

Media Note

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Financed by ULB (FER, ARC)

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Politicians in the spotlight: the personalization of Belgian parties' communication on X

15 April 2025

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INTRODUCTION

Today, social media platforms are pivotal in the communication strategies of most political actors. For political parties, these platforms are often regarded as key tools to engage with voters, to try and set the policy agenda, but also to disseminate ideas and criticize opponents in the context of interparty competition. Beyond trying to shape the political debate, **social media can also be used to shift the focus of communication from policies to people**. This **personalization of politics** has broader implications for representative democracy, as media and party dynamics increasingly revolve around individual figures rather than collective institutions. As a result, visibility and power can become more concentrated in the hands of a few powerful actors, undermining internal party deliberation and weakening accountability mechanisms. Additionally, it can reduce complex policy debates to the image that politicians convey. **This research note examines the tendency of political parties in Belgium to emphasize personalities over policies**, a trend that is especially common in online communication, where personalized messaging resonates particularly well with an audience keen on identifying individuals they can relate to. **Personalization** refers to the **increasing emphasis on individual politicians**—rather than political parties, institutions, or policies—in political communication and media coverage. It reflects a shift in how politics is presented and perceived, often privileging personal traits, leadership style, or private life.

This note investigates which individual politicians are most prominently featured in the official **communication of political parties on X** (formerly known as Twitter) in Belgium, a country known for its party-centric political system. It focuses on parties' publications **before and during the June 2024 electoral campaign**. The note is divided into two sections. First, we assess the extent and evolution of personalization, both before and during the 2024 electoral campaign and how this varies across parties. Second, we examine whether the attention is concentrated on a limited number of political figures or more broadly distributed across different personalities, based on their gender and function within the party. To do so, we categorize politicians into four categories: party leaders (or presidents), members of parliament (MPs, of all different levels), ministers, and candidates that are running for a mandate, but do not hold one yet.¹ All our analyses differentiate between Dutch-speaking and French-speaking political parties. It supplements a [previous analysis](#) of political parties' policy messaging on X before and during the 2024 election campaign (Marié et al., 2024).

MAIN FINDINGS

1. Limited personalization on X

Although political personalization is a widely discussed trend, **only 6% of posts on X by political parties focus exclusively on politicians without any reference to policy discussions**. However, more than **70% of all the posts** do mention individual politicians, often in connection to **policy issues**.

2. Personalized posts are proportionally more frequent among X posts from government parties (7,8%) and mainstream parties (8,2%) than among X posts from opposition (3,0%) and ideologically extreme parties, such as PTB-PvdA or Vlaams Belang (1,7%).

3. Personalization increased during the campaign, mostly among French-speaking parties

Dutch-speaking and French-speaking parties differ in how personalization on X evolved before and during the 2024 electoral campaign. Among Dutch-speaking parties, only Open-VLD increased personalization during the campaign, likely to leverage Prime Minister

¹ Other profiles, such as mayors or retired politicians were excluded from the analysis due to their very low frequency (less than 1% of mentions across all parties).

Alexander De Croo's visibility. In contrast, most French-speaking parties significantly increased personalization during the campaign.

4. Women are underrepresentation in parties' X communication

Dutch-speaking parties mention women in 31,9% of cases and French-speaking parties in 28,4%. Parties with female leaders (e.g., Groen, Vooruit, Ecolo) and those with a higher proportion of female MPs are more likely to highlight female politicians in their communication on X. Likely this is due to the lower female representation in high-level political functions and key candidates.

5. Party leaders first, then ministers and MPs

Parties use different strategies in highlighting politicians in their digital communication, focusing either on ministers, party leaders or parliamentarians. First, French-speaking parties tend to concentrate communication around party presidents, who receive most of the attention (e.g., PTB, MR). Second, while some government parties (Open Vld and PS) emphasize the work of their ministers, others (Groen, MR) prefer to focus on MPs or party leaders, possibly to downplay their government positions or to make the electorate acquainted with other political figures, next to the ministers. Finally, Les Engagés, uniquely highlighted new figures without elected positions, such as Jean-Luc Crucke and Yvan Verougstraete, to emphasize party renewal and its success in recruiting new party faces.

DATA AND METHOD

This research note explores the content of posts disseminated on X by political parties in Belgium before and during the June 2024 electoral campaign. We analyse posts between January 1, 2022, to June 8, 2024, the day before the federal, European and regional election held on June 9. The campaign period is defined as the period between February 9, 2024 (start of the legally regulated phase with rules and limits on campaign spending, i.e., *sperperiode* or *période de prudence*) until Election Day. Our analysis includes all Belgian political parties with parliamentary representation at the federal level (6 French-speaking and 7 Dutch-speaking parties). A total of 19,909 posts were collected and manually coded across various dimensions², including the names and role of politicians that are mentioned in each post. More information on the entire dataset and analytical variables can be found in previous reports (Close et al., 2023).

Although Belgium is known for its strong party-oriented political system, with political parties playing a strong and significant role in national, regional and local politics, the personalization of politics has also been observed there. Personalization can take different forms. In fact, research on electoral politics in Belgium has previously coined the term "**presidentialization**" (Wauters et al., 2015) to describe **the importance of party leaders** in the country's political life. Other research has also examined the **place of other prominent party figures** (e.g., "subtop candidates") (Dodeigne & Pilet, 2024) that boast a strong public following (i.e., MPs, ministers, mayors, etc.), and whom parties can promote to boost their own standing. This should especially be the case on social media platforms, which have intensified the personalization of politics across various political systems by allowing unmediated communication between individual politicians and voters.

