Spatial Visual Communications in Election Campaigns: Political Posters Strategies in Two Democracies

Dissertation

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By

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Abstract

In an era so heavily dominated by the high-tech electioneering, why do parties and candidates still choose to inundate their constituency’s streets with colorful posters at election time? So far, little attention has been paid to election posters as electioneering tools, despite abundant evidence of their extensive use in many countries, and despite parties and candidates spending 20% and more of their campaign communication budget on them.

By emphasizing posters’ embeddedness in the physical space of the electoral battleground, this dissertation provides a strong rebuttal of the conventional wisdom in electoral communication who would consider posters as an outdated form of campaigning.

Over the course of five empirical chapters, I provide extensive evidence of posters’ complex communication functions and of parties’ rationality in their poster campaigns use, using different methodological approaches. By examining this campaign phenomenon in France and francophone Belgium, I show that, due to their spatial visual characteristics, posters’ primary role is to signal a political actor’s electoral competitiveness to other actors involved in the election (supporters, opponents, and
undecided alike). Their informational function, i.e. their function of familiarizing voters with a candidate’s name, party affiliation or ideology, appears to be secondary. Moreover, by means of a large survey of party officials, analysis of campaign expenditures and visual analysis of hundreds of candidate posters, I provide persuasive evidence that political actors use this communication resource as dictated by their optimal electoral strategies. Major parties and their candidates are significantly more likely than minor ones to attach more importance to posters, and to use them as signals of their electoral competitiveness. Minor political actors are in return more likely to use this type of campaign to provide voters with additional campaign information.

The findings in this dissertation are relevant for our general understanding of the messages that political actors try to convey in elections, of the channels and means they use to convey these messages, and of the interaction between political actors at during campaigns.
Dedication

To Razvan
Acknowledgments

Looking back at it, it all makes sense. This dissertation would not have been possible without my being so fortunate from so many points of view.

Fortunate to have been working under the supervision of Dr. Tony Mughan, who never tired listening to my wildest ideas, giving me the best of advice and helping me to constantly improve this project. Without his unwavering confidence in this project, I would have never been able to do one full year of fieldwork, and without extensive fieldwork this dissertation would not have been possible. Nor would it have been possible without his constant feedback. I will always cherish the memory of our weekly meetings, which made me be a better scholar, and aspire to become a better one every day. Thank you so much for providing me with guidance and support at every step of the way.

I have been fortunate to benefit from the constant excellent advice of Dr. Tom Nelson whose door was always open whenever I encountered a problem in this research. His advice often made problems that seemed intractable become tractable, and I am deeply grateful for his constant assistance with this project.

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My husband has always been there for me, and I cherish this opportunity to thank him for all his patience and unwavering understanding throughout all these years. Without our stroll in Paris in 2005, wondering about “what in the world are these parties trying to achieve by posterizing?!?” none of this might have been researched and written. Without his unwavering support throughout the long days and nights spent researching and writing, this dissertation would have been much more difficult to accomplish. Thank you for everything.

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This project would have been much more difficult to achieve had it not been for Bill Miller’s kind technical assistance. It has been a true pleasure collaborating together, and I will always be grateful for his help with the web survey and the experimental research.

I would also like to thank Dr. Nicolae Mihalache for designing the ingenious visual analysis software used in Chapter 7. This project would have been poorer but for his technical support.

This dissertation is dedicated to Razvan, and to two people close to my heart who will never be able to see it. To my grandmother who passed away and who taught me that wisdom is also to be found outside books. And to my dear friend Ninucia, who brought joy and light in my life and the lives of those fortunate to know her, and whose intelligence, warmth and friendship will never be forgotten.
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Chapter 1: Re-conceptualizing Posters as Spatial Visual Communications

Consider this reality, as portrayed in Figure 1.1, and captured by news cameras time and again: in many countries around the world, posters are a sure sign that an election campaign is underway. Only recently, a radio reporter noted of the recent 2009 Iraqi provincial elections: “Posters are everywhere, layers of them, sometimes three or four deep, fixed […] on every vertical surface in Baghdad; the faces of one politician or another, asking for or demanding votes, some are down or defaced, a new kind of conflict in Iraq”.

And these observations are not unique to this emerging democracy. In fact, significant percentages of political consultants worldwide rate election posters as “exceptionally important”: According to Plasser & Plasser (2002, p. 295), the percentages of consultants holding this opinion range from about 20% (in Latin America, Western Europe and India) to 54% (in South Africa). Moreover, based on the spending information available, poster expenses seem to account for a significant percentage of political parties’ and candidates’ campaign expenditures. A communication officer from the German Christian Democrats noted in private correspondence with the author that, “considering all advertisement means (TV, broadcast, Cinema, newspaper-advertisement, Internet etc.), advertisement by posters [was] the most important

**Figure 1.1. Poster Campaigns on Five Continents.** From top to bottom and left to right: Serb posters from ex-President Vojislav Koštunica; Belgian posters from MR leader Didier Reynders; Kenyan posters from Fred Gumo, elected Westlands constituency representative; Unidentifiable posters from Malaysian and Azeri candidates; Posters from the Australian Labor leader Kevin Rudd; Posters from Cristina Kirchner, President of Argentina; Posters from Alvaro Colom, winner of the Guatemalan Presidential elections.
part” of CDU 2005 general campaign spending. Indeed, a previous study puts the CDU poster spending figure at 20% of its total campaign communication budget (Langguth, 1995). As a major party official in an interview put it, Belgian “candidates love seeing their picture everywhere” and this is at least one of the features they have in common with Irish candidates, for whom Marsh (2004) estimates that posters take fully 50% of their campaign budgets in national elections.

But what makes posters important? Put differently, why do parties and their candidates (hereafter “political actors”) make such heavy use of this old form of political communication in their campaigns? Despite the fact that, by all accounts, “many countries still find print display advertising, particularly posters, to be an important part of party advertising strategies” (Kaid, 2004, p.184), and despite the fact that posters are seen by virtually every voter during their most routine outdoor daily activities during the campaign period, no systematic study to date has examined why parties and candidates persist with poster campaigns and to what effect.

1.1. Overview of the Present Study

The main argument developed throughout this study is that, far from being a remnant of outmoded electioneering techniques, the presence of posters in campaigns is the result of politicians’ strategic choices. Over the course of five empirical chapters, I present extensive evidence that, given posters’ ability to act as constant reminders of a political actor’s embeddedness in a community’s shared space, they are primarily used to signal an actor’s electoral competitiveness in the district, while their role of transmitting ballot-related information (e.g. name or party affiliation of a
candidate) is only secondary (the communication functions proposition). The term of “electoral competitiveness” encompasses both the strength of an actor’s campaign and her possession of the right governing credentials. Moreover, I show that, consistent with their optimal electoral strategies, major political actors are significantly more likely to use posters as signaling devices of electoral competitiveness, while minor actors are more likely to use them as informational devices (the party strategy proposition).

The argument of strategic poster communication is developed as follows. It begins in the next section of this introduction with a theoretical reexamination of what sets poster campaigns apart from other types of campaigning, in other words, with their definition. Posters are thus argued to be the only form of electoral communication that uses the well defined physical space of a community to send information about the parties and candidates involved in the election. Paraphrasing McLuhan’s famous phrase, if “the medium is the message”, their location in the public space is crucial for any interpretation of the information they transmit, and the purposes they have in the campaign.

This definition of posters leads to the development of a novel analytical framework for their study, which holds that there are two distinct dependent variables subsumed by the concept of “poster campaigns”. The first is the individual poster, and it refers mainly to their content. The second is “postering”, and it refers to the clustering of posters in the public space. By outlining the intrinsic duality of the phenomenon to be explained, and by connecting the two dependent variables to the actors involved in them, this framework is the skeletal structure around which this study is framed and its parts provide the building blocks for each chapter.
Chapter 2 starts elaborates the framework by formulating two general hypotheses with regard to posters’ communication roles and actors’ decision-making strategies, building on the relevant communication and advertising literature. Chapter 3 provides initial empirical support for this framework, by means of interviews with party elites involved in real life election poster campaigns in France and francophone Belgium. Chapters 3 through 7 present empirical evidence for the visual signaling of competitiveness being the most important function of posters and postering, and for parties’ strategic poster decisions. Chapter 8 concludes.

This study rests therefore on a significant reconceptualization of the phenomenon of poster campaigns itself as spatial visual communications, an elaboration of which now follows. Without further ado, what makes a poster a *poster*?

1.2. An Intensional Definition of Posters

Few studies of campaign communication have paid attention to the role of posters in the larger set of campaign communications, and none has defined them. If anything, posters are negatively portrayed as a “pre-modern” form of communication (Norris, 2000), or as a remnant of the “Stage 1” of campaigns that has carried over in the current “Stage 3”, which is defined by the simultaneous use of not one, but multiple high tech means of campaigning (Farrell, 2001). From this perspective, it is all too clear what posters are seen to lack in an electronic communications era: the ability to combine moving visual images with audio information, the ability to convey complex policy positions and campaign arguments and the ability to reach a national audience. But why then, do we continue to see posters in so many campaigns in different countries (see
Figure 1.1), particularly from well known political actors who clearly have the means to, and do indeed run “post-modern”/ “stage 3” campaigns? To say what posters don’t do is also of little help in understanding what they actually contribute to in election campaigns. To advance, we need an intensional logical definition of posters (to borrow a concept from mathematics); in other words, we need to specify a number of conditions that are both necessary and sufficient to define them as a subset in the larger set of election campaign communications.

The primary attribute of this type of campaign communication is its embeddedness in the public space. Unlike electronic forms of communication which target people in the isolation of their own home through computer or TV screens, posters reach people through their constant and open display in a shared spatial environment (see also Meyers, 1999). This intrinsic spatial dimension has two implications that have been neglected to this point. The first concerns directly the message that political actors attempt to communicate through posters. Irrespective even of its precise content, this message is a direct function of at least two spatial variables: (1) the location of any poster in this common space (on public or private ground), and (2) the relation of any one poster to other posters in the same space (i.e. instances of poster clustering).

The second implication concerns the variety of formats that posters can take, and requires us to extend the universe of posters from just regular-sized official posters, to the entire range of visual advertisements that political actors display publicly in common spaces during campaigns. Thus, the set of posters includes, for example, any print production intended for independent posting (billboards, as well as smaller sized images, ranging from a pocketbook format to A4 or A3 formats); small-size stickers (posted on
postboxes, street signs and garbage cans); “headpieces” (i.e. strips of posters usually carrying a slogan or a name, designed to be posted either separately or on top of other, more information-rich posters); and multi-dimensional posters as in Germany (where parties place posters around street light posts, so they can be seen from several angles).

While posters imply connection to a space, not all spatial communications belong to the poster subset. For one, we need to set apart posters from graffiti and other mural art, which is painted directly on the public space. Unlike these other spatial communications, posters have a physical support of their own (e.g. a paper support). Moreover, as research on campaign communication points out, posters lack the capacity to combine moving visuals and auditory information. To set them apart from animated billboards (however rare those might be in actual election campaigns), a third condition must be applied to posters: their content must be made up of static visuals only.

We have so far delimited the set of posters from graffiti and from other electronic communications (indoor and outdoor). There are, however, other outdoor political forms of communication that rely on static visuals alone: for example, banners or placards that parties and candidates prominently display at their rally. To complete the definition of posters, we must therefore require them to exhibit a final necessary characteristic: their temporal dimension, that is, their lasting presence in that spatial context. Unlike other static visual advertisements associated with rallies, like banners, posters are intended to remain in place for the duration of the campaign. At the most general level, posters serve to communicate a message from a certain political actor in absentia of that actor, or her rally supporters; it goes without saying that the briefer their presence in the public space,
the less likely the message is to reach any of its intended recipients. While some posters get ripped down, sometimes just hours after being posted, this is seen a political act in itself, and most of the time they are replaced by other posters from the same political actor or her opponents.

There are, then, four necessary and sufficient defining characteristics of posters within the larger set of political communications. The subset of election posters contains all election advertisements that have, at the same time, the following properties:

1. **Spatial dimension.** Individual advertisements are intended for display in public (or in private, but publicly observable) spaces.

2. **Physical support dimension.** Poster communications have a print support prior to their display in public.

3. **Static visuals content dimension.** Their content is restricted to use of static visuals.

4. **Temporal dimension.** The public display of individual advertisements is intended to last for at least some time in that space.

Consequently, a shorter definition of “election poster” is: “any static visual electoral material designed for posting in public (or private, but publicly observable) spaces for a longer period of time”. In the specific cases of France and francophone Belgium, this subset of political communications includes multiple poster sizes (displayed on public and private property), headpieces and stickers only (billboard posting being prohibited in both countries during elections). Similarly, yard signs are also a category of posters, since they fulfill all four requirements.

This definition has two immediate implications for the study of poster campaigns, both of which warrant additional discussion:
The first implication is *the primacy of the public spatial dimension of posters*. While this is not their only attribute, it is nevertheless the dominant one distinguishing posters from *most* other election campaign communications. Their other dimensions – albeit necessary for an *intensional* definition – are marginal refinements to their basic character. The “physical support” and “static visuals” attributes create a distinction between posters and two highly unusual means of *electoral* communication: While widespread as a form of political protest, graffiti is rarely part of a party’s electioneering arsenal; same goes for animated billboards, which are more the domain of commercial advertisers. The “temporal” attribute enhances the definitional accuracy, by separating posters from rally banners; yet, it can be argued that these are substantially different at least another ground as well: unlike posters, rally banners cannot be separated from the simultaneous presence of a mass of supporters.

The second logical implication concerns *the status of poster content* in the larger study of poster campaigns. Throughout the centuries, posters (not poster *campaigns*) have captivated researchers’ interest for their use of powerful cultural symbols. Examples are the iconic “Uncle Sam Needs You” poster (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2006) or Pablo Picasso’s 1920 “Paloma” poster that later became a symbol of peace. Such examples bring home an appeal of a semiotic study of posters, that is, of a study focused on the analysis of the cultural symbols of which they make use to get their message across. And yet, there is no specific mention of content in the my definition of posters and it has been left out for the following reason: Irrespective of the global content of the poster (name, candidate picture, party sign, slogan, cultural symbols etc.), the simple fact that a political actor decides to place a poster in a public space for a longer period of time *is already a*
message. At the very least this public message is, “Look, there exists a candidate/party X!” So, imposing an additional condition with regard to specific poster content (i.e. culturally interpretable symbols) is redundant, since their message is already a function of their spatial character. This consequently implies that a study of posters that focuses uniquely on the analysis of posters’ content (i.e. the interpretation of symbols and verbal messages they contain) is reductionist, because it cannot account for the messages that posters send through their presence in the public space. This idea is further developed in the next section of this introduction.

But while content is not part of the definition of a poster, it is important to note that there are common patterns in posters. They have long been recognized by advertising professionals, like David Ogilvy (1983), as being primarily a communication instrument designed to capture attention by using simple visuals and language to transmit a message that is easily understandable by viewers and easily associated with the firm sponsoring the poster. Advertisers expect customers’ exposure (or, in the case of election campaigns, voters’ exposure) to posters to be much shorter than for other forms of visual campaign communications (e.g. TV advertising and the internet), precluding therefore the possibility of lengthy argumentations or sophisticated visuals. Instead, advertisers and parties strive for designs that ensure maximal visibility, while minimizing the effort required of viewers to process the poster message. Given these insights from commercial advertising, we would expect posters to focus on, or emphasize those features of parties or candidates that enable viewers to link the poster instinctively to its sponsor.

