have at their disposal?

2. The French case

The two predominant models of campaign organization discussed earlier – the top-down model (Howard, 2005; Gerodimos and Justinussen, 2015) and the “citizen-initiated” campaign (Gibson, 2015) – largely draw upon the Anglo-Saxon context. The French case offers a unique opportunity to examine these models, considering its distinctive multi-party system and specific legislation pertaining to campaign expenses and personal data in online political campaigns.

French legislation is notably stringent, as it prohibits advertising on social media for political purposes during election campaigns. Unlike in many countries, this legislation precludes candidates from implementing comprehensive electoral targeting strategies. Consequently, it prompts them to encourage their supporters to utilize social media as a means of compensating for this ban on online advertising by disseminating information. The French multi-party system thus presents an intriguing context for understanding how supporter empowerment either complements or deviates from the political communication strategies of parties, aiding them in connecting candidates with regional voters. Both the multi-party system and the legislation significantly shape the organization and strategy of online campaigns in France, particularly on Facebook.

Numerous European countries have restrictions (Dobber et al., 2019; Kruschinski and Haller, 2017) akin to those in France in terms of electoral legislation. Even if our results are rooted in the French context, they could be retested, expanded upon, or even refined in other countries. This would counterbalance the prevailing theoretical models primarily derived from US and Anglo-Saxon case studies (Gerbaudo, 2019, Penney, 2017; Gibson, 2015), which is particularly relevant for understanding how the political uses of social media may vary between European countries.

3. Method

We focus here on the 2022 French presidential campaign as an opportunity to analyse the strategies and practices of party members managing Facebook pages. As mentioned above, the aim of this study was to get feedback and information from local party members, rather than from central party strategists, to investigate the specificities of political communication on Facebook during a presidential campaign.

To conduct our interviews with page managers, we listed 1,477 political pages on Facebook supporting the main candidates in the election. We sent a message to their managers asking them for an interview. In total, 21 interviews² were conducted with page managers associated with various parties³. The duration of the interviews varied from 45 minutes to two hours. Our population includes 22 pages managers who are members of a political party (and who have paid membership fees) (cf. Appendice 1 for a detailed presentation of the interviewees). The main political forces are represented, from the radical left to the extreme right, including the left, the ecologists, the centre, and the right⁴. This allows us to understand the ecosystems of partisan communities on Facebook in their entirety, without restricting ourselves to candidate pages.

During the interviews (see Appendice 2 that presents the interview guide), we went over various items about the page (the context of creation, its objectives, etc.) before discussing in more detail how the page was managed and what were the strategies of dissemination of information. The focus then shifts to the page's place in the digital

² One more respondent answered our questions by e-mail. He preferred to reply in writing to the questions we sent him, rather than take part in an interview. These responses were treated in the same way as the oral interviews, although they contain less relevant information.

³ We sent an email to all the Facebook page managers in our dataset but they rarely responded to our request. This can be explained by the fact that these managers are in greater demand during election campaigns.

⁴ Supporters of 10 candidates, were interviewed: Nathalie Arthaud (Lutte ouvrière (LO)), Philippe Poutou (Nouveau Parti Anti-Capitaliste (NPA)), Fabien Roussel (Parti communiste Français (PCF)), Jean-Luc Mélenchon (mainly supported by La France Insoumise (LFI)), Anne Hidalgo (Parti Socialiste (PS)), Yannick Jadot (mainly supported by Europe Écologie-Les Verts (EELV)), Emmanuel Macron (mainly supported by La République En Marche (LREM)), Valérie Pécresse (mainly supported by Les Républicains (LR)), Marine Le Pen (Rassemblement National (RN)) and Eric Zemmour (Reconquête).

repertoire of the manager and possibly of the party. The interview then concludes with questions about the respondent's broader perception of the challenges of digital politics. We transcribed the interviews and performed a qualitative analysis. All the transcriptions were manually analysed by the authors in order to extract the data they considered to be most relevant. In particular, we selected inductively the phases of the interviews describing the strategic organization of online campaigns. This allowed us to identify the three main characteristics of partisan-managed campaigning: how partisans define the political purposes of their Facebook pages, their degree of autonomy in the management of these pages, and how they target a local audience with their messages in the absence of party directives.