Until recently, X was a key campaign tool for political actors, despite being used by only about 10% of the voting population (Close & Kins, 2024). Most political parties (or their party leaders)

² We conducted inter-coder reliability tests to ensure consistent coding among different coders and these results show that they are indeed sufficiently reliable and meet requirements of the thresholds that are commonly applied.

were active on the platform, with some differences in parties' volume of communication. It should be noted that X is not necessarily the platform of choice to run personalized campaigns, as it is more often described as an arena of competition between parties, especially in light of topics that are newsworthy at a given time. This means that overall, personalization should be relatively low, and comparatively more limited than on other platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, which are more "people-centred". Table 1 provides an overview of the data, showing the frequency with which each party posted on the platform during our period of investigation. Although some parties reduced their activity on the platform during the campaign (i.e., Vooruit, CD&V and Groen)³, we still have a sufficient number of posts to compare the levels of personalization in party communication overtime.

Table 1. Distribution of posts on X by Belgian parties.

Party	N posts	Frequency
Dutch-speaking	14,915	74.9%
PvdA (radical left)	342	1.7%
Groen (green)	1,600	8.0%
Vooruit (socialist)	284	1.4%
CD&V (Christian-democratic)	596	3.0%
Open Vld (liberal)	1,354	6.8%
N-VA (regionalist)	4,285	21.5%
Vlaams Belang (radical right)	6,454	32.4%
French-speaking	4,994	25.1%
PTB (radical left)	279	1.4%
PS (socialist)	475	2.4%
Ecolo (green)	803	4.0%
LesEngagés (ex-Christian-democratic)	863	4.3%
DéFI (regionalist)	892	4.5%
MR (liberal)	1,682	8.4%
Total	19,909	100.0%

How did we operationalize personalization? This was closely informed by theory-building and based on that we developed two measures. Firstly, to differentiate between posts about individual politicians and posts about policy issues, **we manually classified a post as personalized when it exclusively promotes a politician with no reference to any policy issue** (n=1,174 or **5.9%** of the dataset). Such posts often invite users to watch a politician's media intervention or attend an event where a politician will be present where the politician is the center of attention. For example, the following post by the official account of the French-speaking liberal party (MR) corresponds to our conceptualization:

"Self-confidence is not about being proud of your qualities, it is about not being afraid of your shortcomings. 🔑 Read @GLBouchez's summer interview with Stavros Kelepouris (De Morgen) at the #Inflow restaurant in #Antwerp" (07/08/2022).

Second, we examine the politicians mentioned by political parties in their posts on X, even if this post discusses a policy issue. This approach is less restrictive and helps us understand

³ Importantly, some parties might have reconsidered their presence on X since the takeover of the platform by Elon Musk.

how different parties associate various figures with their communication efforts and, more broadly, whether certain politicians concentrate the party’s attention. Hence, **we rely on all the posts that mention at least one politician that either belongs to the party or does not. These represent 72.6%** of the entire population of posts (n=14,462). We then compiled all these mentions for each party—as one post can contain up to 6 mentions of political actors—and sorted between the politicians that belong to the party, and those that do not. This means that the observations that we present are based on the proportion of mentions of a given political figure divided by the total number of mentions. For this note, we focus on in-party politicians and exclude mentions of politicians from rival parties. Please note that these are general operationalizations of personalization, as we do not focus on politicians’ private lives or references to non-political traits or hobbies, for instance (= privatization).

I. THE EXTENT AND EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL PERSONALIZATION ON X

General overview

We begin by providing an overview of the level of personalization of parties’ communication. Overall, **posts that only mention politicians, with no reference to any policy issue, represent 5.9%** of the dataset, a relatively low number. This could be attributed to X not being the platform of choice to run personalized campaigns, as it is generally described as an arena for competition between parties about newsworthy topics. As a result, personalization may be lower on X compared to other platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, which are more visual and “people-centric” platforms, where they often also try to attract youth (Cervi et al., 2023).

However, there are important disparities between parties depending on party characteristics, which we summarize in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution and proportion of personalized posts according to party characteristics.

Party characteristics		N posts	% of posts	N personalized posts	% personalized posts
Language	Dutch-speaking	14,915	74.9%	851	5.7%
	French-speaking	4,994	25.1%	323	6.5%
Incumbency	Majority	11,971	60.1%	932	7.8%
	Opposition	7,938	39.9%	242	3.0%
Ideological extremity	Mainstream	12,834	64.5%	1,055	8.2%
	Radical	7,075	35.5%	119	1.7%

First, there is a small difference based on the language group to which a party belongs, with lower personalization observed among Dutch-speaking political parties on X, although the difference is very small (5,7% vs. 6.5% for French-speaking parties). Second, we note a sharp contrast between incumbent and opposition parties, with **incumbents at any level (i.e., either regional or national) opting for significantly more personalized communication (7.8% vs. 3.0% for opposition parties)**. Finally, ideological moderation also matters, with **mainstream parties being much more prone to choosing personalized messages than so-called radical parties** (i.e., PTB-PvdA and Vlaams Belang). This difference could be explained by the fact that mainstream parties (most of whom were also incumbents during our period of investigation) enjoy broader access to the media, allowing them to more easily promote their politicians’ media appearances or their achievements on X. Indeed, we know that parties often engage in self-promotion strategies on social media to showcase to the public their realizations and a glimpse

into their professional work. Moreover, majority parties that deliver a minister of course also are more relevant and have simply more high-level politicians to highlight. Regarding the distinction between mainstream and radical parties, it is well-known that the electorate more often focused on the latter for specific issues (e.g., on immigration) and the program, rather than for political figures.

In what follows, we investigate these trends party by party, first for Dutch-speaking parties and then for French-speaking parties.

Dutch-speaking Belgium

Table 3 shows the percentage of personalized posts for each Dutch-speaking parties, both during the routine period (before the campaign) and during the campaign. Overall, among all Dutch-speaking parties, the difference between the routine and campaign periods is negligible and non-significant, suggesting **that the campaign was not necessarily more “personalized” in Flanders**. However, there is important variation between political parties. For example, while some parties experienced a decrease in the percentage of personalized posts between the two periods (e.g., Groen, -5 points), others opted for a more personalized strategy during the campaign, such as the Open Vld (+8). **The liberal party Open Vld may have tried to capitalize on its leading position in the incumbent government through Prime Minister Alexander De Croo, putting in the spotlight his personal news, while downplaying the much-criticized policy record of the government.** This attempt at a “Chancellor’s bonus” ultimately did not seem to pay off. For the remaining parties, the changes between pre-campaign and campaign periods are insignificant. Finally, it should be noted that the absence of personalized posts for Vooruit and CD&V during the campaign could be attributed to their lower publication volumes compared to other parties. The same could be said for Groen, which did not use as much the party official account during the campaign and, when doing so, the focus was on policy and on substantive issues rather than political figures.