Having equipped ourselves with a rigorous definition of posters as spatial, static visual and durable electoral communications vehicles, attention now turns to the
elaboration of the analytical framework to be used in this study of poster campaigns.

1.3. Analytical Framework

The primary consequence of this definition of posters is to make an analysis focused *only* on the content of individual posters (the dominant approach in propaganda studies) insufficient to understand why political actors use posters, and to what effect. To answer these key questions, we must take into account posters’ fundamental spatial dimension, and an adequate framework for analyzing their electoral role needs to examine both (1) the aspects related to each individual poster in isolation, and (2) its relationship to other posters in their immediate spatial proximity (i.e. instances of poster clustering). This framework is summarized in Table 1.1, and elaborated below.

This analytical framework reflects the interaction between posters and those who use them. The horizontal axis represents the two characteristics of poster campaigns that we are interested in explaining. The vertical dimension reflects the actors involved in this form of campaign communication. Based on the spatial dimension of posters, the **horizontal dimension** introduces a critical distinction between *two* dependent variables inherent in poster campaigns. On one hand we have the *individual* poster (and its characteristics); on the other hand, we have the spatial clustering of multiple similar posters in the same location (that we see, for example, in Figure 1.1), and hereafter referred to as “*posterering*”. The focus on the individual poster, as we have seen above, is not new; rather it is at the core of propaganda studies. However, rather than offering an analysis of poster symbols, this study will focus primarily on uncovering a set of
Table 1.1. An Analytical Framework for the Study of Poster Campaigns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTORS</th>
<th>Individual Poster Content</th>
<th>Postering phenomenon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sender(s)</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Party; Candidates; Party &amp; Candidates)</td>
<td><em>(See chapters 2, 3, 7)</em></td>
<td><em>(See chapters 2, 4, 5, 6)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Receivers</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Opposing parties; Opposing candidates; Activists; Voters)</td>
<td><em>(See chapters 3, 7)</em></td>
<td><em>(See chapters 4, 6)</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
election-related factors responsible for the variation in visual content choices (elaborated upon in Chapter 3 and 7).

While the individual poster is the necessary foundation stone of the larger poster campaign, this framework aspires to separate the bricks from the edifice that is the product of their spatial clustering: Because posters have a strong spatial dimension, *postering* acquires the capacity of transmitting a message that amounts to more than the sum of its parts. Put differently, the clustering of posters in the streets acquires more meaning than just the sum of the messages contained in the individual posters. This distinction between posters and postering makes it possible not only to carry an investigation of the critical spatial aspect of these campaigns, but also to expand our understanding of the non-verbal messages parties transmit at election time.

The **vertical dimension of the analytical framework** simply acknowledges the two categories of actors involved in this communication process as creators or targets of poster campaigns. By means of this very general second dimension, this framework opens the study of poster campaigns to a world of theoretical possibilities allowing for a finer examination of the making of poster- and postering decisions and their impact. First, the category of “senders” comprises multiple actors: various parties, candidates, party/candidate affiliated organizations, etc.. Second, given posters’ necessary visual embeddedness in a spatially defined community, all political actors in the district become potential “receivers”: one’s party activists and supporters, opposition activists and supporters, and neutral voters.

Before going into detail about how this analytical framework informs subsequent chapters, it is important to recognize the three crucial advantages it brings to the study of
poster campaigns. First, it connects observed patterns of campaign communications to the strategic calculations of political actors in a very simple manner. Second, it encompasses significantly more aspects of poster campaigns than have previously been considered, and thereby opening our mind to the wider range of potential explanations for this form of campaign communication. Third, while widening the realm of theoretical possibilities with regard to poster- and postering strategies and their impact, this analytical framework also promises theoretical efficiency by dividing the study of this campaign phenomenon into four specific foci of inquiry.

This analytical framework permeates this research in two main ways: on the one hand, it ensures the unity of this study; on the other hand it provides guidance about the research areas that need to be developed in the quest for a comprehensive understanding of the rationale behind poster campaigns. The last part of this introduction provides a synopsis of how these research foci are addressed chapter-by-chapter in this dissertation.

1.4. Plan of the Dissertation

To understand why political actors run poster campaigns, we need to understand the strategies and incentives shaping both poster content and postering decisions (the top two cells of the analytical framework); and then to translate them into a set of testable expectations. This is the purpose of Chapter 2. Building on the literature in campaign communications, it spells out the incentives that parties and candidates have to run poster campaigns. Based on advertising research, it narrows down to two the possible messages that poster campaigns (i.e. posters and postering) convey: ballot-related information and visual signaling of electoral competitiveness. Finally, it introduces the cases in which the
expectations about posters and postering will be put to the empirical test: France and francophone Belgium.

Chapters 3 through 7 represent the empirical part of this study, dealing with the motivations actors have to run poster campaigns. Chapters 3 and 4 use qualitative data obtained from elite interviews with candidates and party officials centrally involved in the planning and conduct of poster campaigns. These interviews not only validate the 2x2 analytical framework used in this study (see Chapter 3), but also cast light on (1) the motivations behind poster content (Cell 1, Chapter 3); (2) postering (Cell 2, Chapter 4); and (3) the effects that elites expect poster campaigns to have (Cells 3 and 4).

Using an original survey of party members in France and francophone Belgium, Chapter 5 provides further insight into the top right cell of Table 1.1. By investigating the role of posters to signal campaign competitiveness and as media to convey ballot information, Chapter 5 also provides first hand evidence for the strategic differences in major and minor political actors’ use of posters.

The basic difference in the strategies of the two types of parties is further highlighted in Chapters 6 and 7. Chapter 6 provides additional evidence for the signaling importance of *postering* for major parties. Using a game theoretical model, it also shows that major political actors’ postering strategies are the result of rational adaptations to the postering strategies of their immediate opponents and to variations in electoral conditions. This model is then tested using candidate poster expenditures in the French 1997 legislative elections. Chapter 6 speaks therefore to both Cell 2 and Cell 4 in Table 1.1, as it models how political actors adapt their postering strategies to the actions of other actors in the campaign.
Chapter 7 turns to the study of differences in *poster content* between major and minor party candidates. Using a purpose-built visual analysis computer software and an original database of candidate posters in the 2007 French legislative elections, Chapter 7 examines the use of visual cues and verbal information in posters and provides further confirmation of the strategic dimension of poster communication.

This study concerns itself most with poster communication goals and actors’ strategies, and less with the effects of these strategies, particularly when it comes to voter effects. However, voters’ reaction to the content of posters (Cell 3) is briefly addressed in Chapter 7, and a number directions for the study of poster impact on voter attitudes and behavior is proposed in the concluding chapter of the dissertation.

**Summary**

Poster campaigns are an important and pervasive form of election campaign communications worldwide, yet we understand little about why parties and candidates adopt this form of campaigning and to what effect. This dissertation provides a comprehensive answer to the “why” question, and preliminary insights into its “effect” counterpart.

This chapter has had a dual purpose: The first one has been to propose an unambiguous definition of what makes a poster. Conceptualized as “any static visual electoral material designed for posting in public (or private, but publicly observable) spaces for a longer period of time”, this makes posters, in effect, the only form of *spatial visual communication* available to parties at election times. This definition lays the groundwork for a novel analytical perspective on poster campaigns, which was the
second purpose of this chapter.

Any answer to the question “why do political actors use posters” is necessarily preceded by a deep understanding of this form of political communication in election campaigns, and this chapter has proposed an analytical framework built around the content of the individual poster, and the larger phenomenon of postering, i.e. their clustering in space. This 2x2 simple analytical framework connects political actors and observed poster practices, and provides direction for the general study of poster campaigns by identifying four specific research foci.

To address these foci, the dissertation now turns to the formulation of a set of testable expectations by means of an analysis of the campaign communication and advertising literature.
Chapter 2: Mapping Posters’ Informational and Signaling Roles

As the introductory chapter has argued, a full inquiry into “why parties and candidates use poster campaigns” translates, in effect into two separate, yet intimately related questions: (1) “What motivates [parties’ and candidates’ decision making with regard to] postering?”; and (2) “What motivates [decision making with regard to] the content of each poster?”. This chapter provides the necessary tools to tackle both these questions.

Absent any prior systematic study of these questions, this research begins with a discussion of the reasons that parties and candidates would have to engage in poster campaigns in the context of their global campaign efforts. By means of a critical discussion of the “Americanization” of election campaigns thesis – the most prominent lens filtering our view on contemporary election campaigns (e.g. Norris, 2000; Farrell, 2006) – the first part of the chapter highlights the considerable incentives political actors have to run poster campaigns. The second part takes note of posters’ distinctive features as communication tools (i.e. voters’ repeated exposure to them, the limited attention they are expected to receive, their clustered display) and addresses posters’ communication roles through the lens of research on consumer advertising, social movements and local campaign strategies.
In a nutshell, this theoretical discussion leads to formulation of two general hypotheses for the motivations behind postering and poster content. According to the first, “posters-as-signaling” hypothesis, political actors make use of posters’ visual and spatial character to signal their electoral competitiveness to voters and opponents. The term of “electoral competitiveness” refers both to the ability of an actor of pulling together a strong campaign (conveyed primarily through postering) and to her command of the right governing credentials (conveyed in the content of posters). The second, “posters-as-information” hypothesis, argues that, to make up for their lack of access to other forms of communication, political actors use poster campaigns as a way to improve voter recognition of the information printed on the ballot (e.g. the name of a candidate, party affiliation and ideological identity). These hypotheses are not mutually exclusive: the tasks that political actors assign to posters should depend on their governing potential. Actors with high governing potential (i.e. major parties and their candidates) are expected to be more likely to assign them a signaling, rather than an informational role. Minor actors should, in turn, be more inclined to see posters as a means to raise awareness of their bid for office.

The final part of the chapter presents the cases in which these general expectations are put to the empirical test: France and francophone Belgium. Conclusions follow.

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1 Francophone Belgium encompasses the French speaking community of Belgium, a territorial entity established by the Belgian constitution in 1970, comprising both Wallonia (the Belgian province inhabited by the French speaking population), and the French-speaking areas of Brussels-Capital. The Belgian party system is comprised of completely independent French- and Flemish-speaking parties, with French speaking parties running candidates only in the French-speaking territories (Wallonia and Brussels).
2.1. Political Posters, Campaign Communications and the Americanization of Election Campaigns Thesis

The rise of the electronic mass media in the past twenty years, and the increasingly important role it plays in shaping the public opinion at election time (e.g. Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) has led researchers to argue in favor of a rapid evolution in the style and organization of political campaigns. Specifically, parties and political actors worldwide are alleged to have started imitating their US counterparts in their electioneering techniques, resulting in the “Americanization” of election campaigns across the globe (Mancini & Swanson, 1996, p. 4). While the notion of “Americanization” has not gone uncontested, there is broad agreement that campaigns around the world have become increasingly reliant on the electronic mass media, political professionals, increased personalization of politics (particularly centered around party leaders), at the expense of local campaigning and parties’ direct contacts with voters (Swanson & Mancini, 1996, p. 249; Bowler & Farrell, 1992; Norris, 2000; Farrell & Schmitt-Beck, 2002; Plasser & Plasser, 2002; Farrell & Webb, 2000; Farrell, 2006).

This focus on centralization and electronic-dominance in contemporary campaigns has led many researchers to brand poster campaigns as “pre-modern” because of their apparent poor fit with the “Americanization” trend (e.g. Norris, 2000). Lacking the national exposure that electronic media offers, lacking the sophisticated use of visuals, music and text that both TV and the internet make possible – posters seem a poor communication tool to improve one’s election returns. Not only do poster campaigns seem of limited communication potential in an electioneering era dominated by a
ubiquitous electronic media and political news featuring prominent political actors, but their presence during the election campaign only contrasts sharply with the alleged “permanent”, year-round character of today’s campaigns (Farrell, 2006). Whereas modern campaigners are said to be in the public spotlight all year round, poster campaigns often start only a few weeks or months prior to Election Day, and end once the election has been decided. Finally, with campaigns increasingly controlled by “special party campaign units and specialized political consultants” (Plasser & Plasser, 2002, p. 6) at the central party level, and with the significant decline of the “voluntary wings of party organizations” (Webb & Kolodny, 2006, p. 337), posters appear even more “a thing of the past”. Their local and spatial characteristics require a level of commitment and knowledge from local activists that the center simply cannot substitute.

Yet poster campaigns are still very much around, which begs the question: If election campaigns had Americanized, why would political actors choose to spend any money, let alone significant chunks of their budgets on them (see Chapter 1)? Consistent with the “Americanization of election campaigns” thesis, one potential explanation might be that, while television is a preferred form of communication in modern electioneering, not all actors have as much direct access to it as they would like. Many countries, for example, prohibit paid political advertising; also, media communications are expensive and actors might have only small budgets at their disposal. In other words, poster campaigns are the domain of poorly funded parties and candidates, who simply cannot afford more powerful electronic electioneering techniques. While imperfect, posters enable these actors to draw attention to their bid and to transmit crucial identifying
information (e.g. name, party affiliation, ideology) hoping that voters will recall it in the voting booth.

The “Americanization” thesis is powerless however to account for the recurrent use of poster campaigns by well established, well funded actors. Why would the German CDU, one of the two largest parties in Germany, which can and does advertise on TV, invest “the largest part of [its] campaign communication budget” on posters? Why would Argentina’s former first lady (and current President), Cristina Kirchner run any poster campaign as in Figure 1.1 (bottom row, second from the right), when she not only had access to paid political TV advertisements (Holtz-Bacha & Kaid, 2006), but her notoriety and presence on the airwaves could hardly be matched? Similarly, why would Didier Reynders (Figure 1.1, top row, second from the left), the leader of the largest center-right francophone Belgian party and one of the Belgian media’s favorite guests, need any posterering? And need Vojislav Koštunica, the former Serbian president and prime minister, really remind voters who he is through a poster campaign (Figure 1.1, top row, first from the left)?

The literature on modern campaigns has no answer to these questions. To increase our explanatory leverage, we need therefore to rethink this understanding of the dynamics of election campaigns in four important ways: (a) the importance of local campaigns for national success, (b) the impact that local actors have on campaign success, (c) the communication potential inherent in nonverbal (visual) cues; and (d) the forceful imprint that the competition between political actors leaves on the flow of campaign communication.
2.1.1. Votes Are Counted and Elections Won at the Constituency Level

The emphasis on increased centralization of election campaigns, and on mass media as a primary forum of political information, has tended to ignore the basic truism that, in most elections, national success is decided at the district level, where votes are counted.\(^2\) A centralized communication strategy, targeting people through the national mass media, is unable to speak to district issues, and it would be irrational for parties not to complement it with locally oriented campaigns. Among the various stratagems that parties use to campaign at the district level, poster campaigns, with their visual and spatial dimensions, seem a particularly suitable means for parties to reach people in the confines of their local community.