As is often the case with qualitative research, the size of this sample is a limitation on the generalisability of our results. Indeed, we were not able to test to what extent the respondents - although representative in terms of their candidates of choice - differed from all other page managers during the campaign. This is why these first results deserve to be supplemented by other studies with a larger sample of interviews. Despite this limitation, this research allows us to complement previous work with significant results on how political activists manage Facebook during election campaigns. This qualitative methodology therefore focuses on individuals' statements to explore the intentions and practices of page managers, an area that is still relatively under-studied (Karpf et al., 2015). Most importantly, it does not take solely into account official campaign pages and their managers but embraces the full range of page managers operating in the partisan electoral ecosystems on Facebook.

4. Results

4.1 Facebook political pages as tools for on-the-ground campaigns

The first under-studied characteristic of political communication through Facebook pages that we address pertains to the rationale and approaches employed by political supporters when managing Facebook pages during a political campaign (RQ1). We previously observed that the methodologies of past studies, in conjunction with the particular political context under scrutiny, do not enable us to discern the political strategies implemented by French party members using Facebook pages during a presidential campaign. Our interviews seek to elucidate these strategies.

Initially, it becomes apparent that party members leveraging Facebook strive to accomplish "concrete action" and "have a tangible impact" on the electoral domain. This motivational aspect is cited by all of them, irrespective of their affiliation with a party's electoral committee. As an illustration, a page manager supporting Fabien Roussel (the PCF candidate) expounds on the characteristics of an effective post on Facebook. As a local party member, it is important for him that the online political communication recalls the many concrete actions organised by his local campaign committee.

I feel like saying 'if it can have an impact on the field'. If I can get the timing right and then there is ... that it leads to concrete action, that would be ideal ...

The manager of a page supporting the candidate Emmanuel Macron (LREM) explains more precisely to what extent the Facebook page serves to highlight the campaign work done on the ground:

For example, at the moment it's all the public meetings linked to the campaign that we're relaying; there will be posts on the events, the public meetings that have taken place; it will be, for example: every day we have a ... how can I put it ... we're presenting someone who is mobilised in our department - in the Val-de-Marne -, at the level of En Marche for this campaign.

Beyond communication between activists or with potential voters, one of the functions of Facebook pages is therefore, in some communities, to strengthen and structure local campaign teams. The page managers try to select information that is likely to have a strong echo at the local level, with a view to bringing the campaign closer to potential voters. This desire to promote local actions makes it possible to understand why local organizing committees can have an online political communication that is not aligned with the expectations and desires of the party authorities (Kreiss, 2014). Where the national authorities favour the visibility of the candidate, local authorities negotiate in parallel the image of local candidates in anticipation of the general elections.

It is therefore interesting to note that the main objective of the Facebook pages managers is the desire to promote local actions, because they perceive local news as being closer to the expectations of their audiences. For example, a page manager supporting the candidate Yannick Jadot (EELV) explained how he selected the information from the candidate's official team that he wanted to relay:

If we take an example from the Jadot campaign. Well, it's always publishing, you know. So, I'm going to take the information that will interest the regional or local level. For example, Yannick Jadot is coming to Toulouse very soon. That means that out of the hundred or so messages received, I'll only take one, the one that will impact the local area. So that means the arrival of Yannick Jadot in Toulouse.

This strategy is also reflected in the campaign themes they choose to put forward. As a page manager supporting Valérie Pécresse (LR) reported, she also focused on local issues:

So, I choose things that I think might interest the French in Switzerland [where the respondent lives]. That is to say, Valérie Pécresse's agricultural policy

interests me because I come from the Aubrac (laughs). But I think that Valérie Pécresse's agricultural policy for the French in Switzerland does not represent ... I always try to put something that might interest them. So, the tax system, the problems of security because we are on the border.

But the interviews demonstrate that, even if various pages have strong local anchoring, they also function as a relay of the campaign messages produced by the parties' communication officers. Moreover, they filter information on the campaign to disseminate it on their page as opinion leaders (Katz et Lazarsfeld, 1955) who select these items according to their personal and political background. These pages bring the campaign closer to the voters while providing a daily news feed of the main events of the campaign as perceived by the page managers. They also build bridges between the online and offline campaigns. The digital space becomes both a means of archiving the key moments of the offline campaign and of announcing future events. By relaying the different activities that are organized it also helps mobilise support. Nevertheless, one should remember that this type of "on-the-ground" campaign remains very small-scale, dependant on the goodwill and motivation of activists and sympathisers, most often volunteers. Many of them mention that they lack time to update the page while, on the other hand, they must be very active on the ground during the campaign. The literature has already highlighted the lack of resources of online party teams (Kalsnes, 2016). This is partly explained by some actors' doubts about the efficiency of social media during a campaign (Klinger and Russmann, 2017). This is why Facebook pages are often limited to supporting grassroots actions and are only considered by their managers as supplementing offline action.