Table 3. Percentage of personalized posts, routine and campaign periods.

Party	Routine period	Campaign period	Difference (campaign-routine)
PvdA	6.4%	6.6%	+0.2
Groen	7.3%	2.2%	-5.0
Vooruit	3.0%	0.0%	-3.0
CD&V	11.0%	0.0%	-11.0
Open Vld	8.8%	16.5%	+7.7
N-VA	10.5%	11.7%	+1.2
Vlaams Belang	4.2%	6.1%	+1.9
Average	7.1%	7.8%	+0.7

French-speaking Belgium

The situation differs significantly for French-speaking parties, as illustrated by Table 4. Before the electoral campaign, French-speaking parties allocated on average 5.3% of their posts for the promotion of party politicians. This figure more than doubled to 11.3% during the campaign, with **some parties substantially increasing the share of posts focused solely on politicians, with no policy message.**

The party with the most personalized communication strategy, both before and during the campaign, was Les Engagés (formerly the Christian-democratic party). While they already had a significant amount of personalized content before the electoral campaign, this increased to over

a fifth of their communication **(20.5%)** during the campaign. This sets the party far ahead of other parties and makes it an outlier among both French-speaking and Dutch-speaking. For the party Les Engagés, the challenge was to make a comeback after hitting rock bottom in 2019 and choosing to go into opposition at all levels of government to rebuild from the ground up. Interestingly, this strategy translated into a distinct approach on X, emphasizing personalized communication, which was further accentuated during the 2024 campaign.

Another political party that increased its share of personalized communication between the pre-campaign and campaign periods is DéFI. **During the campaign, 14.0% of posts from DéFI’s official account on X focused on individual party politicians rather than policy**, possibly switching from highlighting its opposition to government policy to presenting its little-known candidates in a bid to try and expend its very small representation. In contrast, **the PTB is the political party that dedicates the least amount of its communication to personalized messages**. In fact, before the start of the electoral campaign, it allocated only 1.7% of its publications to promoting party figures, the lowest number among parties in Belgium, focusing instead on programmatic appeal. This increase in personalization turned out to be ineffective for DéFI and Ecolo, while Les Engagés’ electoral success might be partly imputed to its more personalized communication, making it stand out from competitors. Of course, we would need data on voting motives to verify this.

Table 4. Percentage of personalized posts, routine and campaign periods.

Party	Routine period	Campaign period	Difference (campaign-routine)
PTB	1.7%	0.0%	-1.7
PS	5.9%	4.9%	-1.0
Ecolo	6.7%	11.4%	+4.7
LesEngagés	8.7%	20.5%	+11.8
DéFI	3.3%	14.0%	+10.7
MR	6.8%	8.6%	+1.8
Average	5.3%	11.3%	+6.0

II. FACES OF THE PARTY: WHO GETS IN THE SPOTLIGHT?

This section examines which politicians are most frequently mentioned by party communication on X, no matter whether they are associated with a policy issue or not. First, we will examine the types of politicians (e.g., MPs, ministers, party leaders) that parties tend to highlight the most in their online communication, and who exactly they are⁴. Second, we will analyse whether female and male politicians receive similar levels of visibility. While women are often underrepresented in politics, we investigate whether this underrepresentation extends to parties' social media.

The role perspective

Who do political parties put in the spotlight on social media? In this section, we examine what politicians are most frequently mentioned by political parties, based on their role within the party. To do so, we categorize politicians according to the four most frequent functions they can exercise within the party: leader (i.e., president or co-president), parliamentarian (MP) at the national or regional level, minister in the federal or in a regional executive, and candidate. Table 5 summarizes the distribution of these mentions for each political party.

At the Belgian level, our analysis shows that **the communication of French-speaking parties is much more “presidentialised” than that of Dutch-speaking parties on X**. Party leaders account for almost half of mentions for French-speaking parties (48.9%), almost double that of Dutch-speaking parties (26.3%). This difference could be explained by the lower volume of communication from French-speaking parties, as fewer messages on X mean fewer opportunities to feature a variety of politicians. This results, for French-speaking parties, in a higher concentration of attention on the most prominent party figures.

⁴ To see the absolute distribution of the most frequently mentioned politicians, see Appendix section figures 1 and 2.

Table 5. Most mentioned types of politicians across parties and language groups.

Party	Party leader	MP	Minister	Candidate
Dutch-speaking	26,3%	60,3%	12,4%	0,6%
PvdA	65,0%	32,3%	0,0%	1,8%
Groen	29,0%	63,4%	6,5%	0,1%
Vooruit	57,1%	38,0%	4,9%	0,0%
CD&V	34,8%	29,2%	34,8%	0,0%
Open Vld	24,8%	18,7%	55,5%	0,5%
N-VA	20,5%	60,7%	17,8%	0,4%
Vlaams Belang	26,7%	72,4%	0,0%	0,9%
French-speaking	48,9%	27,9%	11,0%	9,4%
PTB	64,4%	35,6%	0,0%	0,0%
PS	40,4%	8,9%	43,3%	2,0%
Ecolo	61,0%	28,7%	8,1%	1,8%
LesEngagés	30,5%	37,1%	0,0%	29,4%
DéFI	50,9%	35,0%	3,3%	4,6%
MR	56,1%	16,7%	22,6%	2,6%

Among the two language communities, there is significant variation in the types of politicians mentioned in the digital communication of political parties. Some focus more on ministers, while others highlight party leaders or MPs. In what follows, we provide examples, first for Dutch-speaking parties and then for French-speaking parties.