Research on the importance of local campaigns has undergone a revival in the United Kingdom (e.g. Denver, Hands, Fisher, & MacAllister, 2003), Canada (e.g. Carty & Eagles, 1999) and Ireland (Marsh, 2004). Denver et al. (2003) in particular document the increasing professionalization of campaigns at this level, with key constituencies benefiting from serious central party attention in the form of hiring political professionals and targeting special groups through electronic voter databases. These studies challenge the Americanization thesis, by underscoring the importance of local campaigns. Yet, they tend to omit the fact that district electoral success is not just determined by investments from the central party – but also by the political ambitions of local candidates and party elites.

\(^2\) Only in very few national elections it is the case that the outcome does not depend on the local distribution of votes inside the nation (e.g. in Presidential elections, but even at this level, an unfortunate distribution of votes can deny the winner of the popular vote his victory as in the United States in 2000).
2.1.2. Local Actors Have Considerable Political Leverage in the Campaign

Election campaigns worldwide have undeniably experienced a centralizing trend, to the detriment of local actors and local party organizations. Yet that does not mean that local activists and candidates are simply puppets in the hands of national leaders, or that we should dismiss their importance in the campaign. For one, local actors possess a deep knowledge of the district battlefield. The more competitive elections are, the more precious this commodity becomes for the central party, partly because it improves its projection of its number of seats at the national level, and partly because it allows for a more efficient use of its campaign resources.

Moreover, candidates themselves can make or break an election, particularly in close races, thereby potentially altering the party’s majority/opposition status in parliament. For example, promoting candidates that are unpopular in the constituency can be costly. Consider the attempt to have Alain Juppé, ex-French prime minister, elected in the 2007 French legislative elections. Despite being second in command in the UMP government, and despite being strongly endorsed by the overwhelmingly popular Nicolas Sarkozy, Juppé still narrowly lost a traditionally safe UMP seat in Bordeaux, to the Socialist Party. Parties can also lose seats if their central organizations fail to respond to a candidate’s own ambitions. France again offers an example. Lack of agreement with the central party leadership led André Santini and Jean-Christophe Lagarde, previously UDF MPs, to split with the party and successfully run for reelection as independents. In short, the increased centralization of campaigning must not mask the fact that local actors have, through their grassroots knowledge and connections, a powerful bargaining position vis-
à-vis the central party.

Given the influence that local elites can exercise on the fate of a campaign, no means of campaign communication that allows for their promotion should be prematurely dismissed, particularly posters which, by their spatial and visual distinctiveness, allow local elites to durably boost their visibility where they care most: in the midst of the local community under their political sway.

2.1.3. Nonverbal (Visual) Cues in Campaigns

The rise of issue-politics, the decline of partisanship and of ideological attachments (e.g. Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000) have led to a heightened scholarly concern with the power that the media and elite discourse hold over public opinion (see Dumitrescu & Mughan, 2010 for a review of media effects). Yet, while much of the campaign communication literature has been concerned with people’s cognitive strategies of processing information they are bombarded with on election-related issues (and, consequently on the biases affecting their reasoning, like priming and framing effects; e.g. Kinder, 1998), it is clear cognitive responses to this information are just part of voters’ interaction with electoral politics. Another part of it is based on affective responses to politics (e.g. Neuman, Marcus, Crigler, & MacKuen, 2007a). Work on people’s reaction to expressive displays from leaders on television, for example, has shown that voters not only react unconsciously to happy facial expressions, but that these non-cognitive reactions inadvertently affect their subsequent attitudes (see Glaser &
Salovey, 1998, for a review; see Neuman, Marcus, Crigler, & MacKuen, 2007b, for a review of the research on emotions and politics).

The role that nonverbal cues can play in conveying a message should heighten our interest in posters. In fact, given durable entrenchment in the space of a district, and their display of candidate pictures and simple visuals, posters could potentially be one of the few nonverbal electoral communications that voters are unable to avoid. The communicational power of this simple visual display should not be taken lightly: circumstantial evidence from the United States shows that the more numerous candidate yard signs are in a neighborhood, the more likely people are to regard that candidate as a future winner of the election at the district level (Huckfeld & Sprague, 1992, 1995).

2.1.4. Electoral Competition and Campaign Communications

Election campaigns are crucial for the democratic process not only because they endow winners with legitimacy, but also because they provide a unique opportunity for voters to determine the course of government for the next parliamentary period. Given that elections elevate the public to the status of decision-maker, much of the campaign communication research effort has concerned itself with how voters react to divergent information flows (e.g. Farrell & Schmitt-Beck, 2002 for a comparative macro perspective of campaign effects; Zaller, 1992). While voters are the final judges in the campaign debate, there has been relatively little emphasis on the fact that the content of these divergent flows on information is itself the result of the competition between

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3 The research on non facial expressions is reviewed more in detail in Chapter 7.
political actors. In other words, candidates’ messages are not forged in isolation from their opponents’ campaign. Each actor tailors her discourse to the opposition’s, just as much as both information flows are addressed to the public.

A rounded understanding of the election communication process implies therefore the need for greater attention to the ways in which this political actor interaction manifests itself. From this point of view, the fact that posterising strategies develop in reaction to other actors’ posterising is readily apparent from my own observations in Paris over 39 consecutive days during the 2007 French presidential campaign: The poster displays of the top three Presidential contenders changed 26 times in some areas, sometimes even three times in a single day in the same traffic circle, as in Figure 2.1.

Moreover, the fact is that of all forms of local communication, posters are the only ones readily observable by everybody, offering an ideal “thermometer” for political actors to gauge the state of their opponents’ campaign and to calibrate their response accordingly. To date, the competitive dimension of local campaign communications has been largely overlooked, as each party’s campaign strategy has been treated in isolation from those of the others (e.g. Denver et al., 2003). Moreover, the focus on some types of communication only (telephone calls and door-to-door in the UK, Denver et al., 2003, mailings in Ireland, Marsh, 2004; leaflets and mailings in the US Green & Gerber, 2004) makes it difficult to observe inter-candidate competition, since actors are likely to have

\footnote{The interactive aspect of poster communications is formally developed in Chapter 6.}

\footnote{The French electoral law sets strict restrictions as to the display of posters during the campaign in the public space: these should only be displayed on special boards provided for by the local authorities. This makes therefore the display in Figure 2.1 illegal.}
Figure 2.1. Postering Campaign Wars on the Streets of Paris. Top: Nicolas Sarkozy’s defaced posters on April 4th, 2007. Middle: Ségolène Royal’s posters on April 6th. Bottom: François Bayrou’s posters, on April 7th.
little information about their opponents’ telephone records, or mailing patterns. Given their visibility in a space shared by all political actors and voters, the study of posters can shed significant light on the dynamics of democratic electoral competition.

To summarize this critique of the Americanization of election campaigns thesis, what could push well established actors – whether it is the German CDU, or Argentina’s first-lady-turned-president, or Belgium’s main party leader – who have access to the latest electioneering techniques, to run poster campaigns? First of all, despite centralizing electioneering trends, it would be irrational to dispense with posters as a form of local communication, simply because votes at the district level can determine the fate of their election. Second, local actors’ reputations matter, independently of the support they receive from the central party, and posters present these actors with an opportunity to promote themselves. Third, posters allow actors to send voters nonverbal messages, to which these are expected to react inadvertently. Fourth, and most importantly, posters show everybody (and foremost their opponents) that they are responsive to the campaign environment, in other words, that they are “in the game”.

Far from being an antiquated means of self-promotion in major actors’ electioneering toolbox, there are therefore sufficient reasons to expect posters to play a significant role – due to their visual and spatial character – in the struggle for votes at the district level. But what could these roles be? To allow for a better conceptualization of them, this chapter proceeds to a more rigorous examination of posters’ communication characteristics.
Figure 2.2. One Poster is Not Enough. Top left: Socialist postering on a major Paris boulevard during in the 2007 French presidential and legislative elections. Bottom left: Incumbent postering in a Paris district in the 2007 legislative elections. Right: Main opposition postering in another Paris district, same 2007 legislative campaign.
2.2. **Familiarity and Signaling by Poster Campaigns**

At election time, political actors rarely display just *one poster*; rather, the practice of poster campaigns seems to be skewed toward *postering*, that is, the display of similar posters *clustered* together in the same space (see Figures 1.1 and 2.2).

Furthermore, the postering landscape is forever changing: Most often, parties and candidates will saturate a location with their own posters, only for them to be completely replaced the next day (or even the same day), by opposition posters (see Figure 2.1). Moreover, poster advertising competition occurs not only over time, but also sometimes within the same space. As illustrated by Figure 2.3, the same wall can display party-specific posters from different *parties* (the Green and the Socialists), as well as posters from different *candidates* (no less than four: three presidential and one legislative).

This massive postering display, in multiple locations and over the entire period of the campaign, ensures that everybody living in the enclosed space of the district is repeatedly exposed to them. However, despite this campaigning effort, people rarely stop and stare at them; rather, people’s repeated exposure to posters occurs while they go about their daily business.

Given (1) the cluttered character of poster display, (2) the fierce competition over space (3) their simple content, (4) the inadvertent and (5) repeated exposure of voters to them, identifying posters’ campaigning merits might seem problematic at first. To be able to disentangle their potential campaign contributions in the absence of any prior examination of their effects in laboratory or in real life, we are therefore constrained to make two assumptions. The first is that elites know what they are doing. In other words,
Figure 2.3. Postering Spatial Competition in the 2007 French Electoral Campaign (Paris, March 3, 2007).
political actors have a highly developed practical sense of the communication power of posters, which allows them to deploy them rationally. This is highly plausible: Maddison & Scalmer (2006) show that socialization makes activists in social movements highly knowledgeable about the practical aspects of campaign organization, despite their lack of formal training. The second assumption is that, despite the fact that poster communication occurs in a community space, we can inform our understanding of its purposes and effectiveness by drawing on research on repeated print advertising in consumer settings.

2.2.1. Improving Voter Evaluations through Familiarity Inducement: The Conventional Wisdom about Advertising Effectiveness

The finding that repeated exposure to the same advertisement improves product evaluations has been confirmed time and again in consumer research. Consumer studies have shown, however, that (1) the novelty of the sponsor/product, (2) the number of repetitions, and (3) the spacing-out of advertisements in the context of the same advertising campaign can play an important role in influencing people’s reactions to the product advertised. The question of whether election posters are intended to improve the evaluation of the “actor-product” they portray might fruitfully be examined in light of this evidence.

Inadvertent repeated exposure to a stimulus (e.g. an image, a sign, a product etc.) has been found to generate increased liking of that stimulus, by inducing a feeling of familiarity with it (e.g. Zajonc, 1968, 2001; Bornstein, 1989). These “mere exposure”
effects are robust, and most importantly for poster campaigns, assume that people do not engage in any conscious effort to decode and evaluate the stimulus. From this point of view, exposure to campaign posters fits this pattern of inadvertent exposure quite well, since many people come in contact with them while their attention is focused elsewhere (driving, walking etc.). Moreover, elites are quite aware that people process posters peripherally. In the words of a major party federation official in Belgium, “people see posters when they are in the car, when they take a stroll, but they don’t have time to stop and read them”. Another French official argued that, in his opinion “often, many people don’t notice them”, despite the fact that one of the most important rule of postering is to display it where “there is maximal visibility” (major party French activist).

Familiarity with candidates has been repeatedly recognized as a pre-condition for political success. According to Bartels (1988, p. 57), “in electoral politics, mere public familiarity, although far from sufficient to ensure a candidate’s success does appear necessary. Voters do not cast their ballots for candidates they do not feel they know, at least superficially.” Bartels (1988) goes on noting that the most common measure for familiarity is “name recognition”, but that familiarity also extends sometime beyond the simple name, to the ability to place candidates on an ideological scale. Reviewing the effects that campaigns have on political learning, Iyengar & Simon (2000, p. 154) note “typically to be known is to be liked and campaigns generate large quantities on “knowns” on subjects as diverse as family background and policy proposals”. While posters might be expected to fare poorly in conveying a candidate’s and/or a party’s policy proposals, the simple mechanism of mere exposure might inadvertently familiarize
voters with more simple information, e.g. the name of a candidate, her party affiliation, her general political identity (through her slogan).

The strength of these “mere exposure” effects is, however, strongly correlated with the novelty of the stimuli (Winkielman, Schwarz, Reber & Fazendeiro, 2003, p. 85), raising doubts on the extent to which already well known actors can expect to derive additional informational benefits from covering the streets with posters. But, the author’s day-to-day observation of poster campaign communications in the field suggests that, if anything, well established candidates use postering even more heavily than lesser known ones. Of the twelve candidates in the first round of the 2007 French presidential election, for example, only the top three contenders displayed posters in the extremely busy traffic circle pictured in Figure 2.1. In fact, daily observation of this traffic circle and other three different locations in Paris, in the three weeks before election day, revealed 120 poster displays from the top three candidates as opposed to 77 of them from all other nine candidates.6

It is therefore unlikely for experienced and well known candidates such as Nicolas Sarkozy, Ségolène Royal and François Bayrou to bank on mere exposure effects from their poster display, at a time when the French airwaves were alive with their presence. Could these actors still be using posters to improve voter evaluations of them? According to print advertising research, repeated exposure to an ad can still lead to increased

6 The counts were conducted based on daily pictures taken from April 1st to April 22nd 2007, in the same four locations. “Poster display” means that one or more posters from that candidate were visible in any one day, in one location; thus, if the same candidate posters remained in place for three days in one locations, this was counted as three “poster displays” from that candidate. Pictures are available from author.
evaluations of a product even when the source of the ad is a familiar one. There is, however, a catch: these effects usually tend to follow an inverted U shaped curve – while moderate levels of repetition may lead to increased product liking, consumers become bored at higher repetitions levels. According to the “two-factor” cognitive processing model (Janiszewski & Meyvis, 2001, p. 21, Anand & Sternthal, 1990, p. 346; Berlyne, 1970), consumers first see advertising repetition as an opportunity for learning, but at some exposure level (usually 3 to 5 exposures in laboratory studies), satiation intervenes, resulting in lower product evaluations.

If political actors were to use poster campaigns to improve voter evaluations of them through a mechanism of information learning, then the top three presidential candidates, who ran the heaviest poster campaigns, would actually be inviting lower ratings! This is unlikely to result from miscalculation by candidates: for one, the gap that separates the 3 to 5 ideal number of exposures in experimental studies and the observed 120 poster occurrences is extremely high. More importantly however, field interviews with party elites in France and Belgium indicate that actors produce considerably more than 100 posters (using an identical design) per campaign: One runner up legislative candidate in the Parisian suburbs estimated his number of posters at roughly 4000; one head of list in a francophone Belgian constituency estimated his number of posters at 20000.