Several page managers point out the amateur aspect of their activity on Facebook. Thus, publications are relatively artisanal. They are decided according to the page managers'

availability, their interest in highlighting local actions, and their desire to relay subjects likely to be of interest to individuals in their area. In other words, they can only be understood in interaction with the offline world and the resources available to the different actors. The literature on the 'citizen' turn in campaign practices (e.g., Muldoon and Rye, 2020) has already pointed out this relationship between the decentralization of online campaigns and their anchoring as closely as possible to territories or specific populations. This implies that the page managers are to some extent autonomous from the messages produced by the central campaign team.

Under these conditions, it seems that Facebook pages and their objectives can only be understood as an extension of offline activism (Neihouser, 2016) in a context of scarce resources. Thus, the pages become outposts of the campaign on the ground.

4.2 The Autonomy of page managers and the customisation of their editorial choices

We now try to determine the level of autonomy of page managers when running their page (RQ2).

If I have the time, if I have the courage, or if it's a subject that particularly interests me [I will relay it on my page]. So that's an editorial choice on my part too. For example, equal pay for men and women. And that also pleases a lot, that ... well, it gets a lot of likes and shares.

Like this respondent, other page managers choose the messages they wish to relay from the information proposed by the central campaign teams through different means (Telegram, WhatsApp, etc.). They often point out the personal dimension of these choices, according to their particular interests. In this way, they set an editorial line for their page. In this sense, these pages differ from the strict top-down and streamlined model of campaign communication (Klinger, 2013), which stipulates that activist

Facebook pages only relay the content proposed by the inner-circle of the campaign team. This sometimes involves them taking liberties with the language proposed by the campaign management.

A supporter of Jean-Luc Mélenchon (LFI) also recalled the different parameters page managers must play with when they have to plan publications or, on the contrary, postpone their publication by one or two days so that they do not overshadow more important information. His publication choices are influenced by the hierarchy of content within the page, an adaptation to the logic of algorithms and respect for a certain page-specific temporality:

If I know I'm doing a live show in 20 minutes, I'm not going to have fun posting lots of stuff. Because the aim is that the algorithm favours things that are really important. So, I really take this temporality into account, so as not to pollute the thread with things that are less important. So, I prioritise.

Elements of local politics can also influence the margin of autonomy that page managers build for themselves in relation to the communication expectations of the campaign management. A page manager supporting Anne Hidalgo (PS) revisited this aspect:

The party's doctrine has been for a long time, for the last three months, to systematically attack Zemmour. I'm in a town where 40% of the population is Rassemblement National or extreme right-wing. So, if we want to make people listen to reason, it's not by attacking these people head on.

Thus, the page managers appear relatively distant from the campaign management's communicative injunctions. However, this does not prevent them from mobilising the campaign team's messages in particular contexts, notably according to the agenda of their own page. A page manager supporting Fabien Roussel (PCF) explained:

And then, well, in this period, but it's not really the most logical, but let's say there's the site of the Roussel campaign. I use it more as a backup, let's say.

As many of them need to post content relatively frequently during the campaign, the 'off-the-shelf' content provided by the central campaign can be recycled during lulls in the traditional news coverage.

Of course, the distance they take from the injunctions of the central campaign team is also strongly influenced by the partisan form of the party to which the supported candidate belongs (Deseriis, 2020). For example, the supporters of *Éric Zemmour* (*Reconquête*) who follow a logic of flooding the online community, observe their colleagues' work to draw inspiration from it and disseminate it:

Yes, yes, of course, of course. The people who are in charge of managing the Twitter account, the Insta account, TikTok, etc., look at what the other teams are doing. We share content with each other... There's a lot of buzz in all of this, there's a lot of exchange.

Others are highly autonomous from the centre, in particular because of the initial structuring of the party and of the room for manoeuvre left to supporters. This autonomy can lead to different pages affiliated to the same party defending contradictory ideas within the same territory, thus revealing deeper partisan dissensions. This lack of interest in a global strategy on Facebook is especially true for those communities for whom online communication, on Facebook in particular, appears to be very secondary to the work on the ground.

Beyond the page managers' publications, who these are relayed via activists and readers is also more or less organised and more or less systematic depending on the partisan community. A PS activist explained, for example, that she does not give instructions to the activists of her local group to share her posts from her Facebook page:

No, no, no. Because ... (...) it's not in our culture in fact. We don't have this military culture; we have a culture of debate. And we have a lot of sympathizers too, so it's ... We really ... that's what differentiates us from the LFI for example. We don't have any slogans. Even during the campaign, we had a bit of 'retweet this', but it's not It doesn't work, it's not us.