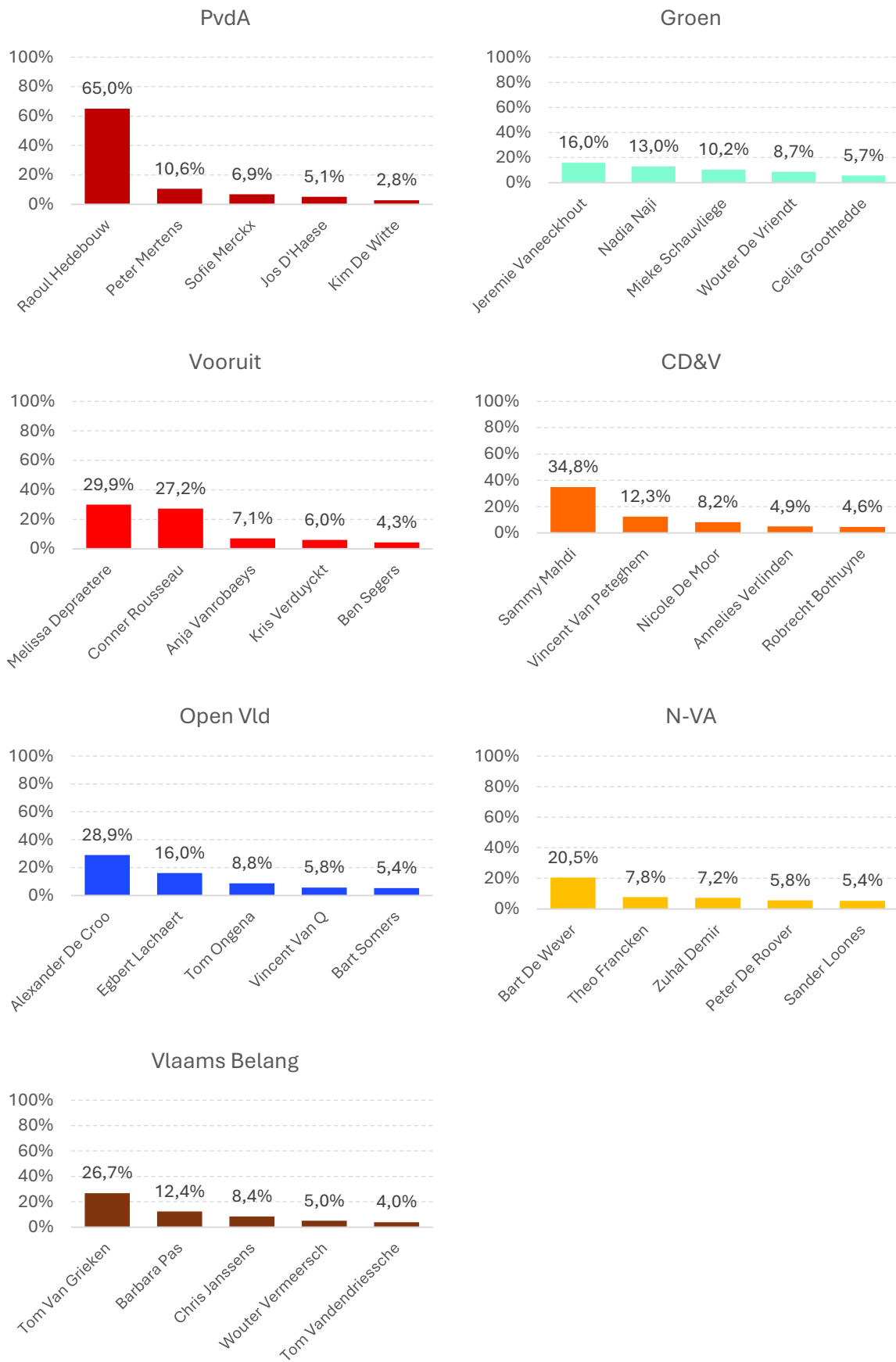
First, in Dutch-speaking Belgium, **Open Vld is the political party that highlighted its ministers the most, with 55.5% of its mentions dedicated to government members**. This strong focus on government figures is largely due to **Prime Minister Alexander De Croo**, who received most of the attention (see Figure 1). However, the party also featured Vincent Van Quickenborne, Minister of Justice until October 2023, somewhat prominently. The **emphasis on government leadership** has consequences for **party leaders Egbert Lachaert and Tom Ongena, who received relatively less attention** from their party on X compared to leaders of other parties. Additionally, this focus tends to **overshadow Open Vld’s MPs**, as the party dedicates the least attention to its parliamentarians among all Dutch-speaking parties, with only 18.7% of mentions dedicated to MPs. This corroborates findings from analysis of offline ads as well.⁵

By contrast, some political parties have a **highly “presidentialised” communication on X**, dedicating most of their mentions to their party leader(s). This is most evident for **PvdA and Vooruit**. First, for PvdA, the most mentioned politician in their digital communication on X is by far its president, **Raoul Hedebouw (65% of all mentions)**. The second most mentioned politician, Federal MP and former party leader Peter Mertens, received only 10.6% of mentions (Figure 1). Second, **Vooruit dedicated 57.1% of their mentions in their digital communication to their leaders: initially Conner Rousseau and later Melissa Depraetere**. It should be noted that these parties communicate less than their adversaries on X, meaning that their fewer posts tend to focus on the most visible party figures: party leaders. However, the very high score of Raoul Hedebouw could be interpreted as a hint to both his popularity and influence within the party.

⁵ Lefevere, J. (2024). Welke partijen voeren nog advertentiecampaagne in kranten? *Samenleving en politiek*, 31(10), 25-30.