Moreover, while voters risk being exposed hundreds of times to identical candidate posters, there is also the issue of postering. Actors rarely display just one poster in any location, instead, there are masses of them, identical ones, clustered together. The
advertising literature is replete with experimental studies showing that massed repeated exposure to the same advertisement in time (i.e. with exposures following shortly one after the other), decreases the effectiveness of an advertisement, as compared to when exposure to them is spaced out in time (see Janiszewski, Noel, & Sawyer, 2003 for a meta-analysis). While no study has examined the impact of postering, given the rich experimental evidence for an advertising spacing effect, it would seem reasonable for political actors to avoid poster clustering. Yet, as Figures 1.1, 2.1., 2.2 and 2.3. illustrate, they do precisely the contrary.

While awareness of less established political actors might benefit from repeated voter exposure to posters through a mechanism of “mere exposure”, for well established candidates and parties this story does not hold. In fact, for these actors, poster communication breaks so many of the taboos of an effective consumer advertising campaign, that using posters to increase one’s approval rating through some kind of learning mechanism is tantamount to actively undermine one’s own bid. In fact, the possibility that poster campaigns do little to increase voters’ positive evaluations of established actors mirrors the textbook view on outdoor advertising: Powell & Cowart (2003, p. 121) argue that

“in more visible campaigns (congressional, senatorial, gubernatorial, presidential), outdoor advertising has minimal utility. They are particularly useless in run-off elections [in which] both candidates have already achieved a sufficient level of name recognition.” (emphasis added).

Still, the fact remains that, in many contexts, well established actors are the ones
doing most of the postering: consider the top three French Presidential contenders, and the fact that for the German governing party CDU, poster expenditures consumed the largest part of its campaign advertising budget in 2005. If it’s not voter learning that they’re after, what then motivates parties and candidates to defy laws regulating postering (as in Figures 1.1, 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3), and to risk a potential voter backlash due to too much advertising?

2.2.2. Signaling Electoral Competitiveness through the Control of the Electoral Space

While no study has examined poster campaigns to date, there is evidence from local campaign studies that candidates do strike a responsive chord in voters when they put up a sustained spatial display of outdoor campaign communications. As previously noted, Huckfeldt & Sprague (1992; 1995) examined the impact of outdoor campaign signs on perceptions of the candidates’ vote prospects in the 1984 US presidential election. They found that, all else equal, the display of candidate yard signs and bumper stickers significantly influenced people’s expectations of who would win the election in their neighborhood: the candidate with more yard signs in the neighborhood was expected to pick up a larger share of the vote than the one with fewer of them (1995, p. 252-3). While this assumption of candidate strength does not equate to a vote for the more visually present candidate in the neighborhood, it certainly lays the foundations for a bandwagon effect.

Moreover, there is evidence to argue that the importance of a political actor’s
visual control over the physical space of the campaign extends beyond yard signs. Consider the following report about the organization and conduct of the Jefferson-Jackson fundraising Democratic dinner in Des Moines, for the 2008 US presidential campaign (The New York Times, November 11, 2007):\(^7\)

**"NEW YORK TIMES SPEAKER:"** Each of the six campaigns has its own goals for this event. Here’s one example: Hillary Clinton’s campaign. [Camera focuses on Hillary Clinton signs]

**TOM VILSACK** *(former Iowa governor, and national co-chair of the Clinton campaign):* This campaign is focused on using this as a teaching opportunity and an organizing opportunity. So it’s really about keeping the eye on the ball. And that’s what we’re about today. You are going to see some interesting and thoughtful approaches, and *strategic approaches as to where signs are, and how many signs there are, and, you know, how big they are, to make a statement.*

[Camera shows a Hillary Clinton campaign staff meeting:]

**TERRY MCAULIFFE** *(National chairman of Hillary Clinton’s campaign):* [speaking to the campaign staff] I tell you what, I don’t want to leave here and not see Hillary signs every *three* feet. If people will stack, tackle them, put them down, I want to see Hillary everywhere.

**TOM VILSACK:** It’s not so much about… persuading undecided people as it is about making sure that your organization is in place to be able to deliver people

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\(^7\) The full video is available at [http://video.on.nytimes.com/?fr_story=1f5f51e5c86c3947778eaece3be5149bdff56062](http://video.on.nytimes.com/?fr_story=1f5f51e5c86c3947778eaece3be5149bdff56062). I am grateful to Tom Nelson for having pointed it to me.
on January 3rd.

NEW YORK TIMES SPEAKER: There are lots of opportunities for campaigns
to test their organizing skills. […]These signs wars are the central front, more so
than the candidate speeches, where the campaigns are competing this week-end.

[Final report image shows all the walls in the halls leading to the dinner hall full
of candidate signs.]” (emphases added)

Research evidence and testimonies from US campaigns managers help, therefore,
substantiate the assumption that working to have a durable visual spatial presence in the
campaign might not be meant to activate a learning mechanism. Rather, its purpose is to
show one’s ability to “deliver” on election day. Moreover, using visuals to show one’s
strength is not of concern only for Hillary Clinton’s campaign managers. Conveying a
massive presence in a community’s space through visual means is also one of the
techniques employed by social movements to reach out to potential supporters. Chong
(1993, p. 137) argues that leaders consistently report higher participation figures in mass
demonstrations, as a way of signaling the movement’s strength. In this case, leaders
courage people to apply a “social proof” heuristic (Cialdini, 1985), i.e. assume that the
more people there are out there, the stronger the movement is. Chong further argues that
this “projecting strength” strategy is more important, the more the movement operates
under imperfect information conditions, in which case people might be moved to join if
exposed to credible signals of its strength and power.

Finally, the realm of print consumer advertising offers significant evidence that
advertisement repetition can lead consumers to attribute higher quality to a product
(Moorthy & Hawkins, 2005; see Kirmani & Rao, 2000 and Riley, 2001 for reviews).
Research studies have also shown that quality attributed to a product seems to be dependent on consumers’ *direct visual repeated exposure* to the advertisement itself: evaluations were consistently higher when consumers were repeatedly exposed to the ad, than when they were simply informed of the high advertising expenditures incurred for the campaign (Moorthy & Hawkins, 2005). In the absence of more extensive information (e.g. as derived from trying the product out), repeated “seeing” could therefore lead to “believing” that a product (or a political actor, for that matter) is of high quality. At the same time, Moorthy & Hawkins (2005, p. 358) also note that people’s appreciation of the advertisement itself may also play a moderating role in signaling product quality: conditional on repeated exposure to the ad, the more appreciated the advertisement was, the higher consumers evaluated the quality of the product. This suggests that if political actors use the visual presence of posters to signal their competitiveness, the content of posters would also be designed to convey an actor’s high governing potential.

In short, this discussion provides us with a strong basis to formulate a set of general expectations with regard to the communication purposes of poster campaigns at election time.

### 2.3. Why *Do* Political Actors Run Poster Campaigns? General Expectations

Contrary to the conventional understanding of contemporary posters as a “pre-modern” electioneering technique (Norris, 2000) – we see that not only *do* major parties and candidates continue to use posters liberally, but that they *do not* appear to do so with a view to increasing public’s awareness of their campaign. Instead, given the significant
Evidence suggesting a “the more advertisements, the higher the [candidate/ movement/product] quality” heuristic in electoral, advertising and social movements research, there is sufficient ground to posit a first general hypothesis:

*Poster-as-signaling hypothesis.* Political actors use posters’ visibility and durable spatial embeddedness in the local community to convey credible signals of electoral competitiveness to both opponents and supporters in the race.

In essence, the “posters-as-signaling” hypothesis argues that political actors use poster campaigns to convey a credible message of “We fight to win!” to all other actors involved in the election.

If the “posters-as-signaling” hypothesis is indeed a more accurate interpretation of the campaign reality than the “pre-modern electioneering” explanation, then several consequences ensue. **First,** with regard to postering, elites should attach higher importance to its signaling function than to any other role it may fulfill. This expectation is examined through open ended interviews (Chapters 4) and surveys (Chapter 5). **Second,** if political actors regard postering as a credible signal of electoral competitiveness, then strategic postering should be of particular concern for those with a reasonable chance of winning the election. Actors with higher winning potential should, consequently, attach more importance to posters’ signaling role than those with lower winning potential (Chapter 5). **Third,** if postering is a credible signal of competitiveness, decision making on postering volumes should occur in interaction with other actors’ postering, and should vary in accordance with an actor’s expectations of winning the election (Chapter 6). Two further expectations relate specifically to poster content.
Fourth, if poster campaigns do have a signaling function, elites should express particular concern for the way poster content conveys a candidate’s high governing quality. This expectation is examined in Chapter 3. More important however, is the fifth one. To the extent that candidates have power over their own poster design, we would expect major candidates to give higher priority in their posters to the display of nonverbal visual cues signaling their high governing potential than their minor opponents (Chapter 7).

On the other hand, there is reason to expect that posters might indeed play an information function in line with that inherent in the Americanization of campaigns thesis. Given caps on spending in many countries, restricted access to television, and given that “voters are loathe to support unknown candidates” (Iyengar & Simon, 2000, p. 154), some political actors might use posters simply to generate familiarity with important information concerning their election bid. Whereas posters’ content is expected to be relatively miserly in information (e.g. Ogilvy, 1983, see Chapter 1), voters’ expected inadvertent repeated exposure to posters and the evidence in favor of “mere exposure” effects enable us to formulate a second hypothesis:

Posters-as-information hypothesis. Political actors use poster campaigns to increase voters’ familiarity with crucial identifying information about their election bid: candidate name, party affiliation and ideological orientation.

If the “posters-as-information” hypothesis comes closer to reality than the “signaling” one, then several testable consequences ensue. First, elites should give higher importance to posters’ role in generating awareness of a candidate (i.e. increasing her name recognition, and/or awareness of her party affiliation, and/or her ideological
orientation) than to other roles they may fulfill (Chapters 4 and 5). **Second,** their more limited access to other vehicles of communication, should lead minor actors to assign greater importance to posters’ informational function than major actors do (Chapter 5). Moreover, **third,** if candidates are intent on using posters to inform the public, then *all* candidates, irrespective of their winning potential should display as much information as possible in their posters, at the expense of other nonverbal cues. On the other hand, assuming that the signaling and the information hypotheses are not mutually exclusive, a **fourth** expectation could be formulated with regard to poster content: If political actors use posters rationally, then, *to the extent that they have control over their poster design,* minor party candidates should prioritize the provision of ballot-related information over the use of visual competitiveness cues in their posters (Chapter 7).

Before we move on to the description of the case studies where these expectations are tested, it should be noted that the two general hypotheses are largely complementary. In essence, by pitting one against the other, we are in a better position to identify a **primary** role of poster campaigns. But most of their empirical consequences speak to the rationales that separate categories of actors should have for running poster campaigns: the “signaling” hypothesis speaks to the rationales of major parties and candidates, and the “information” one speaks to those of minor political actors. This synergy allows us not only to explain a larger chunk of the reality of poster campaigns as we observe it day in day out in election campaigns, but also to better comprehend the strategic underpinnings of the use of this form of communication.
2.4. **The Benefits of a Comparative Study of Poster Campaigns in France and Francophone Belgium**

As local communication vehicles par excellence, local factors are the primary culprits that we would expect to affect poster campaigns rationales. Specifically, they should be influenced by a political actor’s winning potential in the district, and the level of uncertainty about the district election outcome. On the other hand, they might also be expected to be shaped by the electoral system, and by the overall access that competitors have to other communication channels. From this point of view, the choice of France and francophone Belgium offers the needed variation both in electoral incentives and in the regulation of campaign communications.

To start with the general incentives that the rules of the electoral competition offer political actors, France has a single member, two round majority electoral system, while Belgium has a proportional open list system. The French system promotes both inter- and intra- bloc competition between candidates in the first round, and inter bloc (right-left) competition in the second round. To win an election in the first round, a candidate must receive a majority (50%+1) of the valid votes cast. If no majority emerges in the first round, only candidates who won the support of at least 12.5% of all registered voters in the district can proceed to the second round a week later. In practice, only two candidates generally proceed to the second round.\(^8\) Belgium uses an open list proportional system,

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\(^8\) The most recent estimates of triangular contests (i.e. districts where more than two candidates qualified for the second round) put them at an estimated 3% of the 577 French constituencies in the 1993 legislative elections (Farrell, 2001, p.52).
with the d’Hondt formula for seat allocation. Voters can either choose an entire list by checking a box at the top of the list, or choose a candidate on that list (in which case, the vote also counts as a vote for the party). This leads to both inter-party competition, as well as intra-list competition, since the number of “individual” votes obtained by a candidate on that list can affect her chances of getting a party seat. Moreover, while voting is compulsory in Belgium, there is no such obligation for French voters. These electoral system differences give rise to a number of differences in the poster campaigning incentives for political actors in the two contexts, particularly with regard to the content of posters (Chapter 3) and the function of postering (Chapter 4), as well as in the way political actors target different voter groups (Chapter 5).

Second, the laws governing electoral campaigns in Belgium give parties and candidates more freedom than in France when it comes to advertising. Specifically, they are allowed to run advertising campaigns in the print media, while French political actors are not. Moreover, France has strict rules to ensure balanced coverage of the campaign in the media. Imbalance (as determined by an Audiovisual Council) can lead to a new election being called. The Francophone Belgian media also strive to abide by a fairness principle in their coverage of the campaign, but this principle is not enforced by law. Finally, while both countries prohibit postering in public places outside a number of special reserved billboards, Belgian parties and candidates are allowed to display posters on private grounds as well, similar to yard signs. This option is again, not available to the French political actors. While the French-francophone Belgium comparison does not
encompass the full range of variation in political advertising opportunities,\textsuperscript{9} it nevertheless provides enough of it for an initial cross-national test of the two main hypotheses.

It should also be noted that this is not a fully symmetrical comparison, because of the unavailability of campaign expenditure data in Belgium. France has a ten year moratorium on the publication of campaign expenses, which explains why Chapter 5 looks at French spending data for the 1997 election. Also, as discussed in Chapter 3, Belgian candidates enjoy very little freedom in designing their own posters, which means that Chapter 7 will, again, focus on France. On a final note, this study focuses on the 2007 elections to the national legislature in both countries.

2.5. Conclusions

The goal of this chapter has been to expand the theoretical foundations for the study of poster campaigns, by identifying their contributions to an actor’s campaign effort and their distinctive communication characteristics. A review of the campaign communication and consumer advertising research has led to the formulation of two general hypotheses as to “why political actors run poster campaigns”. The primary “posters-as-signaling” hypothesis is that parties and candidates use poster campaigns to signal their electoral competitiveness to voters, supporters and opponents at the local

\textsuperscript{9} It should be noted that the two cases also share a number of characteristics: while the Belgian law is more permissive with regard to advertising, both countries have strict limits on campaign expenditures. Moreover, as in most European countries (Holtz-Bacha & Kaid, 2006), paid political advertising on TV is prohibited in both France and Belgium, and parties receive free advertising time on public channels.
level. The second, “posters-as-information” hypothesis posits that posters serve an information purpose, to raise the public’s recognition of the most important elements that people will see on the ballot: a candidate’s name, her party and or her ideological orientation.

The next two chapters consider these two hypotheses in isolation, and provide a first general test of them by means of in-depth interviews with party officials in France and francophone Belgium. Chapter 3 examines the purposes that party campaign officials assign to poster content in open-ended interviews while Chapter 4 examines the rationales the same elites offer for postering.