In the end, it appears that page managers make important editorial choices and stray from the content proposed by the central campaign teams. Through their page, they become true opinion leaders. They filter the information they relay according to the interests of the territory and of the population they are addressing, but also of their own. Above all, their pages become media in their own right. They must therefore define their own editorial line that takes into account the various constraints specific to social media: algorithmic logic, temporality, and frequency of publication, etc. In other words, they need to understand the logic of social media when they publish content. They must therefore respect the standards set by Facebook, in terms of access to visibility for example, in the same way as professional journalists who adapt the content, they produce to the standards of the platforms on which they wish to publish (Lamot, Kreutz, and Oopenhaffen, 2022). More traditional media constraints, such as the hierarchy of information, also influence them. However, their autonomy from the campaign management does vary depending on the form of the party represented by their candidate. Nor is it an obstacle to them relying to a greater or lesser extent on the content proposed by the campaign teams for various practical, political, or ideological reasons. Moreover, their level of autonomy must be understood in a context of tension between, on the one hand, the need for page managers to have some knowledge of the logic of social media, and, on the other hand, their (mostly) amateur status and limited resources.

Indeed, in tandem with this editorial work, the primary aspect that emerges from the interviews is the minimal coordination between the pages and their modest level of professionalism. This can largely be attributed to the limited resources (particularly in terms of time and digital skills) available to the page managers. Consequently, the management of Facebook pages remains relatively rudimentary as well as the level of professionalisation among page managers. Our analysis demonstrates that this resource deficiency simultaneously encourages and compels them to maintain autonomy from the parties' directives. Aside from these various elements, the page managers' perception of the audience of their page seems particularly important in their selection of the content they post.

4.3. The importance of the imagined audience: Facebook pages as answers to readers' supposed needs

The third element we wish to address in this article is the issue of targeting. How do party members who run a Facebook page identify their audiences in a context of limited resources and relative autonomy (RQ3)? Indeed, while the management of the pages remains relatively artisanal, we may assume that the Facebook page managers also use artisanal audience-targeting techniques. They use various mechanisms and shortcuts to learn about their audiences in order to meet their expectations. While some use the tools offered by Facebook to find out the geographical location, age, and gender of their readers, others prefer to rely on feedback from the field. This is notably the case for some party members who manage local pages. A supporter of Fabien Roussel (PCF) told us:

Let's say I'm trying to do something a bit informative for the activists as well [by announcing candidate Roussel's media presences]. So, I know that this is

something that is ... so on the one hand, I know that there are some who are interested. And it's also part of the things that friends tell me. So I'd say that there are 60% who are pointed out to me by friends who say 'you could put this on the page'.

Here again, the offline political ecosystem in which the page managers operate appears to be crucial - both in the collection of information to be published and in the feedback on the choices they make. In particular, it allows them to build an 'imagined audience' (Litt and Hargittai, 2016) in order to make their editorial choices. A page manager thus recalls that 'on our groups, we preach to the converted'. A radical left-wing activist stated that the majority of his page's audience is made up of local activists:

So, it's some sympathizers and then it's also a lot of people who ... may be activists from other organisations. For example, often people from other organisations are subscribers to our account. It's people we work with on a daily basis. And also, people who are, let's say, nowhere and who have at the same time militant practices, people who go to demonstrations regularly for example.

The testimonies of the page managers paint the picture of a sort of 'buddy' audience which is mostly passive. However, the number of views per post and the number of clicks suggest to various managers that it does really exist. Under these conditions, they adapt their publications to this 'informed' public. Several page managers told us that they had stopped publishing content on the candidate's electoral programme during the campaign, considering that it had necessarily reached their readers-sympathisers in one way or another. In defining their audiences, page managers use practices that range from concrete and objective knowledge to more intuitive and pragmatic. This hybrid positioning, at the intersection between amateurism and professionalism, characterises more broadly the way in which they manage their page. This has already been

highlighted in the literature. However, the latter tends to treat the notion of online amateurism in terms of strategy and of the (more or less fine-tuned) quest for authenticity by political actors (Enli, 2017).

5. Discussion

This article is based on interviews of party members managing political pages on Facebook that were conducted during the 2022 presidential campaign in France. It sheds light on the role played by these pages in the digital action repertoire of the various candidates. It aims to identify the political objectives of the partisans who manage a Facebook page (RQ1), their degree of autonomy from party directives (RQ2) and their strategy for targeting their page's audience (RQ3).