Finally, **three parties dedicated a substantial share of their attention to their MPs: Vlaams Belang (72.4%), Groen (63.4%) and N-VA (60.7%).** This could be due to factors such as party size or incumbency status. Larger parties (in terms of number of mandate holders) simply have more political figures that they can choose to put to the forefront. Parties can choose who they put on display based on the overall popularity of an MP with constituents, or their role within the institution in which they serve. **For Vlaams Belang, after the party leader, the focus was on Barbara Pas (12.4% of mentions), fraction leader in the Chamber, and Chris Janssens (8.4%), who holds the same role in the Flemish parliament.** Since Vlaams Belang is in the opposition, they have no other options than to highlight their party leader and MPs. **For N-VA, while party leader Bart De Wever leads the ranking (20.5%), he was mostly followed by federal MPs as well by Zuhair Demir, Flemish Minister of Justice and environment.** Interestingly, **Jan Jambon, the Flemish minister-president, did not make the top 5** and was less prominently featured. This aligns with the **N-VA's potential electoral strategy to focus its communication on its role as opposition leader in the Chamber, while seemingly downplaying its incumbency at the Flemish level.** Lastly, the same could be said about **Groen, which focused on its opposition status in the Flemish parliament** (with fraction leader Mieke Schauvliege and Celia Groothedde as visible MPs) **rather than highlighting its two ministers in the federal government** (only 6.5% of mentions). The latter might be due to the difficult situation on nuclear energy as well as that their competences were not that highly salient. For its part, the CD&V distributes attention more or less evenly between its party leader, its MPs and its ministers, a singular strategy in comparison to other parties.

Figure 1. Top 5 most mentioned politicians, as percentage of total communication.



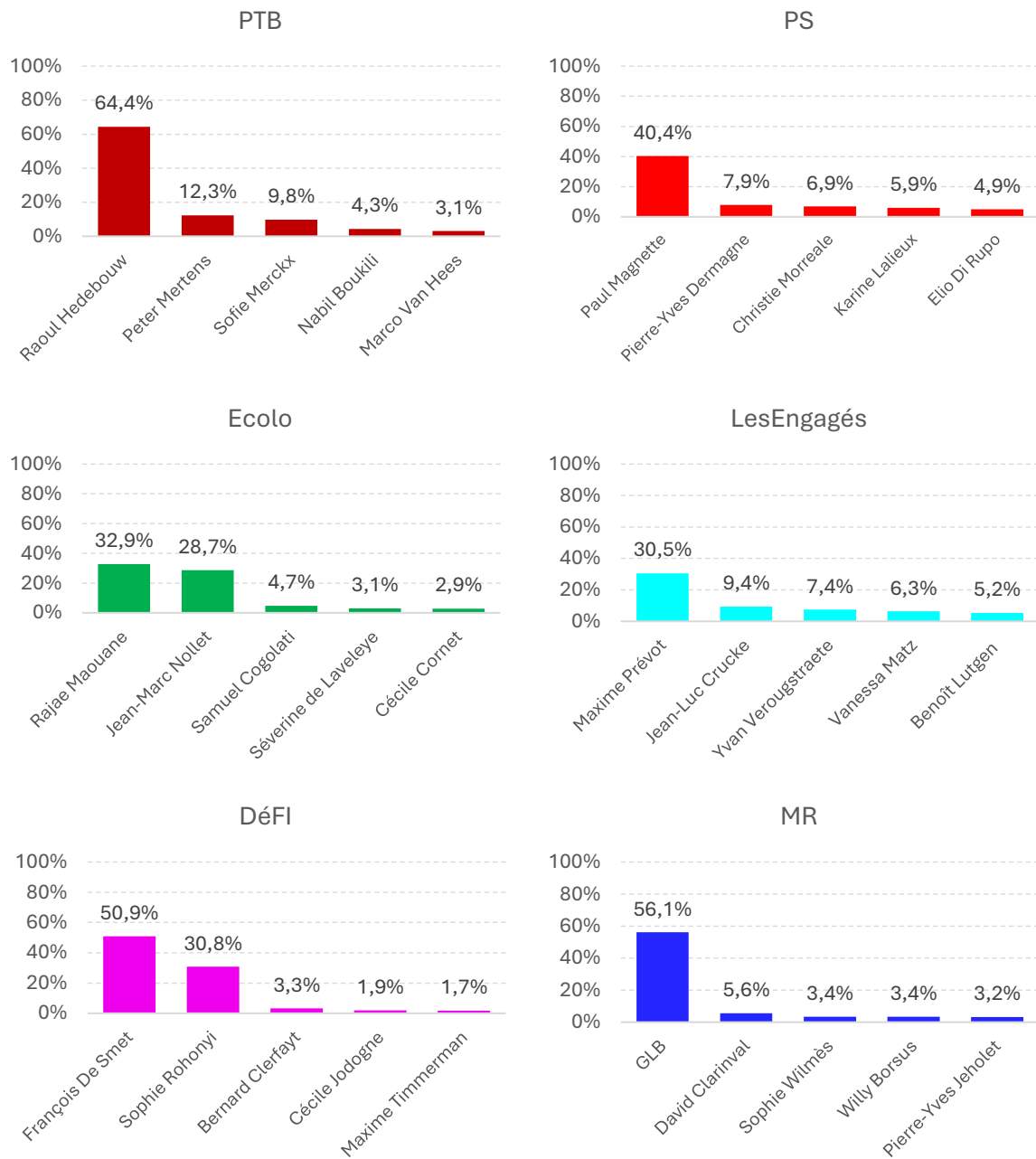
Second, in **French-speaking Belgium**, party leaders concentrated much more attention than their Dutch-speaking counterpart, though there is variation between parties. Figure 2 illustrates how attention is distributed among various politicians in each party.