Yet the two hypotheses are not necessarily mutually exclusive. A more fine-grained testing of them is reserved for Chapters 5, 6 and 7, which examine the variation in poster campaign rationales due to an actor’s winning potential (and thus, the strategic aspect of poster choices).
Chapter 3: What’s in a Poster and Why Does It Matter? A Political Actors’ Perspective

Previous chapters have argued that, due to their spatial character, political poster campaigns have an intrinsic duality, which means that a rounded understanding of their goals and effects must address simultaneously both the content of a poster, and the larger phenomenon of postering. By combining different streams of literature, Chapter 2 has also proposed two general hypotheses regarding the purposes to which political actors put them during campaigns. On the one hand, the “posters-as-signaling” hypothesis maintains that parties and candidates use posters to signal their electoral competitiveness. On the other hand, the “posters-as-information” hypothesis argues that the primary purpose of posters is to increase voters’ recognition of a candidate’s name, political affiliation and ideological identity.

Together with Chapter 4, this chapter substantiates the poster-postering theoretical distinction introduced in Chapter 1, and provides a first assessment of the two hypotheses through in-depth interviews with 22 candidates and party officials with firsthand experience of poster campaigns in France (N=11) and Belgium (N=11).

I begin with a description of the elite selection process and of the open-ended interview protocol. The next section addresses the distinction between poster content and
postering in both France and Belgium. The rest of this chapter focuses on the “what” and “why” of poster content decision making in both contexts. Conclusions follow, outlining the support gathered for each hypothesis, paving the way for a more extensive examination of poster content differences as a function of actors’ winning potential in Chapter 7.

3.1. The elite interviews study design

The selection of French political elites began at the beginning of January 2007, at a time when French parties were getting ready for the presidential and legislative showdown that ended on May 6, and June 17 respectively. Given the busy political period, the actual elite interviews took place over a few months, from February to July 2007. Belgian interviews were conducted in the aftermath of their parliamentary campaign, in June and July 2007.

Absent any prior investigation into the rationale for poster campaigns, this study’s objective (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002) presented itself quite readily: acquiring an understanding of the design and purposes of poster content and of the conduct of poster campaigns in the streets from party officers with firsthand experience of them. In light of the expectation that political actors of various winning potentials might place a different emphasis on the signaling vs. information roles of posters, a special effort was made to obtain information from actors involved in parties with different governing statuses.

3.1.1. Elite sample selection

The pool of French respondents included officials, activists and candidates from
six political parties: three major ones (Socialist Party (PS), Union for a Popular Majority (UMP) and Union for French Democracy/Democratic Movement (UDF/Modem)) and three minor parties (Greens (Les Verts), French Communist Party (PCF), and Communist Revolutionary League (LCR)). The Belgian sample included party officials and candidates from the four francophone parties represented in the Lower Chamber, two major ones (center-right Reformist Movement (MR), center-left Socialist Party (PS)), and two minor ones (centrist Democratic Humanist Center (cdH) and the Greens (Ecolo)).

A second factor influenced the interviewee selection: the hierarchical organization of parties in both contexts. In effect, French and Belgian parties receive generous state subsidies for their campaigns (Nassmacher, 2003), which they channel through a well organized party structure going from the national to the local level. In between the national and the local level, there is the federal level which, at campaign time, is in charge of the party campaign over several adjacent districts. At the local level, candidates run their own campaigns, overlapping with their party’s campaign effort. In France, each candidate receives state subsidies for their own campaign (under the form of campaign reimbursements) if they obtain 5% or more of the valid vote cast in the first round of elections. In Belgium, candidates receive a fixed amount of money from the party prior to the start of the campaign. In short, experience with poster campaigns was expected to vary as a function of the party level that the respondent was involved in, with party federation officials more able to give an overall account of the state of poster campaigns in several districts, and local activists more able to account for the rationale behind poster campaigns on the streets under their own “jurisdiction”. Similarly, candidates and their advisers would be most able to provide details of the rationale
behind poster content, since they are the ones in charge of it.

To gain a rounded perspective on poster campaign decision making, interviewee selection was therefore fueled by the need to obtain insights from elites with a large diversity of positions in the poster campaigns process. The French pool included four party officials involved at the federation level (three from a major party), three local legislative candidates (two from a major party), two campaign advisors to a local candidate (one from a major party), one party activist and one local party official (both from different major parties). In Belgium, three respondents were involved at the federation level (two of them from a major party), four legislative candidates had been heads of list (one from a major party), two other candidates had been in electable positions on their party’s list (one from a major party), one was campaign advisor to a major party head of list, and one had run in a non electable position on a major party list.

Finally, given poster campaigns’ local nature, the study aimed to achieve an as wide a territorial representation as possible. As a result, the 11 elites interviewed in the French case were active in 10 districts, and the Belgian elites were active in three out of six districts in the Belgian francophone community.

Absent any public list of party officials with decision making power on poster campaigns, it was impossible to estimate the targeted elite population and to create an unbiased sampling frame (Goldstein, 2002). Consequently, rather than producing a representative sample, the design of this study aimed to maximize the diversity of perspectives that each respondent brought to the decision making process and the goals of poster campaigns. While this sample of elites does not certainly facilitate a full assessment of the impact that an actor’s winning potential has on poster content (and
postering for that matter, in Chapter 4), it nevertheless plays a key role in the study as a whole. Not only can this wide array of perspectives be used to provide a first test of the study’s analytical and theoretical premises, but it also outlines the direction of further hypothesis testing. As such, elites’ insights were enormously consequential for the design of the web survey of party officials (see Chapter 5), the structure of the game theoretical model in Chapter 6 and the poster content variable construction in Chapter 7.

3.1.2. Individual Elite Recruitment and General Structure of the Interviews

The actual recruitment of elites extended over a period of six months in the case of French elites, and employed a variety of approaches: e-mail, in person and by phone. Most respondents were first contacted by e-mail, using the contact information on their public website. Some ended up being interviewed after the researcher visited the local or federal headquarters of the party organization (with the interview scheduled on a subsequent day). Two respondents were recruited by phone, upon recommendation from another respondent. When the first contact took place by e-mail, the recruitment message contained a summary of the research project and the recommendation from my PhD advisor on departmental letterhead. In case of in-person recruitment, respondents would receive a hard copy of the same recommendation.

In contrast to the lengthy French recruitment process, all Belgian elites were recruited by e-mail over two weeks. In both countries, interviews of less than one hour took place at respondents’ main work place, namely their party’s local or federal
headquarters. The broad focus of this research required that interviews be open ended, semi-structured conversations. The interviewer would begin by giving both French and Belgian respondents a sense of the general direction of the interview and of its three areas of focus: (1) poster design; (2) organization of poster campaigns in the constituency and (3) the importance of this communication medium for their general campaign. Within these overarching themes, follow-up questions sought to determine: (a) who the decision-makers on poster content are and their reasons for the choice of visuals and slogan; (b) the motivations behind the choice of posting places and general poster advertising volume; and (c) the intended target population of poster campaigns, as well as the roles that parties assigned to posters. This interview structure aimed to produce the optimal environment for elites to voice whatever aspects they regarded as important with regard to poster content and poster advertising, while the emphasis on the three overarching themes helped to prevent excessive digressions from the topic at hand.

The greatest challenge of the interviews was to ensure that party officials overcome their natural reluctance to discuss the illegal aspects of their poster practices during campaigns (i.e. l'affichage sauvage, fly posting), particularly in France where

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1 Two Belgian candidates were interviewed at the Federal Lower Chamber in Brussels.
2 A copy of the open-ended questionnaire is available from the author.
3 For example, the interview would generally start with “Going back to the beginning of the last campaign, how did you/your party design your/its poster campaign?”, which would allow respondents to emphasize who they thought were the most relevant decision-makers, as well as what they considered to be the most important features of the process. As they were recounting this aspect of poster campaigns, follow-up questions would inquire about the criteria for the choice of visuals and slogan, etc. Similarly, a general question “How is the campaign organized in the field?” would allow the interviewee to stress what they believed to be the main organizational aspects, and opened the way for critical follow-up questions regarding the importance of territorial patterns of poster advertising, the number of posters printed, etc. Finally, the issue of the target of this type of campaigns and their importance would often emerge as follow-ups from the details elite provided regarding their design and their spatial distribution in the district.
street postering is completely prohibited. This reluctance threatened particularly the validity of responses related to postering, and the mechanisms employed to overcome this problem are discussed more broadly in the Chapter 4.

This initial reluctance however did not prevent them from treating poster content and postering as two separate aspects of the larger phenomenon of poster campaigns. Nor did it impede on their openness to explain the goals and reasons for their poster content. It is to these issues that this chapter now turns.

3.2. Elite Validation of the Analytical Distinction between Poster Content and Postering

Does postering deserve its own theoretical focus, or are poster campaigns just a matter of poster content? To avoid leading respondents, this question was never directly asked in the interviews. The validity of this analytical distinction must therefore be judged from elites’ latent comments (i.e., not explicitly called by the questions themselves, Aberbach & Rockman, 2002).

Asked about the importance of poster campaigns, one French major party local activist argued: “Posters are important to let people know who the candidate is… and seeing a lot of posters of her makes people think that she is somebody important”. Similarly, another major party candidate’s campaign advisor argued that posters help reach undecided people “because they see posters everywhere, they see us doing postering, they see that we are campaigning strongly, so I think this at least makes them curious about who our candidate is, and maybe even vote for us.” Another advisor to a minor party candidate with strong winning potential argued that to boost voters’
awareness of his charge “people needed to see the candidate’s face,” adding immediately that, to fulfill this goal, the campaign produced “a maximum number of posters, so he could be everywhere in the district” (my emphases). All these latent comments operate therefore a spontaneous and clear distinction between posters’ individual content on the one hand, and the effects of sheer numbers of posters in the streets on the other, suggesting that the separation of these two variables is indeed part of the reality of poster campaigns.

The same spontaneous distinction is apparent in Belgian interviews. Out of the 11 interviewees, 8 defended the importance of having a uniform poster design across all candidates from the same party, because of the visual effect produced by their clustering: “whether you go to Brussels, Charleroi or elsewhere, you know, “this is “[my party]”, because all the candidate posters look the same” (major party elected candidate). Or, in the words of a minor party federation official: “you go to a city and you only see red posters everywhere, blue posters everywhere, and you don’t see posters in [our color], then people will say, “[the party] is not around!”’. Put it differently in Belgium, “poster campaigns are very much about the war of colors, it [is a way of showing] that a party is strong” (major party federation). If people “see [our party’s] color, [this shows that] the party is everywhere”’ (minor party head of list).

The importance of poster clustering for the overall impact of the campaign, from an elite point of view is apparent from other statements as well. One Belgian minor party head of list argued: “One [candidate] poster serves no purpose, but seeing the same poster 100, 200 times, over two weeks, that is good. So it’s important that [people see them] repeatedly. One must have a lot of posters and be present in the territory for [poster
campaigns] to give results. One must be very present.”

These spontaneous statements – and the fact that, but for two French interviews, all respondents addressed naturally both the mechanics and importance of poster content (affiches) and postering (affichage) in their answers – confirm that, far from being a theoretical artifact, the distinction of between the content of individual posters and their spatial clustering mirrors actors’ perception of poster campaigns. In other words, although longtime overlooked, the horizontal dimension of Table 1.1 is of key importance for any understanding of the rationales behind this type of campaigns.

With the duality of poster campaigns now more clearly established, I proceed to an examination of elites’ rationales for poster content, with the aim of providing an initial evaluation of the “posters-as-information” and “posters-as-signaling” hypotheses.

3.3. **What’s in a Poster and Why Is It Important? Elites Respond**

As we would expect, party officials and consumer advertising professionals converge on the fact that the content of posters “should be sober and simple, the slogan needs to be short, one must understand right away who it comes from” (French major party local activist). Similar views are espoused by Belgian elites, for whom “a poster must be understood on the spot, it’s not a text one reads, rather one must be able to recognize right away “this is [the party]”” (head of list).

Beyond simplicity however, an important question about poster content is the relative importance of each of the elements that parties and candidates choose to include
in them. To discern the informational and/or signaling roles in poster content, the interviewer asked both French and Belgian respondents two questions. The first one was simply “How do you make decisions about your poster content?” As a rule, follow-up questions solicited more information about the poster content items mentioned in the respondent’s answer. The second question invited elites to elaborate on “in your opinion, what are the most important [things] candidates try to convey thorough their poster content?” Elites’ insights touch both on the relative importance of factual information (candidate name, party affiliation, slogan, list number and position on that list) as well as on the importance of non-verbal aspects of poster content (e.g. face, background color) – enabling a first evaluation of the two hypotheses of this study.

3.3.1. France

**Indentifying Information: Candidate Name, Party Affiliation, Slogan**

The importance of a **candidate’s name** has been the major focus in many outdoor campaign studies (e.g. Powell & Cowart 2003, p. 121). Surprisingly, however, only 5 out of the 11 French party elites mentioned the candidate’s name *at all* in their interviews. Of those who did mention it in relation to poster content, in no interview was the name of the candidate ranked *first* in the list of important elements in a poster; rather, it was her picture. After giving detailed information about the candidate’s poster picture, one interviewee did mention at the end, however, that “posters make the candidate known to voters, her name, her political affiliation” (major party, federation). Asked about the decision making process in terms of poster design, and the place assigned to each poster content element, a minor party advisor to an electable yet new minor candidate argued
that, given people’s low awareness of his boss’s election bid in some constituency areas, they had to “hammer home his name”. This remark came however, only after emphasizing the importance for voters of “seeing the candidate’s face on every wall”. The issue of the candidate’s name came about incidentally in three other interviews: one interviewee mentioned the candidate’s name in the context of the production of “headpieces” that are usually attached to bigger posters, while two others digressed on the issue of whether a presidential candidate should put their name on the poster or not.

Again, quite unexpectedly, the importance of a candidate’s party affiliation in the poster was singled out in just 6 of the 11 French interviews. One major party candidate did explicitly argue that party identification is the second most important piece of information contained in a poster, her picture being the first. This view was echoed by yet another first-time candidate from the same party. However, this second candidate’s party identification efforts manifested themselves primarily through the attachment to the party’s presidential candidate, and only second, to the party itself (as a logo). In three other interviews, the respondents mentioned the importance the party logo in their poster as opposed to its full name, although one interviewee (whose party was undergoing a split) did note that “if a party is well established, then we use the logo, but if it is a new party, then we would use the full name”. One respondent at the federation level argued that “we often provide candidates with posters containing just the party logo, because there’s an activist demand to put them up next to their candidate posters”. The importance of a party affiliation depends, as argued by a major party federation official on “how well the candidate is known”; “if the candidate is already established, then we try to “sell the person”, if it’s a new candidate, then we include the party logo”.
As far as the **slogan** in candidate posters is concerned, one respondent spontaneously dismissed its usefulness, arguing that it destroyed the uniformity of the party’s national campaign. According to this respondent, slogans were held to unnecessarily take away space on the poster (major party federation).