Our study emphasizes that their primary purpose is to bring the campaign closer to their local audience in order to bring the campaign itself closer to the voters. The page managers' editorial choices thus become autonomous from the national campaign team and its various publications most of which deal with national issues. This reflects the great autonomy shown by party members when sharing information via their Facebook page. Of course, the degree of autonomy is more or less strong depending on the candidates, the pages, or the moment of the campaign (Deseriis, 2020). Nevertheless, there is clearly room for manoeuvre in relation to the central team's communication injunctions. Our results thus complement those of Chadwick and Stromer-Galley (2016) when they explain that the digital transition and the engagement of different types of supporters who are more or less integrated within the parties during online election campaigns allows for the revitalisation and renewal of party life. Party members select and adapt the different messages they publish on their page according to their perception of their audience, sometimes independently of the central party's

advice. Nevertheless, they contribute to the campaign of the candidate they support in a freer and more flexible way.

Under these circumstances, the practices of page managers deviate from the two main online campaign models identified in the literature. The use of Facebook by French members of political parties does not align with the top-down model (Howard, 2005), where Facebook pages are managed as a direct extension of the political parties' guidelines. They are also not managed according to a citizen-initiated campaigning model (Gibson, 2015), where the campaign is entirely managed by grassroots supporters, independent of the parties. The French case reveals a third hybrid approach. In this scenario, the Facebook page managers, who are party members, become opinion leaders (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955), adhering to the directives of the parties to varying extents, capable of spreading the candidate's message and of adapting it to the local level according to their own political, media, and digital ecosystems. A two-stage system emerges. The first stage relies on the candidate's or the central party pages, as well as on the internal information loops set up by campaign teams via different platforms (WhatsApp, Messenger, Telegram, Slack, etc.) to offer content to the managers of Facebook pages supporting their candidate. The second refers to the pages of the party members interviewed here. They filter the communication items disseminated by the main Facebook pages and the national information loops according to their own interests and dependence on the party, various constraints such as lack of means and time, as well as according to the specificities of the population and the territory to which their "small" pages are addressed. In the end, this filtering allows the party members to play the role of local animators of the campaign. It also reflects a certain amateurism.

A third hybrid model of online campaigning is therefore emerging, a partisan-managed model of campaigning, in which the autonomy of pages managers (RQ2) and the way in which the local audience is targeted (RQ3) are highlighted. This article is a reminder of the value of adopting contextual approaches and of not erecting strict boundaries when studying online campaigns (Dommett, Kefford, and Power, 2021). Online practices are embedded within social environments that need to be considered when trying to explain them. Here, we emphasise that the economy of the political pages on Facebook during an election campaign cannot be understood in isolation from the offline campaign on the ground, or from the links between Facebook pages and the informational loops run by parties via different platforms (Lobera and Portos, 2021).

6. Conclusion

These findings are important insofar as they lead us to consider the results of this study in light of the more general French context, and of the country's electoral legislation and multi-partisan system. Thus, this study argues for more studies in electoral contexts that are different than the American one. Indeed, the United States electoral legislation is relatively liberal when it comes to campaign finance and the use of personal data for political purposes (Magin et al., 2017). However, many countries, such as France, have much stricter legislation in this area. These national particularities often prevent the transfer of the results of US studies to other countries (Vaccari, 2013). Moreover, the US political system is a two-party one, whereas many other countries have multi-party systems. This may influence the practices of online campaigning of partisan communities. Following previous studies (Dommett, Barclay, Gibson, 2023), this article therefore demonstrates the importance of studying different political contexts, particularly within Europe.

This article therefore demonstrates the emergence in France of a partisan-managed campaign model due to its multi-partisan system and electoral legislation. The importance and autonomy of party members in French presidential campaigns is due to another specific feature of party organisation in France, i.e. the rise of “platform parties” (Deseriis, 2020), which are numerous today (LREM, LFI and Reconquête) and have many elected representatives since the election of Emmanuel Macron in 2017 (Neihouser et al., 2023). The organisation of these parties differs from traditional parties in that they use digital services to compensate for their more limited resources. This leads the central committees of these parties to grant a large degree of autonomy to local party members. As a result, local networks are able to organise themselves with a great deal of freedom to run election campaigns in the regions, positioning some of their members as true opinion leaders.

Nevertheless, this article has several limitations. The size of our sample is a first one, affecting the generalisability of our results. Further investigations could explore this research perspective by analysing online electoral strategies in different legislative contexts. In addition, a more systematic analysis of the content of Facebook posts would expand the scope of this study, especially to confirm the specificities of Facebook uses performed by the supporters of extreme right-wing parties in France (Figeac et al., 2020). It could examine the organisation of campaigns through parties’ use of Facebook pages and how they adapt their electoral communication to different local contexts and to the different populations targeted by their pages.