Similar to trends in Dutch-speaking Belgium, some incumbent parties focus more on political figures with government positions. This is particularly true for the **PS**, which was incumbent at all levels of power during the study. The party dedicated **43.3% of its mentions on X to ministers**. For instance, after the party leader, most mentions were dedicated to Pierre-Yves Dermagne, the Minister of Labor and vice Premier in the De Croo government. However, being in government does not necessarily mean that a party's digital communication focuses on government activities. Indeed, **the two other French-speaking parties in the Vivaldi government, Ecolo and MR, did not primarily focus on government figures but rather on their leaders**. This suggests that, despite their involvement in the government, these parties choose to highlight the activities of their leaders, perhaps as a strategy to maintain more control over the political messaging.

Most political parties in French-speaking Belgium focused their digital communication on party leaders. In fact, the leader of the **PTB concentrated 64.4% of mentions of the party X, followed by Ecolo's co-presidents (61.0% of mentions) and MR's Georges-Louis Bouchez (56.1%)**. **French-speaking political parties have a very "presidentialised" style of communication compared to Dutch-speaking parties**. This could be seen as a "rationalization strategy" considered their overall lower volume of communication. Even Les Engagés, which focuses the least on its leader, still does so more prominently than most Dutch-speaking parties. This "presidentialisation" results in a highly concentrated communication style, where the visibility of the leader greatly overshadows other party politicians. This pattern is evident in the PTB and MR. For the PTB, while the leader attracted 64.4% of mentions, the second most mentioned politician, Peter Mertens, received only 12.3% of mentions. Similarly, for the MR, Georges-Louis Bouchez attracted 56.1% of mentions, while the second most mentioned politician, David Clarinval, received only 5.6%.

Finally, **Les Engagés stands out by emphasizing parliamentarians in its digital communication, with 37.1% of its mentions on X dedicated to MPs**. Among the top five most mentioned politicians by Les Engagés are Vanessa Matz, a federal MP at the time of the study, Benoît Lutgen, a Member of the European Parliament. Moreover, the political party also highlights political figures characterised as **candidates** in our dataset (key individuals without official party positions but running for election in 2024). For instance, Jean-Luc Crucke, former Walloon minister for MR who ran for an MP seat for Les Engagés in 2024, was the second most mentioned politician by the party on X, totalling 9,4% of all mentions. Similarly, Yvan Verougstraete, a former CEO of a pharmacy chain and candidate for a European Parliament seat (and possibly the new future party president), received 7.4% of mentions. Therefore, **following the party's refoundation in March 2022, Les Engagés heavily promoted its new recruits in 2024**, including those it gleaned from other parties or non-political backgrounds. This strategy led to a high proportion of mentions dedicated to party politicians without MP seats, with the objective to emphasise the party's renewal and success in recruiting "new faces".

Figure 2. Top 5 most mentioned politicians, as percentage of total communication.

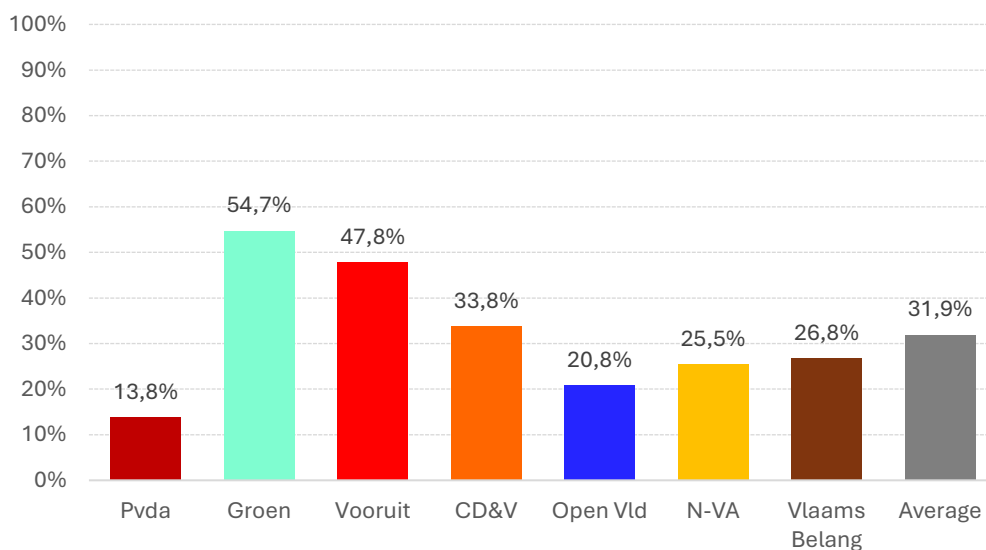


Women in parties' communication

In this final section, we investigate the extent to which parties choose to promote female versus male politicians in their communication on X. The online presence of female politicians is crucial, as it provides role models for citizens and can bring more diverse perspectives to politics. Given these implications, political parties lacking equal leadership or having low representation of women in parliament raise concerns. Of course, we should be aware of the fact that if in reality the share of female politicians is lower—especially in top positions (such as party presidents or vice-ministers), this will inevitably also be reflected in their social media presence. However, in general, **we note that the proportion of female politicians mentioned by each party is mostly low, and generally lower than the actual share of female MPs boasted by a party.**

As seen on Figure 3, for Dutch-speaking parties, **only less than a third (31.9%) of mentions of political figures on X are women. Groen and Vooruit are exceptions**, with respectively 54.7 and 47.8% of their mentions dedicated to female politicians. This is **largely due to the presence of Nadia Naji as co-president for Groen and Melissa Depraetere assuming the leadership of Vooruit** following Conner Rousseau's departure amidst a political scandal. These two parties are followed by the CD&V, which mentions women in 33.8% of cases, largely due to the prominence of ministers such as Nicole De Moor and Annelies Verlinden in the party's communication (see Figure 1). On the other side of the spectrum, **PvdA mentions female politicians in only 13.8% of the cases**, suggesting a pattern of underrepresentation of women in the communication of this party, which could be a reflection of the lack of women in key party positions. The other parties -- Open Vld, N-VA and Vlaams Belang -- take an average position.