All other respondents addressed the issue of a poster slogan one way or another, however. One minor party federation official recounted the lengthy discussions that led to the adoption of their party campaign slogans for presidential and legislative elections. “We felt we had a lot to say and we wanted people to ask themselves questions, that is why we opted in the end to formulate them as questions.” While formulating slogans as questions was unique to this party in the 2007 elections, the desire to prove oneself to voters as “having ideas” is something that many respondents recognized as important. When discussing his party’s posters (that is, those promoting the party as a whole, with no mention of any candidate), one major party federation respondent justified the inclusion of a slogan as “we have to show people that the party has ideas” (i.e., is ready and able to govern). Another candidate from the same major party running against an entrenched incumbent argued that a slogan needed to reinforce the idea of competence she hoped to transmit through her physical demeanor in her poster picture.

Two other major party candidates on different sides of the political spectrum, fighting against the same entrenched incumbent, talked separately about the inspiration they had drawn from the social realities in their district to fashion their slogan. The first of these candidates pointed out that the choice of words in her slogan drew attention to the fact that she was the first black candidate in a constituency with a significant immigrant population. Her opponent’s advisor mentioned that it was important that the
slogan touch on the difficult social and economic problems that residents faced so that voters could relate to the candidate.

With the exception of two minor party respondents, there seemed to be a consensus that the slogan needs to be short – “four words long” as one respondent put it. Moreover, after discussing several slogans from the presidential campaign, one respondent concluded that “a bad slogan can be very damaging because one can turn it around”, giving the example of Nicolas Sarkozy’s “Together, everything is possible”, next to which left-wing activists had had posted the words “even the worst”. In this sense he argued, “better no slogan at all than a bad slogan”.

Taken together, these insights from French elites do support the idea that one of the functions of posters is to make candidates “known” to voters, by providing basic information about them: name, party affiliation and slogan. This appears to be particularly so for minor party candidates, or for “new” candidates of major parties.

Considering the electoral regulations on ballot content and the voting procedure, it is particularly surprising that neither the name of the candidate, nor her party affiliation was singled out as the most important piece of information that posters are supposed to convey. French candidates print their own paper ballots, which must contain their name (French electoral code, articles R30 and R103), and, only if the candidate chooses so, their party affiliation and/or slogan. Voters cast their vote by selecting the paper ballot with the name of their preferred candidate on it and placing it in the ballot box. While the small number of interviews precludes us from drawing a clear conclusion, the secondary importance assigned to the candidate’s name and to her political affiliation does cast serious doubts on posters’ function as a tool to improve name recognition and provide
basic information. If anything, those running want voters to know that they are more than just a simple name and/or a simple party representative, that they have the right “ideas” to govern. On the other hand, these insights do lend some support to the “posters-as-information” hypothesis, although they imply more sophisticated information than just one’s name recognition: the importance of showing that one “has ideas” was more readily argued by officials of minor parties and by challengers to entrenched incumbents. This suggests that posters might be used to transmit more complex campaign information, a possibility investigated in Chapter 5.

If neither name, nor party affiliation, nor slogan is ranked first in the order of the most important things that a poster must convey, what then, is most important for the elites interviewed?

**Candidate picture**

The candidate’s face was singled out as the first element of concern in posters by 8 of 11 interviewees. Among the three remaining ones, one major party respondent at the federation level mentioned posters’ role of making a candidate “known to voters”, so she “can be recognized in the streets”. One major party local activist talked about posters’ general visual appeal, and only one respondent, from a minor party, completely ignored the visual-only aspects of posters.

Voters’ facial recognition of the candidate emerged as the thing of utmost importance for those without incumbency status (in 9 of 11 interviews) – seven of these candidates were major party challengers, and the eighth candidate was succeeding a minor party incumbent. Simply put by the latter’s campaign advisor, “people are not
going to vote for you if they don’t know who you are”, and that is why “we had to put up his face everywhere”. The importance of giving people a firsthand visual of the candidate, right from the beginning of the campaign is apparent from other interviews as well. As another campaign manager of a major party challenger put it, “[once we selected the candidate] we had to quickly produce a poster of her, so naturally, it had her picture, and a slogan”.

Studies of nonverbal communication have consistently shown that body language can speak volumes (e.g. Manusov & Patterson, 2006), and according to Fridlung & Russell (2006, p.299), “the face [occupies] a central role in our social interactions”. Reviewing the evidence for the communication potential of faces, Fridlung & Russell observe: “Our [facial] expressions participate in and guide our [social] interactions just like our words, our tone of voice and our gestures” (2006, p. 311), concluding that facial expressions are in fact interpreted as credible signals of behavioral intent in social contexts.

If anything, elites’ accounts appear to strongly reflect this conclusion. In fact, the importance of familiarizing voters with the candidate’s physical appearance seems to go beyond simply letting people know of who the candidate is. Rather it is a move towards inviting people to bond with the candidate. In the words of a major party challenger in a district with an entrenched incumbent:

“Posters are very important because they help people know me as a candidate, even more than other campaign materials, such as leaflets (which, in fact, people don’t really read). I was surprised to be approached in the streets, “Ah, you are [Candidate name], of [party]!” by voters who wanted to tell me their concerns
with the way things are going on in the district. You know, every evening I make
door-to-door calls in different neighborhoods, together with other party members,
to introduce myself and my program, and once it happened that even before I
introduced myself, the young kid in the family exclaimed, “Ah, [Candidate name]
is here!”

Rather than imprint a name and a party in voters’ mind, there is therefore good
reason to suspect that political actors use the visual content to make people (even those
who do not vote!) more comfortable in approaching the candidate and confident in her
abilities to deal with their problems. The idea that a candidate’s picture speaks volumes
emerged spontaneously in several interviews. In the words of another major party
candidate running against an entrenched incumbent:

“One must strive for the right picture, one that would convey to viewers both the
type of person that I am, and speak to the type of position that I’m running for.
There are thus, three parameters [to the poster picture], if I can call them so: first,
this is a representative position, at the national level even, therefore my picture
must convey the image of somebody who is competent; on top of that, I also have
to contend with the fact that I am an outsider, challenging a long time incumbent,
so the picture must convey not only that I can be a representative, but that I can be
different from him, and third, I also need to display an image that would show
voters a bit of who I am personally; so it’s complicated.”

The depth of the nonverbal messages that a candidate picture is able to convey is
echoed by the comments of a first-time major party challenger: “I think that posters need
to make people feel better about a candidate; […] people are able to tell just by looking at
a [candidate’s] poster “I don’t like this person, I don’t feel like voting for her””. Finally, another minor party candidate espoused the view that a poor picture can seriously play against a candidate’s bid.

While the face is the central element according to the interviewees, the candidate’s body posture in the picture also receives careful consideration. In the words of the advisor to a well known major party candidate: “our candidate chose on purpose to show more than just a close-up, because her image, with her slightly tilted torso gives the impression of movement [toward voters], and this is exactly what she wanted to say, that she wants to solve voters’ problems, [she wants to] act; whereas all other candidates in her district displayed very static pictures”.

In summary, consistent with the “posters-as-signaling” hypothesis, not only does the picture of the candidate appear to be the central element of a poster, but its purpose seems to go beyond just showing a candidate’s good looks. While voters are undoubtedly expected to get much more information about a candidate from her written campaign materials, elites seem to regard the candidate’s picture as a passport in building the necessary trust voters must have in her governing potential if they are to inform themselves further and eventually vote for her. Moreover, judging by the length and depth of their spontaneous responses with regard to their picture, the importance of the visual message seemed to be more of a concern for major party candidates. These elites insights fuel therefore the question of the use of nonverbal cues in posters by candidates with different winning potentials, an issue addressed at length in Chapter 7 where research on visual design is also brought into play.
3.3.2. Belgium

Unlike French candidates who have full control over the choice of picture and other information on their poster, Belgian candidates have almost no leverage. As one campaign advisor of a major party head of list put it, “the party wanted to create a uniform poster template design for all the heads of list in all the districts, and although we didn’t really agree with their proposed design, we implemented it anyway because there are clear advantages in having a uniform campaign”. Asked about the decision-making process involved in the design of his candidate posters, another interviewee responded:

“The party central office puts together a template for candidate posters (specifying the use of a particular color, the logo and its placement etc.); then at the beginning of the campaign, the central office distributes to each candidate a CD and a brochure detailing what candidates they should do and what to avoid, how they should have their picture taken, where their name and their list number should be on the poster, etc. Then the candidate takes this CD to a photo professional who combines the template with the picture”.

There is therefore little place for individual candidate strategy in poster design. But the questions still remain. (What) Is poster content supposed to convey (in terms of) identifying information? Or are posters intended rather to signal a party’s and/or a candidate’s electoral strength?

**Identifying information: name, party affiliation, slogan**

“The national party prefers to draw voters’ attention to the party first, and to any candidate second” according to a major party head of district list. As such, the importance
of identifying a candidate’s party is key, whether by the number of the list on which they are running (as apparent from two interviews) or, more often, by the color of their posters (more below).

Belgian parties rarely, if ever, display party-only posters (that is, posters where there is no mention of any candidate); rather, parties prefer to provide funding for individual candidates’ poster campaigns, provided that they all use a similar template. If the template is that of a party, what candidate information is particularly important for posters to transmit?

The name of the candidate emerged as an important piece of information in six of the 11 interviews. Interestingly however, despite the wealth of candidates on party lists in each district, this element was rated only as second in importance in five of 6 interviews. The name and the place on the list were the primary concern only for one candidate in a non-electable position on the party list. For the rest of the candidates, whose position was closer to the top, the most important element of the poster was the face (see below).

Contrary to their French counterparts who saw the slogan as an opportunity for showing that one “has ideas”, the benefit of a slogan was directly dismissed by three interviewees, who argued that including a slogan would only blur the message that the poster is supposed to convey, and hurt the candidate’s campaign. Only one head of list cared to add that it is worth putting a slogan only if it is a good one, while the other interviewees failed to raise the issue.

Yet no respondent dismissed the importance of a candidate’s poster content; rather, they focused on the importance of the candidate’s face and of the poster’s background color, as a visual mark of her party affiliation.
Visual Cues: Poster Background and Candidate Face

The importance of a poster having the right color was explained by one interviewee thus: “People associate parties with colors, so the background [of the poster] must inevitably be of that color; because even if the person doesn’t see the candidate name, they immediately know their party because of the color, therefore they think, we see color, we see [this party’s color], therefore [this party] is very present here”. The same respondent recalled one election in which the poster background was not quite the established color of his party, and recalled comments made by voters, “We don’t see your posters, we don’t see your faces… So, where are you in this campaign?” Whereas we were there, we were present in the territory” (minor party head of list). As the discussion of postering in Chapter 4 will reveal further, the key term that party officials employ with regard to the role of posters is “presence”: the physical presence of many candidate posters from a party in the district in closely associated with perceptions of its electoral competitiveness.

Similarly, a major party federation official argued that “the most important thing is that all candidate posters be in [our party’s] color, is that to have that color everywhere. So with posters, we are fighting a war of colors here in Belgium, it’s not a war in terms of ideas”.

Posters’ background is therefore used, on the one hand, to provide a crucial piece of information to voters: a candidate’s party. However, the background does not play a simple information role; in fact, parties seem to bank on the fact that voters are already highly familiar with the party color, so familiar that the association is automatic. Moreover, from the party point of view, associating candidate faces and names with the
party color appears to be of secondary importance, because any vote for a candidate on the list is a vote for the party. What seems to matter, instead, is that people see that the party has candidates everywhere. The purpose of a uniform background color can therefore only be fully realized when there are multiple similar posters clustered together. Rather than being an information element, this makes the color background more of a tool in the party’s effort to signal its electoral competitiveness, since it is it who allows the party to wage its “war” against other lists.

For candidates however, there is second nonverbal element of significant importance: their face. Supporting the idea that actors use posters to signal their good credentials for the job, Belgian elites mirror the French accounts. Ten of 11 argued, under a form or other, that a face can, and should speak volumes to those who are exposed to it:

“The most important part of the poster is the face. One tries every time to look straight at voters, and not tilt one’s face to the left, because that gives the impression that one is more oriented toward the past than toward the future. Then, one must always smile, but the smile must not be exaggerated so as not to lose credibility. Finally, the most important element in a picture is the eyes, [the candidate’s glance] must convey confidence and determination, to make people think “This person is somebody competent, who wants to be there, who is looking at us, and who is listening to us”” (minor party head of list).

Similarly, another candidate explained that the picture can show how close a candidate is to voters: “the more you cut off of the candidate’s head in the picture, the closer physically one appears to be; if one doesn’t cut off at all, then the person in the picture appears to be very far away… To convey the idea of proximity, and to reassure
voters that one wants to be next to them, the poster picture must not display the candidate’s head in its entirety, the more you cut off at the top, the closer that face appears, and the stronger the proximity effect will be”. Moreover, in the picture “one must find the right facial expression to express on the one hand, reliability, and on the other hand, to make people like you as a person.”

The importance of striking the right expression in a picture emerged from yet another interview, as one well known major party candidate was recalling his mistakes in a previous election: “I did a campaign three years ago, where people told me after, “you [seemed] too harsh in the picture. You didn’t win any new votes with that picture.” Because, [if you are trying to win new votes], it’s important on one hand, that people see your poster everywhere, but the picture also matters: “Is the picture good? Is he likable in the picture? Does he inspire confidence? Does he have confidence in himself? Do we want to trust him?”

In short, Belgian elites tell a story about the information-conveying role of posters that is similar to the one told in France: posters do not seem to be there to necessarily imprint a candidate’s name in people’s minds, although this function did seem more important for the only candidate on a non-electable position included in the Belgian sample. As expected, since any vote for a Belgian candidate counts as a vote for the party on behalf of which they are running, posters play an important role in conveying a candidate’s party of affiliation. Yet, this information element hides a clear signaling intent: banking on people’s automatic associations of colors to parties, it is meant as an important element in the show of electoral competitiveness that the party puts at election times.
Mirroring the accounts of French elites, the most important element in Belgian candidate posters seems to be the candidate’s face. The visual features of a candidate are not merely meant to create a certain liking for her, although this is certainly part of the equation. More important, however, seems to be the unspoken message that a candidate’s face and posture is supposed to transmit: that message, just as in the case of French officials, is meant to convey credible signals of candidate governing quality and determination.

Thus, just as in the case of French elites, it appears that poster content is primarily entrusted with a function of signaling of electoral competitiveness and of high candidate credentials. The transmission of ballot-related information, seems, if anything, to take a back seat.

3.4. Signaling and Information in Poster Content: Conclusions from Elite Interviews

In an effort to shed light on the top left cell in the analytical framework laid out in Table 1.1, this chapter has examined importance of written information and visual cues in poster content as they spontaneously emerged from elite interviews. While these interviews do not allow us to draw more definite conclusions as to how the winning potential of an actor influences poster content, or to generalize to the entire population (these issues are dealt with in Chapter 5 and Chapter 7), the insights obtained from the 22 elites reveal considerable more support for the signaling function of posters than for the information one.

First, to be clear, posters do make some things known about a candidate: her
name, party affiliation and ideology (at least in France). And it does appear, as expected, that this information function is more important for challengers running against entrenched incumbents, for candidates of minor parties, or in Belgium, for candidates on non-electable positions. However, in just one interview of the 22 was this identifying information singled out first.