References

Bennett, C. J. (2016). Voter databases, micro-targeting, and data protection law: can political parties campaign in Europe as they do in North America?. *International Data Privacy Law*, 6(4), 261-275.

Braconnier, C., Coulmont, B. & Dormagen, J. (2017). Toujours pas de chrysanthèmes pour les variables lourdes de la participation électorale: Chute de la participation et augmentation des inégalités électorales au printemps 2017. *Revue française de science politique*, 67, 1023-1040.

Chadwick, A. and Stromer-Galley J. (2016). Digital media, power, and democracy in parties and election campaigns: party decline or party renewal?. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 21, 283–293.

Deseriis M. (2020). Digital movement parties: a comparative analysis of the technopolitical cultures and the participation platforms of the Movimento 5 Stelle and the Piratenpartei. *Information, Communication & Society*, 23(12), 1770-1786.

Dobber, T., Ó Fathaigh, R., Zuiderveen Borgesius, F. (2019). The Regulation of Online Political Micro-Targeting in Europe (2019). *Internet Policy Review*, 8(4).

Dommett, K., Barclay, A., & Gibson, R. (2023). Just what is data-driven campaigning? A systematic review. *Information, Communication & Society*, 1-22.

Dommett, K., Kefford, G. and Power, S. (2021). The digital ecosystem: The new politics of party organization in parliamentary democracies. *Party Politics*, 27(5), 847–857.

Dommett, K., Temple, L. and Seyd, P. (2021). Dynamics of intra-party organisation in the digital age: a grassroots analysis of digital adoption. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 74 (2), 378-397.

Enli, G. (2017). Twitter as arena for the authentic outsider: exploring the social media campaigns of Trump and Clinton in the 2016 US presidential election. *European Journal of Communication*, 32(1), 50–61.

Enos, R. and Hersh, E. (2015). Party Activists as Campaign Advertisers: The Ground Campaign as a Principal-Agent Problem. *American Political Science Review*, 109(2), 252- 278.

Figeac, J., Smyrnaio, N., Salord, T., Cabanac, G., Fraissier, O., Ratinaud, P., & Seffusatti, F. (2020). Information-sharing practices on Facebook during the 2017 French presidential campaign: An “unreliable information bubble” within the extreme right. *Communications*, 45(s1), 648-670.

Gerbaudo, P. (2019). The platform party: The transformation of political organisation in the era of big data. In D. Chandler, & C. Fuchs (Eds.), *Digital objects, digital subjects* (pp. 187-198). London: University of Westminster Press.

Gerodimos, R. and Justinussen, J. (2015). Obama’s 2012 Facebook Campaign: Political Communication in the Age of the Like Button. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 12(2), 113-132.

Gibson, R. K. (2015). Party change, social media, and the rise of ‘citizen-initiated’ campaigning. *Party Politics*, 21, 183–197.

Gibson, R., & Römmele, A. (2001). Changing campaign communications: A party-centered theory of professionalized campaigning. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 6(4), 31-43.

Gibson, R. K., & Römmele, A. (2009). Measuring the professionalization of political campaigning. *Party politics*, 15(3), 265-293.

- Heiss, R., Schmuck, D., & Matthes, J. (2019). What drives interaction in political actors' Facebook posts? Profile and content predictors of user engagement and political actors' reactions. *Information, communication & society*, 22(10), 1497-1513.
- Hillygus, D. S., & Shields, T. G. (2008). *The persuadable voter: Wedge issues in presidential campaigns*. Princeton University Press.
- Howard, PN. (2005) *New Media Campaigns and the Managed Citizen*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kalsnes, B. (2016) The Social Media Paradox Explained: Comparing Political Parties' Facebook Strategy Versus Practice. *Social Media + Society*, 2(2).
- Karpf, D., Kreiss, D., Nielsen, R. K., et al. (2015). Qualitative Political Communication| Introduction~ The role of qualitative methods in political communication Research: Past, present, and future. *International Journal of Communication* 9(19).
- Katz, E. and Lazarsfeld, P. (1955). *Personal influence*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Klinger, U. (2013). Mastering the art of social media: Swiss parties, the 2011 national election and digital challenges. *Information, Communication & Society*, 16(5), 717–736.
- Klinger, U. and Russmann, U. (2017). “Beer is more efficient than social media”—Political parties and strategic communication in Austrian and Swiss national elections. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 14(4), 299-313.
- Koc-Michalska, K., Lilleker, D. G., Michalski, T., Gibson, R. K. and Zajac, J. M. (2021). Facebook affordances and citizen engagement during elections: European political parties and their benefit from online strategies? *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 18(2), 180-19
- Kreiss, D. (2012). *Taking our country back*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