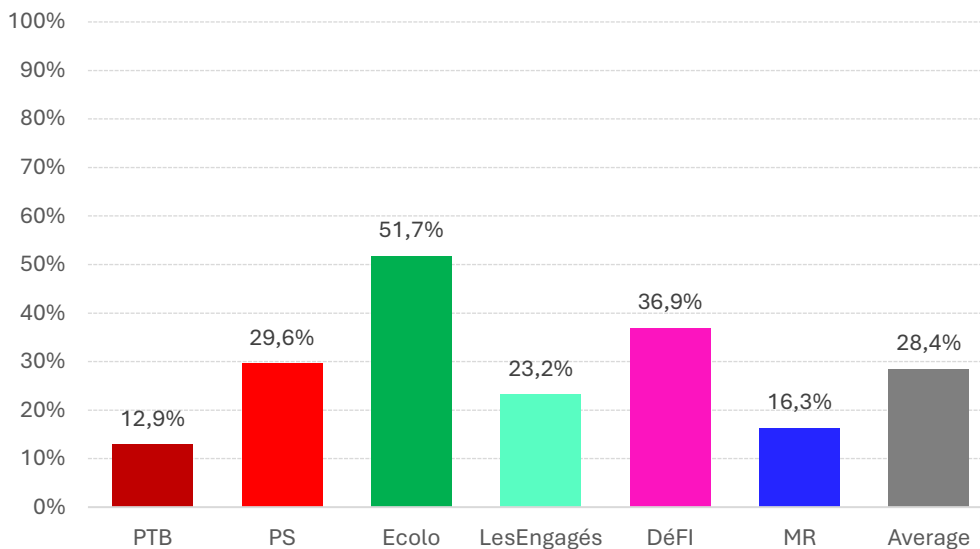
Figure 3. Proportion of women that are mentioned across Dutch-speaking parties.



Among **French-speaking parties**, the numbers are quite similar to those of their Dutch-speaking counterparts, though slightly **lower on average (28.4%)**, as seen on Figure 4. This lower score may be attributed to the more presidentialised communication of French-speaking parties, while only one of these parties (Ecolo) was (co-)led by a woman during our period of investigation. Therefore, not surprisingly, **Ecolo stands out with just over half of mentions (51.7%) dedicated to female politicians**. Most of these mentions are for **Rajae Maouane, the party's co-president**. The "second-best" party in terms of women's representation is **DéFI (36.9%)**, with **Sophie Rohonyi**, who was at the time of our study federal MP, getting most of these mentions. On the

contrary, the **political parties mentioning the least female political figures are PTB (12.9% of mentions) and MR (16.3%).**

Figure 4. Proportion of women that are mentioned across French-speaking parties.



Overall, our findings show that **the presence of female politicians in the digital communication of political parties is heavily influenced by whether women hold leadership positions** within the party, the government or parliament. This pattern is **consistent** across both Dutch-speaking and French-speaking parties. Unsurprisingly, political parties with women in the leadership roles (i.e., Groen, Vooruit, Ecolo) are more likely to put in the spotlight female politicians in their digital communication. Conversely, when women do not occupy influential roles within the party, they are rarely highlighted in the party’s online communication (e.g., PTB-PvdA, Open Vld, MR). Hence, a bias in social media presence is at least partly a reflection of a bias in political reality.

The presence of women in the party’s digital communication may also depend on the number of female MPs within the party. Those with a higher proportion of female federal MPs during the 2019-2024 term (see Table 2 in the Appendix section), such as Vooruit, DéFI, Ecolo, and Groen, had more opportunities to showcase the profiles and work of female politicians on X. In contrast, political parties like MR, PTB-PvdA, and PS tend to highlight fewer women in their digital communication, despite having several prominent female ministers at both the regional and federal levels.

CONCLUSION

The observations that we make in this note shed some interesting light on the personalization of the official, day-to-day communication of Belgian political parties on X. Interestingly, our findings tend to disprove the general assumptions that communication is very personalized—as only a small fraction (6%) of parties’ posts on X are solely dedicated to the promotion of party figures—and that party leaders amass most of the attention in partisan communication, in light of the “presidentialization” of Belgian politics. Nevertheless, **politicians are still frequently associated with policy discussions, as 72% of posts do mention at least one politician.** Instead, we reveal that **political parties have very different strategies when it comes to which political figures they choose to emphasize** in their communication. Furthermore, approaches also show **distinctiveness across language groups.**

This variation can partly be understood according to the **position of parties** in the political landscape. For instance, some incumbent, governing parties, can highlight their ministers (e.g., PS, CD&V), whereas opposition parties lack this advantage. Interestingly, some incumbent parties that are in opposition at other levels of government sometimes choose to highlight their opposition through those that embody it, while giving less attention to their ministers. During the period of investigation (Jan 2022 – Jun 2024), **party leaders were always the most mentioned politicians among all but one party: the Open Vld**. Yet there is a lot of variation as to how much of the attention they concentrate (about 65% of mentions for the PTB-PvdA), vs. “only” 16.0% and 13.0% of mentions of personalities for Groen. For the Open Vld, the party might have tried to capitalize on the visibility of the Prime Minister. The very opposed electoral fortunes of these parties demonstrate the importance of considering—among many other factors—how parties put individual politicians in the spotlight, but also who these people are. There are of course limitations to this study, such as the fact that on social media, individual politicians are generally more active (and more popular) than official party accounts, especially for some parties. Future research should also assess the electoral ramifications of personalization strategies which is beyond the scope of this media note.

APPENDIX

Table 1. Overview of accounts included in the study.

Party	Party family	Creation date	Handle
Dutch-speaking Belgium			
PvdA	Radical left	Oct 2009	@pvdabelgie
Groen	Green	Aug 2007	@groen
Vooruit	Socialist	Mar 2009	@vooruit_nu
CD&V	Chris-dem.	Aug 2008	@cdenv
Open Vld	Liberal	Feb 2009	@openvld
N-VA	Regionalist	Mar 2009	@de_NVA
Vlaams Belang	Radical right	Mar 2009	@vlbelang
French-speaking Belgium			
PTB	Radical left	Oct 2009	@ptbbelgique
Ecolo	Green	Apr 2008	@Ecolo
PS	Socialist	Feb 2011	@Psofficiel
LesEngagés	Chris-dem.	Jan 2011	@LesEngages_be
MR	Liberal	Jan 2010	@MR_officiel
DéFI	Regionalist	Mar 2010	@defi_eu

Figure 1. Top 10 most mentioned politicians in absolute terms, Dutch-speaking.