When encouraged to discuss the content of their poster, what comes in most elites’ minds is its visual content, and particularly the face. Elites seem to be aware of the fact that people “are loathe to support unknown candidates” (Iyengar & Simon, 2000, p. 154). Yet face recognition seems to be about more than just showing the candidate around. Rather, the face seems to be taken as the passport of a candidate in gaining voters’ trust. Contrary to the received conventional wisdom in the campaign literature, which places the emphasis on “name recognition”, the importance of this information seems secondary compared to the signals of candidate competence and determination that the poster is supposed to convey through the visuals of the candidate.

As expected, due to the Belgian open list proportional system, which makes that every vote for a candidate is treated as a vote for the party list, Belgian parties are more prone than French ones to impose strict discipline in poster content. Yet if candidate posters undeniably reflect more the party than in the French case (by virtually reproducing the same color), the party cue seems less intended on simply informing, and more on signaling that the party has the strength to put up a good show in the elections.

Before converging toward a more rounded assessment of the information and signaling role of poster campaigns, we must however direct our attention to postering as well. Chapter 4 discusses elites’ insights in this regard.
Chapter 4: Why Do Posterbing? Signaling and Informational Roles from a Political Actors’ Perspective

Previous chapters argued in favor of treating the content of posters and the larger phenomenon of posterbing as two separate distinct variables subsumed in the larger theoretical and empirical study of poster campaigns. This distinction not only follows from the definition of posters put forward in the Chapter 1, but, as evidenced by Chapter 3, reflects the empirical distinction that elites themselves seem to draw with regard to this form of campaign communication.

The important question to be addressed now concerns therefore the top right cell in the analytical framework introduced in Table 1.1: What functions do elites assign to the clustering of posters in the space of the community? Is this an information function, designed to raise awareness to an otherwise little publicized campaign? If so, then inducing familiarity with the candidate’s name and/or the party affiliation should emerge as the primary reason for posterbing. Or is it a signaling function, designed to convey to voters and opponents the strength and determination of a party and/or a candidate’s election campaign? If the latter provides a better explanation of the reasons behind posterbing, then campaign strength and the strategic use of posterbing should be of primary concern, not the familiarity that people get with the actors depicted in the posters.
To provide these questions with a first answer I draw on the interviews with the 22 elites introduced in Chapter 2. I start by discussing the challenges encountered in the data collection process due to the illegality-related concerns brought about by postering practices. Once the validity of the responses and the techniques of increasing it have been addressed, the chapter plunges into the respondents’ insights on the goals of postering, starting with the Belgian elites.

4.1. Poster Campaign Legal Interdictions and Validity Issues in Interviews

The sensitivity of postering campaigns for elites was perhaps the major data collection challenge encountered in this study. This hurdle presented itself particularly in France, where the electoral law imposes strict restrictions on the public display and number of political posters. During the campaign, the law provides special billboards for political posters, in which the space is evenly distributed among all candidates competing in a district. These billboards are located next to each voting location, and each candidate has the right to put only two large posters and two small posters on every billboard in her district (French Electoral Law, Article R26). While there is no doubt to anybody walking or driving around the busy city streets during the campaign that French parties do not abide by this law, nevertheless, the fact remains that all street postering in France is illegal.

These legal restrictions had therefore a significant impact on the interview procedures and on the techniques in place to increase the validity of responses (Berry, 2002). First, they affected the terminology of the questionnaire. While the correct French term for postering, given the legal interdiction, is “affichage sauvage” (“fly posting”,
Collins Dictionary), questions about posterizing were asked simply in terms of “affichage” (a general term which refers to the act and/or result of posting), so as to avoid priming elites on legal issues. Second, where possible, the interviewer would insert follow-up questions based on street observations to persuade the respondent to provide more details (e.g. “I have seen your posters on street X, and I was wondering how you decided on the location…”). Third, to make the respondents more at ease, taping was reduced to a minimum after the first two interviews: this allowed the researcher to gain more insights into the organization of poster campaigns, as elites became less tight lipped. For example, asked about the quantity of posters that they use in the campaign, one official from a major party who refused flat out to be taped declared: “you know, sometimes you can get a receipt [to present to the Official Control of Expenditures Commission] for 5000 posters, but the printing company in fact produced 10,000 of them” (adding also that “we don’t really do this anymore, it is more a thing of the past”). Another official argued that the fines they needed to pay for posterizing were an integral part of the cost of poster campaigns: “it happens frequently that we need to pay fines for illegal posterizing; in fact the party needs to pay another one in a week” (minor party).

Belgians have more freedom when it comes to poster campaigns, as they are allowed to place posters on private properties (similar to yard signs in the US). In the public domain, however, posterizing is restricted only to the billboards put at the disposal of parties by local authorities. The rules allocating this posting space vary: some

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1 In Belgium there is a special interdiction on putting up posters on commercial billboards that have been rented by firms to promote their own commercial advertising campaigns. Moreover, the law forbids the use of political posters bigger than 4 square meters (or the clustering of posters from the same party on a surface bigger than this size).
municipalities don’t impose any; while some other limit the number of billboards available to each party. In practice, however, parties have the tendency to cover all the billboards with their own posters (whether they are allowed to do so or not, as illustrated by Figure 1.1). Moreover, as one respondent admitted, “there is always some “affichage sauvage” in the streets” (minor party). This means that part of the Belgian parties’ public poster campaigns entails also some degree of illegality. To increase the reliability of elites’ comments then, all questions about postering were also formulated as questions about “affichage” (i.e. the act or result or posting). Moreover, to distinguish between the two different types of locations of posters, separate questions inquired about “affichage public” (posting in public places) and “affichage privé” (location of yard signs).

Undoubtedly, as interviews were piling up, the interviewer’s knowledge of the mechanics of postering campaigns also improved. This provided for more efficient techniques to alleviate elites’ concerns about the illegality of postering practices, and obtain more information about their goals. In short then, through careful question framing to ensure the validity of elite responses, and increased knowledge of the campaigns, the interviews steered reluctant respondents from legality concerns, to produce a rich and complex account of these campaigns.

To avoid leading respondents one way or another, the interviewer abstained from asking any direct question on the informational and the signaling role of posters. Instead, the decision was made to ask respondents in both France and Belgium two general questions only, and give them full freedom to emphasize whatever aspects they considered most important about postering. The first question asked respondents if they could elaborate more on “the organization of poster campaigns in the field”. The second
general question asked respondents to simply talk about the “importance of poster campaigns”, which, as has already been mentioned in Chapter 2 resulted in a spontaneous distinction between the content of posters and the postering phenomenon more generally.

This chapter proceeds now to an analysis of elites insights on postering, as reflected in their responses to the above two questions. The relative liberty Belgian elites enjoy with regard to postering made them significantly less reluctant to talk about it on tape. The decision to start by the Belgian account instead of the French one is therefore motivated by the fuller word-by-word quotations that these interviews offer. Other than their obvious importance for getting a first impression of the goals of postering in Belgium, these quotations also serve to introduce, in the words of elites themselves, some common postering-related themes emerging in both contexts, in particular the idea of “presence”.

4.2. Why Do Postering? A Belgian Elites’ Account

The purposes of postering emerged spontaneously in response to the two open-ended questions outlined above. These question not only gave elites the opportunity to address the different ways in which they considered postering helped their campaign, but it also allowed them to make fine distinctions between the importance of postering for candidates, as opposed to the importance of this medium for the party as a whole. Many also touched on the differing degrees of importance for more well known as opposed to newer candidates.

Since there are no manifest replies defending either the informational or the signaling role of postering – because no direct question on these purposes was asked, this
section of the chapter will address first the *latent* comments (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002) that seem to fall in the informational role, and then continue with the latent comments relevant to the signaling hypothesis.

### 4.2.1. Posters as Information: Repetition Effects

A minority of those interviewed (five out of eleven) emphasized the *repetition effects* that they hoped to capitalize on with postering, which is consistent with the “posters-as-information” hypothesis. “Postering is a reminder that one is a candidate in this election”; this is how one first-time head of list from a minor party justified his decision to run a poster campaign. One campaign advisor to another first-time major party head of list justified the candidate’s extensive poster campaign as a means of raising awareness that he headed that particular list. However, the repetition effect was less related to his name recognition (as he had been in politics for a long time, as the president of a regional party), and more to his picture, which “the campaign had made sure to print on all his campaign materials”. “Just as in advertising, we are banking on repetition, [and I think that] the picture played a role [in its success]”.

Another respondent, serving as the campaign advisor to another head of list from a major party also believed that the main contribution of posters to his candidate’s campaign had been to “let people know that she is running on the list in their constituency, because in a previous election, she had been elected in a different district”. In this case, however, the importance of candidate postering went beyond her simple recognition as a candidate in that particular district. As he later added in the interview: “we acted like a bulldozer, she was everywhere, she *had* to be seen everywhere. Because
for her, the stakes were high, she was about to conclude her ministerial mandate, she had a good record to defend, and people had to see that she was deeply involved, and people had to know with the highest certainty that voting for her meant endorsing somebody who is absolutely determined to work at the federal level”. In this case, therefore, recognition was strongly complemented by the desire to show not only the candidates’ determination in fighting a fierce campaign, but also to show her governing potential.

Finally, one first-time legislative candidate in a non-electable position on a major party list argued that for him, his low-key poster campaign (in which he had only targeted private properties, and not run any public postering) had helped increase his familiarity among constituents.

Common to all the above candidates is their first-time experience either as head of list or as a candidate for the legislature; and it is particularly for less established candidates that we would expect postering to play an informational role. Nonetheless, the support that even these elites give to the role of postering for making a candidate’s name and/or her party affiliation known seems mitigated at least. As we would expect from their emphasis on the face as the most important element in the poster (Chapter 3), rather, it is the candidate’s physical features that they seem to want to imprint in voters’ minds more than anything else. This is particularly apparent from interviews with heads of list and/or their advisers. In the same vein, another candidate who mentioned “repetition [effects]” was running for reelection on a list headed by the party leader, and he tarried little on the “repetition” effects. In fact his only mention of it is in a short phrase, “One must put up a lot of posters in neighborhoods where he is an already established candidate; it’s a repetition factor, it’s also a factor of a candidate’s strength” which he
used as an introduction to more extensive explanations about how postering is indicative of a candidate’s electoral strength.

One strong indication that postering is not intended as a means to raise awareness of a candidate is provided by the consensus that emerged spontaneously among a majority of elites that “investing in a poster campaign [as a candidate] makes no sense if one doesn’t enjoy some degree of prominence already” (major party federation official). “One must be very clear: first of all, posters help people who are already well established. If nobody knows you, if you don’t have any prominence, there’s not much point in running a poster campaign” (reelected major party candidate). This view was spontaneously voiced by six out of the eight interviewees who discussed individual candidate poster campaigns (the other three focused more on the parties’ campaigns than on candidates’ bids).

Moreover, not only do elites seem to believe that postering is of no help to little-known candidates, but they also agreed that well established candidates “cannot afford not to do it” (minor party head of list). In the words of a major party head of list in a district he had represented for 22 years and had served as mayor of one of its cities for 30 years, “candidates who are very new may invest in a few posters, particularly if they are good looking. Me, everybody knows me, but if I don’t do postering, it is perceived badly. One cannot afford to be absent.” Another major party reelected candidate noted “[we are in a situation in our district where] all candidates do postering, and whoever doesn’t est zéro – [it’s not possible to] say “Yes, I can see everybody does it, but I’ll just say no!”.

Another candidate was more specific: “the more well known a candidate is, the more postering is worth doing; for candidates who run at the bottom of the list, it’s better if
they just run a campaign focused on targeted and general mailings, print advertising, etc.”

Considering the diversity of respondents’ political backgrounds and positions, the emerging consensus from these interviews enables us therefore to question the assumption that postering is the province of new and less established candidates. Indeed, the opposite appears to be the case: rather than helping them, the conventional wisdom among elites appears to be that candidates without significant winning potential are better off not doing postering. If somebody must do it, then it is well established candidates.

4.2.2. Postering as Signaling of Electoral Competitiveness and Strength

Ten of the eleven elites interviewed spontaneously characterized postering campaigns as a show of electoral strength. Five of them referred to their ability to convey “party strength”, while the other five emphasized their ability to show a candidate’s electoral strength. Whether it concerns parties, or well established candidates – the key word employed by elites in relation to poster campaigns is “présence”: “il faut en avoir beaucoup [d’affiches], il faut être présent, très présent, pour que ça paie” (which translates as “one must have a lot of posters, one must be present, very present, for poster campaigns to give results”, minor party head of list). The requirement of being “present” means, at the concrete level, one’s visual presence in the space of the district. At a more abstract level, it is taken as an indication of one’s ability to be a strong contender in the campaign; in other words, the veteran elite’s remark “one cannot afford to be absent in terms of postering” translates in fact as, “one cannot afford not to show one’s campaign competitiveness”. According to another candidate, “In fact, postering, in general, serves one purpose only: people take it as an indication of the determination one has in the
campaign. That is, your determination to win the election”. Absence from postering campaigns is therefore interpreted as poor candidate quality (e.g., according to an elite’s previously cited remark “the one who doesn’t do [postering] est zéro”), whereas “presence” means reassuring voters that one is still fighting, and fighting hard in the race.

The major party reelected candidate, who claimed that “postering is about power” elaborated further:

“because, if you do a large postering campaign, people see you everywhere, on TV, through postering, etc. and this is important. […] One must put posters everywhere where people know them. One must put a lot of posters. […] because the people who went by the places where I had put posters, and there were a lot of posters, many of them told me later “he’s everywhere, he’s present!” Postering reveals therefore a candidate’s power, power in a good sense, it shows people that “he’s a candidate who matters [in the race]”. And so people tell themselves, “if he does it [postering], it must mean that he absolutely needs more votes, and we will not only vote for the party, but also for him, because, if he does this [postering], that means he’s fighting.”

The importance of showing strength, and its consequences on campaign strategy emerged clearly in yet another interview with the campaign advisor to a first-time major party head of list:

“It’s much better to wait and have a large postering campaign in the last three weeks of the campaign. It’s apparent from all the polls that there are a lot of undecided voters, and these undecided often make up their mind in the last week before the elections. So we must be present in the last week for these people; the
others are already decided and seeing posters will not change their vote. […] So we had teams of people touring all the postering locations on a permanent basis, to make sure that [our candidate] wasn’t covered by other candidates’ posters. We were drawn into a game of… [no word, but the respondent doesn’t appreciate it] But it was necessary to play it.”

The importance of maintaining one’s “presence”, given the strong competition from other candidates and parties emerged in yet another interview, when a candidate was speaking about the practice of postering in public locations: “at the end of the campaign you have [in public locations] a thick layer of posters, because everybody puts them on top of the others, and then there are some more on top, and so on and so forth. So for these places, we have a list of them, and we just tour them all the time. […] One must try to be present”.