- Kreiss, D. (2014). The Virtues of Participation without Power: Campaigns, Party Networks, and the Ends of Politics. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 55, 537-554.
- Kreiss, D. (2016). *Prototype politics: Technology-intensive campaigning and the data of democracy*. New York, USA: Oxford University Press.
- Kruikemeier, S., Vermeer, S., Metoui, N., Dobber, T., & Zarouali, B. (2022). (Tar) getting you: The use of online political targeted messages on Facebook. *Big Data & Society*, 9(2), 20539517221089626.
- Kruschinski, S., & Haller, A. (2017). Restrictions on data-driven political micro-targeting in Germany. *Internet Policy Review*, 6(4), 1-23.
- Lamot, K., Kreutz, Tim and Opgenhaffen, M. (2022). “We Rewrote This Title”: How News Headlines Are Remediated on Facebook and How This Affects Engagement. *Social Media+ Society*, 8(3), 20563051221114827.
- Litt, E. and Hargittai, E. (2016). The imagined audience on social network sites. *Social Media+ Society* 2(1), 2056305116633482.
- Lobera, J. and Portos, M. (2021). Decentralizing electoral campaigns? New-old parties, grassroots and digital activism. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(10), 1419-1440
- Magin, M., Podschuweit, N., Haßler, J. and Russmann, U. (2017). Campaigning in the fourth age of political communication. A multi-method study on the use of Facebook by German and Austrian parties in the 2013 national election campaigns. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(11), 1698-1719.
- Muldoon, J. and Rye, D. (2020). Conceptualising party-driven movements. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 22(3), 485–504.

Neihouser, M. (2016). *Un nouvel espace médiatique. Sociologie de la blogosphere politique française*. Paris: LGDJ-Lextenso.

Neihouser, M., Figeac, J., & Le Coz, F. (2022). Faire campagne sur Facebook. Les pratiques privilégiées par les extrêmes droites et les partis émergents. *Politiques de communication*, 19, 55-86.

Penney, J. (2017). Social Media and Citizen Participation in “Official” and “Unofficial” Electoral Promotion: A Structural Analysis of the 2016 Bernie Sanders Digital Campaign. *Journal of Communication*, 67, 402-423.

Tenscher, J., Koc-Michalska, K., Lilleker, D. G., Mykkänen, J., Walter, A. S., Findor, A., ... & Róka, J. (2016). The professionals speak: Practitioners’ perspectives on professional election campaigning. *European Journal of Communication*, 31(2), 95-119.

Tufekci, Z. (2014). Engineering the public: Big data, surveillance and computational politics. *First Monday*.

Vaccari, C. (2013). *Digital politics in Western democracies: A comparative study*. JHU Press.

Zittel, T. (2009). Lost in Technology? Political Parties and the Online Campaigns of Constituency Candidates in Germany’s Mixed Member Electoral System. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 6 (3-4), 298–311.

Zuiderveen Borgesius, F., Möller, J., Kruikemeier, S., Ó Fathaigh, R., Irion, K., Dobber, T., ... & de Vreese, C. H. (2018). Online political microtargeting: Promises and threats for democracy. *Utrecht Law Review*, 14(1), 82-96.