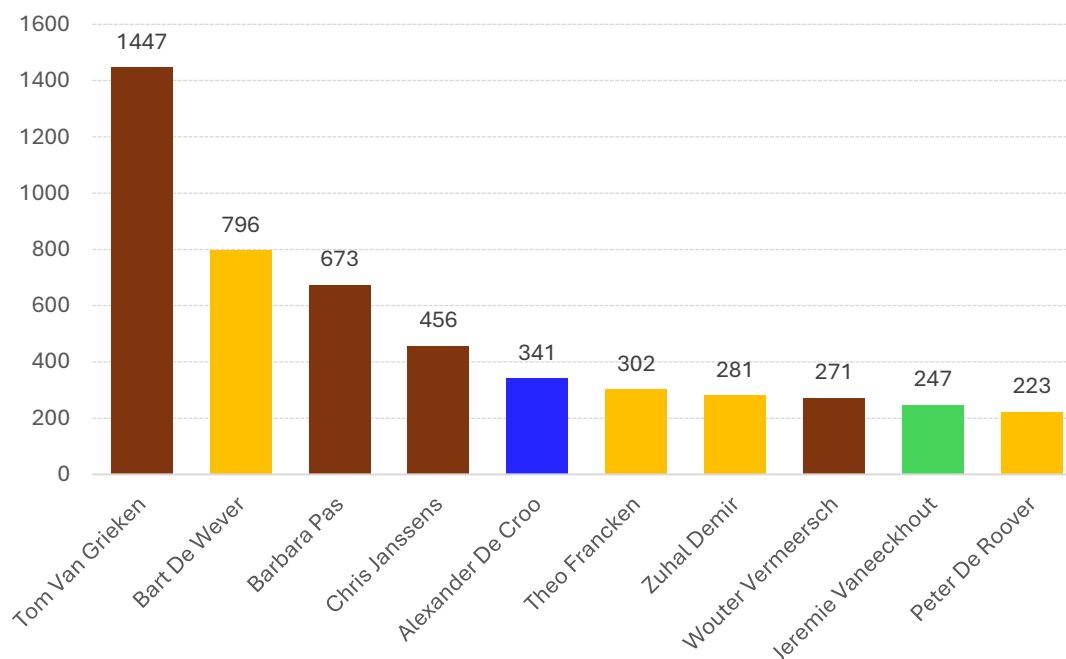


Figure 2. Top 10 most mentioned politicians in absolute terms, French-speaking.

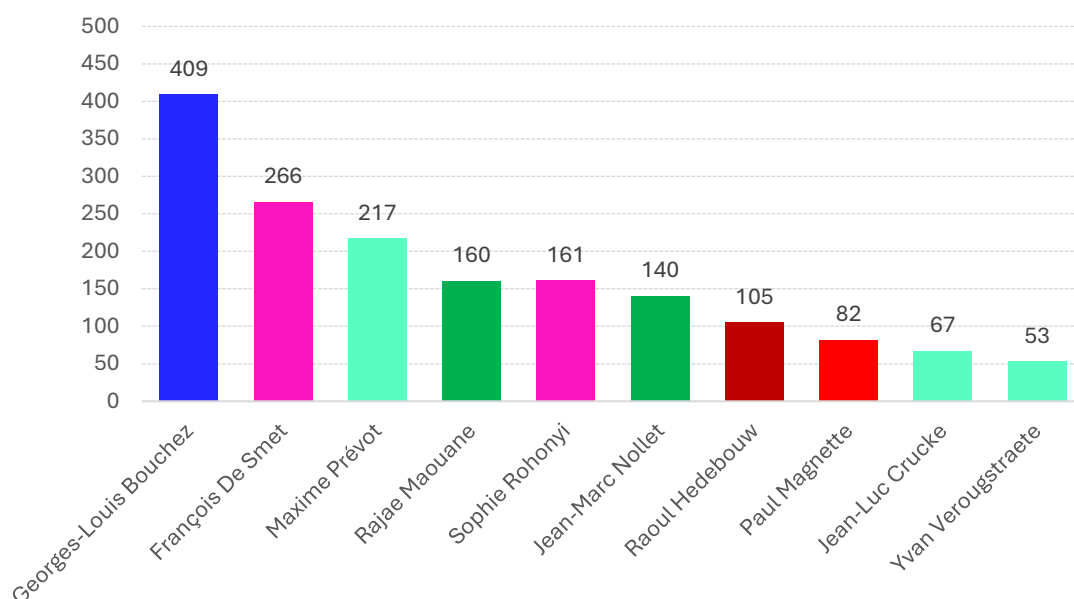


Table 2. Percentage of female MPs by political party*.

Party	% female MPs	% female politicians in X posts	Difference (X-Chamber)
Vooruit	55.6%	47.8%	-7.8
DéFI	50.0%	36.9%	-13.1
Ecolo	50.0%	51.7%	+1.7
Groen	50.0%	54.7%	+4.7
N-VA	50.0%	25.5%	-24.5
Open Vld	50.0%	20.8%	-29.2
LesEngagés	40.0%	23.2%	-16.8
CD&V	38.5%	33.8%	-4.7
Vlaams Belang	36.8%	26.8%	-10.0
PS	35.0%	29.6%	-5.4
PTB-PvdA	33.3%	13.4%	-19.9
MR	28.6%	16.3%	-12.3
Independent	0.0%	NA	NA
Average	41.7%	31.7%	-10.0

*Results for the Chamber of Representatives, composition of parliament in 2022.

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