Appendice 1. List of interviews

Name of the Page	Respondent	Date of interview	Number of subscribers	Party	Candidate
Les Jeunes Républicains du Nord Seine-et-Marne	Female; Born in 1998; Student; Level of Education: Less than Master Degree; Right-wing	03.03.22	103	Les Républicains	Valérie Pécresse
PCF 82	Female; Born in 1966; Trainer for People in Vocational Integration; Level of Education: Less than Master Degree; Left-wing	21.03.22	2400	Parti Communiste Français	Fabien Roussel
Groupe local EELV Tarn	Male; Born in 1953; Professor (Retired); Level of Education: National Diploma; Left-wing	08.03.22	548	Europe Écologie – Les Verts	Yannick Jadot
La Rochelle Insoumise #Mélénchon2 022	Male; Born in 1953; Railway Worker (Retired); Level of Education: Less than National Diploma; Far left	28.02.22	2800	La France Insoumise	Jean-Luc Mélenchon
Eelv Aquitaine	Male; Born in 1971; Project Manager; Level of Education: Master Degree or more; Left-wing	02.03.22	4500	Europe Écologie – Les Verts	Yannick Jadot
Vincennes en marche	Male; Born in 1985; Public Procurement Purchaser; Level of Education: Master's degree or More; Right-wing	05.04.22	492	La République en Marche	Emmanuel Macron
Parti Socialiste de Malakoff	Female; Born in 1987; Translator and Assistant to Elected Representatives; Level of Education: Master's degree or more; Left-wing	30.03.22	681	Parti Socialiste	Anne Hidalgo
LO Muret	Male; Born in 1973; Programmer Analyst; Level of Education: Master's degree or more; Far left	03.03.22	73	Lutte Ouvrière	Nathalie Arthaud
Eelv Canada et USA	Male; Engineer; Level of Education: Master's degree or more; Left-wing	01.03.22	459	Europe Écologie – Les Verts	Yannick Jadot
PS Trouville-Deauville	Male; Born in 1943; Bookseller; Level of Education: Master's degree or more; Left-wing	30.03.22	691	Parti Socialiste	Anne Hidalgo
Reconquête 77	Male; Born in 1958; Lawyer (Retired); Level of Education:	22.03.22	378	Reconquête	Eric Zemmour

	Master's degree or more; Far right				
Rassemblement National du canton de Vaison-la-Romaine	Male; Born in 1987; Communication Officer; Level of Education: Less than Master's degree; Far right	Questions sent by mail	3083	Rassemblement national	Marine Le Pen
NPA73	Male; University Professor; Level of Education: Master's degree or more; Far left	16.03.22	558	Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste	Philippe Poutou
Section de Montesson du parti socialiste	Male; Born in 1985; Data Scientist; Level of Education: Master's degree or more ; Left-wing	08.03.22	187	Parti Socialiste	Anne Hidalgo
Les Républicains de L'Arageois	Male; Born in 1998; Student; Level of Education: Master's degree or more; Right-wing	28.02.22	138	Les Républicains	Valérie Pécresse
En Marche Tunisie	Male; Born in 1944; Entrepreneur (Retired); Level of Education: Master's degree or more; Left-wing	24.02.22	1800	La République en Marche	Emmanuel Macron
Pierre Mazaheri	Male; Born in 1948; Lecturer (Retired); Level of Education: Master's degree or more; in the Centre	09.03.22	147	Parti Animaliste	Hélène Thouy*
PCF Saint-Etienne	Male; Born in 1981; Journalist; Level of Education: Master's degree or more; Left-wing	14.03.22	697	Parti Communiste Français	Fabien Roussel
PS Grisolles	Male; Born in 1994; Entrepreneur; Left-wing	22.02.22	1400	Parti Socialiste	Anne Hidalgo
Les Français de Suisse avec Valérie Pécresse	Female; Born in 1954; Elected Consular Officer; Level of Education: Master's degree or more; Right-wing	03.03.22	387	Les Républicains	Valérie Pécresse
France Insoumise Grenoble	Male; Born in 1990; Communication Officer; Level of Education: Master's degree or more; Left-wing	29.03.22	1100	La France Insoumise	Jean-Luc Mélenchon
Les jeunes Républicains du Maine et Loire	Male; Born in 1998; Public Service; Level of Education: Master's degree or more; Right-wing	23.02.22	730	Les Républicains	Valérie Pécresse

*Candidates who were unable to present themselves because they did not obtain a sufficient number of signatures.

Appendice 2. Main Interview Guide

These questions were adapted and enriched according to the respondents. Follow-up questions were also used to probe respondents' answers. These follow-up questions were developed based on the respondents' answers.

What is your background?

What is the name of your Facebook Page?

In what context was the page created?

How long have you been managing it?

How is the page managed?

What is the purpose of the page?

What is your strategy?

Who is the audience for the page?

What are your sources of inspiration for keeping up to date?

Is the page linked to other social media accounts?

How do you select the information on the page?

What are your links with other activists and the campaign team?

Are you careful about the sources of the information you relay?

Is there a particular theme you follow?

Once you have chosen the information to be relayed, how do you editorialise it?

Do you have any feedback from readers?

How do you moderate comments?

How do you advertise the page?

What are the offline impacts of the page?

What makes a good publication in your opinion?

What is the place of the page in the campaign device?

What sources of information do you personally consume?

Do you manage other Facebook pages or groups? Or accounts on other social media?

Do you think the internet is important in politics today?

Is there anything that was not mentioned in this interview that you think is important to highlight?