Many interviewees stressed that posters were just one element among others in their election campaign, and, just by themselves, could not be credited with the overall success of the campaign. Yet, there seems also to be a strong perception of posters as a necessary asset in a strong candidate’s campaign. According to a minor party head of list [in his 30s], “I’ve always said that once I might just try to run a campaign without any postering, just to see how that goes. But I’m afraid to do it. Because I think it is very risky. Do poster campaigns really make a difference in the campaign? I don’t know for sure. But one should first be in a position to afford not to do them. Me, I cannot.” Nor apparently can 22 years of incumbency and 30 years of mayoralty put one in this position – judging by the previously cited remarks of the major party head of list who also “could not afford not to be present”.
As far as interviews show, posterizing does not only reveal “candidate power in a good sense”, but it also speaks to a party’s electoral competitiveness. Having emphasized the difficulty of offering a precise estimate of the importance of poster campaigns, one minor party official involved at the federal level continued:

“What is certain however, is that if you go into a city, and you see blue posters everywhere, red posters everywhere, and you don’t see any [his own party color] posters, this will certainly make people think “[his party] is not at all present”. Therefore, poster campaigns are an indication of a party being present. Moreover, the fact of being present shows that the balance of power is changing. I will give you an example of a district area that is socialist by tradition, and this is the first election when there have been so many [our party] posters. This meant to show that “look, the balance of power is changing”. Of course, this doesn’t mean that we had a lot of people putting posters up, sometimes you just have a highly committed activist, touring the locations every day. […] I think it’s not that posters will necessarily help change voters’ minds; but, that poster campaigns help establish a certain balance of power, prove the power of your campaign, this I believe. So we cannot afford to be absent from posterizing campaigns.”

The idea of party campaign strength is apparent from other interviews as well. One major party federation official emphasized the importance of the uniformity of candidates’ poster backgrounds. This, she justified with the observation that “in Belgium, posterizing campaigns are in fact a war of colors” adding that “this war of colors – to show the strength of one’s party – this is very important”. “We’re not trying to convince people with arguments in posters; rather, posterizing campaigns are a reminder by which we show
our capacity of being present, of being important, of running a solid campaign”. The same feeling emerges in another interview: “[when people see our candidate posters], they reason “we see there is color [in the streets], we see [this party’s] color, therefore this party is very present”” (minor party head of list).

The importance of postering for signaling a party’s electoral strength emerged even more clearly from interviews with party elites opposed to postering for environmental reasons. One head of list of this minor party argued:

“You know there is always this debate inside our party whether postering brings any additional votes. I don’t personally think they do, but if we don’t do a postering campaign, people will say “But [party name], you are nowhere to be seen! What happened? Don’t you have activists anymore?” So I think that postering does not bring votes directly, but indirectly, it makes people think, “Look, they are well organized, they are present”. So, while we might not necessarily win votes from postering, if we don’t do it we are certainly going to lose votes. Posters, if we don’t have them, people are going to say “this party is not present””.

Another elected candidate from the same minor party echoed these comments:

“Other parties have teams of people touring every public postering location all the time and they constantly cover other parties’ posters […] This goes on especially in the last three weeks of the campaign. We don’t have the means to do it [as major parties do], first because we don’t agree with this [waste]. But if we don’t do [postering], we get comments like “We don’t even see you, because you don’t do any postering, you are not at all present in the campaign”. So we do postering
to ensure that we are present. But I don’t think we win the election because of it.”

The same respondent continued: “[with regard to postering] everybody knows there’s a muscle contest between parties, and particularly between the two major parties, MR and PS, which in certain district areas just cover all the boards in red or blue. Thus, there is a certain balance of power at stake, to convince people to side with the red or with the blue.”

In short, the view that postering is intended to signal a party’s or a candidate’s electoral competitiveness and strength receives significant support; this role is particularly important for well established candidates, as well as for the parties as a whole. As far as the information role of postering is concerned, elites seem to give a negative verdict: a majority of them consider that postering is the domain of major candidates only, whereas minor candidates are advised not to do more than a “few, if they are good looking”. Moreover, while actors do bank on a repetition effect in their postering activities, what they seem to want people to remember is not a candidate’s ballot information, as much as their physical demeanor, and the nonverbal expressions of candidate quality it conveys (as discussed at length in Chapter 3). To what extend are these views shared by the French sample?

4.3. Why Do Postering? A French Elites’ Account

The legal interdictions on postering in France made it very difficult to obtain information about it at all, at first. In fact, the first two interviewees made extensive efforts to fend the question of its purposes and importance, and taping the interviews was abandoned when the third respondent refused flat out to respond to any question about
poster campaigns if there was to be an audio copy made of the interview. In addition to giving up on taping, the other factor that made elites loosen up with regard to postering was that, as the campaign advanced, it was more and more difficult for them to deny that posters were everywhere they shouldn’t have been. In light of this evolution, all respondents beginning with the third interviewee addressed postering and its purposes; this topic emerged both directly, in response to questions like “how do you decide on the organization of postern campaign in the field”, as well as spontaneously in response to the larger question of the importance of postering for the campaign more generally.

4.3.1. The Role of Postering in Making the Candidate “Known”

It emerged pretty quickly from the interviews that elites wanted to use postering to make people know their candidate better. Yet the information they seemed most keen on transmitting by plastering the streets with posters was not the name or the party affiliation that would appear on the ballot. Rather it was the candidate’s face that they most wanted to imprint in people’s minds: six of the 9 interviewees who chose to disclose that they were indeed carrying out postering campaign argued that the massive repeated display of a candidate’s face in the district helped people to “get to know him”.

This nonverbal communication emerged as particularly important for candidates facing an uphill battle against an entrenched incumbent, and was seen as a facilitating factor in the candidate’s efforts to connect to people on a more personal level. For example, one major party candidate in a constituency dominated since 1993 by a minor party local notable (a city mayor of 16 years) argued that “in this campaign we have to communicate to people as much as possible […] The incumbent won’t let anyone put
posters up, he has them immediately covered by his own posters [...] it’s posters that make me known to voters, it’s because of them that people recognize me and approach me in the streets”. An interview with the campaign advisor to another major party contender in the district also touched on the necessity that people recognize his candidate in the streets, given that “the incumbent is very entrenched”. Another minor candidate with significant winning potential (he was runner up in the district) faced a similar challenge after winning his party nomination: According to his campaign advisor, the candidate was not very well known in half of the district, therefore they had to “put his face on every wall in the entire constituency”, so that people recognize him in the streets. Two other respondents shared the view that seeing a lot of the candidate’s face is a necessary requirement of a successful bid, with one of them adding: “postering is marketing: for people to buy a product, they need to know first what we’re selling”. Finally, another major party official involved at the party federation level argued that the function of “making the candidate known” to voters is much more important for new challengers, than it is for incumbents; for incumbents posters serve a “reminder” function.

Underscoring the fact that the “knowledge” people get from candidate postering has more to do with nonverbal cues than with hard-core information, this same respondent added: “but it’s not posters who will make the person known, that is, their program – this is done by leaflets, which we distribute every day at every street corner to reach the targeted population”. In fact, the limited ability of postering to provide election-relevant information to voters is an issue that emerged spontaneously in six interviews out of eleven. Even for a candidate who needed to be “made known to voters”, like the
minor party challenger mentioned above, posters did not seem play a significant information role, as in the words of his campaign advisor: “It’s not in posters that we publicize our program, it’s in public meetings, in the leaflets and mailings.”

The interviews make it clear that waging a postering campaign to make the candidate “known” to voters is more important for newer, less established challengers. However, elites’ consistent emphasis on voters’ familiarity with the facial features of a candidate, at the expense of the basic information printed on the ballot, provides little support for the view that elites employ postering to primarily promote increased voter knowledge of a candidate’s name and or her party affiliation (let alone more knowledge of more complex policy-positions). This leaves open the question of why candidates (particularly those with considerable winning potential) still choose to invest heavily in this type of campaign and leads us to examine the second hypothesis, which assigns to postering a role of signaling electoral competitiveness.

4.3.2. Postering as Signaling of Electoral Competitiveness and Strength

“The primary role of postering is not an informational one, although they do help to make a candidate known. The most important role of postering is to establish a territorial control” according to a major party official involved at the federation level. “It’s a territorial claim we make not so much to voters, as to other parties and their activists.[…] Postering means, in effect “this is my territory” […] [A large postering campaign] gives moral comfort to our activists, and discourages our opponents. [Conversely,] when the opposition engages in postering, if there aren’t a lot of visible opposition posters, then [opposition postering] has a stimulating effect; a massive
opposition postering has a discouraging effect [on our activist forces]”. All nine respondents who accepted to talk about the patterns of poster campaigns (i.e. those whose interviews were not taped) echoed the importance of establishing a territorial claim through postering. Just as for the Belgian respondents, key to their insights was the idea that postering allows parties and their candidates to establish their “presence” in the district (in fact, the words “présent” and/or “présence” were used in each of the nine interviews to explain the importance of postering campaigns). Some respondents emphasized the importance of a heavy visual presence of a candidate in the district, as in the following exchange between the campaign advisor to the runner-up minor party candidate and an activist who joined the conversation toward the end of the interview:

“Campaign manager: I’m back to what I was saying at the beginning, that a postering campaign does not really help to convey any ideas; obviously, we try to imprint an image in [people’s minds], the image of a face, and to make a name known; but the primary role of postering is to create the climate of political competition, a climate of candidate presence. Why do you think there is constant postering and re-postering [over the incumbent’s posters]? It’s not to prevent people from seeing posters of the incumbent as such…

Activist: No, it’s to show him [the incumbent] that he’s not all that powerful.

Campaign manager: It’s to show the incumbent that the one who has more presence it’s [our candidate]! It’s not the incumbent! And so, I know this might seem ridiculous, but it’s extremely important! It’s extremely important, because what matters is to get control over the territory [of the district]. What matters is that people see that [our candidate] has a hold over the territory, [for
them to see] that he is there. Because, if he’s there, obviously this also means that he stands a chance of winning!"

The presence of a candidate’s posters “on every wall” in the district is taken therefore as a clear signal of the strength of his claim to the position of district representative. But candidate postering is often just part of political actors’ poster campaigns. A candidate’s posters are often accompanied by posters specific to the party (i.e. displaying the party logo, or just the party name). One activist from a major party argued that “by displaying party-only posters next to candidate posters, we are able to convey better the strong alliance between the candidate and the party”, a view echoed by two other respondents, one of them from the same major party.

Whether posters display candidate faces or their party signs, one thing emerges quite clearly from all the nine interviews, and that is that postering helps establish the “presence” of that particular political force in the district. “[We did postering] to assert our presence in the district” (major party), “we need to keep our presence in the neighborhoods” (major party), “we organized postering activities every week, in all the neighborhoods of the district, to mark our presence” (minor party) – these are three very similar quotations coming from three different respondents. But why is “presence” important, and when?

4.3.3. Postering Strategies

Several respondents touched indirectly on postering strategy. Interviewed prior to the first legislative round, an activist from the same major party as the district incumbent argued: “If the election is for an important position or if it is highly contested [as it looks
that will be the case with this election], we do a lot of postering, because we want to assert our presence. […] It is particularly important to do postering where the results are expected to be close […] There is more and more postering as the election draws near, to mark our presence”. Another campaign advisor from a different major party touched on the same theme, in an interview conducted right before the second round, which pitted his candidate against a well established incumbent:

“There has never been an election without postering. First, posters help mark our presence in the district territory, which is very important – to show that one has an active campaign can bring votes, as I was saying earlier, and we are only a few hundred votes away from winning, so every vote matters. I think what makes a candidate win votes, is first, her party affiliation, then, her meetings with the constituents, and then, it’s the presence in the territory, it’s very important to be present”.

Finally, another major party federation official argued: “generally speaking, in districts where [our party] doesn’t usually win, we still do postering together with other parties – just to be there, to be present, to show our will to act, in preparation for a future possible reversal of electoral fortunes in the district”.

At the same time, parties and their candidates do not seem to waste their energies on fights that are already lost. In the words of a major party activist:

“Some places are more important to do postering in than in others. For example, crossroads [are very important] – there we do postering all the time, even if it’s dangerous [because of the cars]; in other places we just let the [opposition’s] postering be, that is, we don’t bother taking down their posters, or putting ours on
top, because we believe that voters are more favorable to them in those places, and so, as we don’t have a lot of time, we just go do our postering elsewhere.”

This view was echoed by another minor party campaign official at the federation level: “[The decision as to where we do poster] depends also on the voter support we have in a district. For example, we almost never do any postering in [example of a very rich neighborhood], because we know that is has very little impact, we never win more than half a percentage point there; for this election there was an exception to this rule, because we had an activist in that neighborhood, and she absolutely wanted to do poster, more as a protest…”

Actors’ reluctance to do poster in districts where people know they have no chance in winning the seat is a strong sign of them taking poster as a credible show of electoral strength and competitiveness. Consistent with the “poster-as-signaling” hypothesis, poster acquires increased importance in disputed elections. Moreover, as seen below, elites seem to believe that this signal can be reliably decoded by all relevant actors involved in the election.

4.3.4. Postering Targets Everybody: Supporters, Opponents and Undecided

In the words of one campaign advisor a major party candidate, “posters target everybody. First, it gives us activists, a lot of pleasure seeing them. Then, they send a message intended for all voters who generally vote for us, we tell them, look we are campaigning, we have the means to do an [extensive] campaign, vote for us. Then, they reach undecided people because they see posters everywhere, they see us putting them up, they see that we are thoroughly
engaged in the campaign… Of course, they target our opponents, because by doing postering everywhere, we tell them, we are here, we are active, we have the strength of the campaign [needed to win]. Finally, I think [poster campaigns] also speak to passers-by, who don’t necessarily vote in this district, but our candidate comes from [a major party], so [posters] can help raise the interest for their [same major party] candidate in their district, and maybe vote for her”.

This view was echoed by yet other interviewees. In the words of a major party activist, “[by engaging in] postering we try to target everybody. For voters who are strong party supporters, postering restores their confidence in the party, it makes them feel that there are a lot of people like them. For those who are undecided, posters help convey an image, a message, and it’s more important to do postering in areas where the election is very close”.

Another party local activist on a different side of the political spectrum also credited postering with helping the undecided make up their mind: “if people see many posters from a candidate, they think she is important […] With a strong poster campaign, the undecided can be drawn to [our party]”.

Another major party respondent at a federation level was adamant that postering had a considerable impact on those in charge of the campaign in the district:

“the most important function of postering concerns the activists: it gives them confidence to see posters from their own candidate in the district, this gives them the feeling that there are a lot of people who support the same ideas as them. So this is a source of moral comfort for them, and at the same time, it is a source of discouragement for the opposition activist forces. Postering sends a clear
message: “This is my territory!””.

Given the importance of posterizing for comforting vs. discouraging the activists in charge of the local campaign effort, the same respondent continued

“[when deciding how much to invest in posters] the two criteria that matter are: how much time we want to “last”, and what impact we want to have. For Paris, this time, we started with 5000-6000 posters at the beginning of the campaign, with the goal of giving confidence to our activists and discouraging the opposition. But once a party has started their posterizing campaign, then everybody starts doing it, so we need more and more posters as the campaign advances”.

In short, given the visibility of posterizing and its alignment with the physical space of the district that allows parties to impart a “this is my territory” message, the view of posterizing as a means of signaling one’s electoral competitiveness and strength of campaign rounds up significant support from elites. In line with the “posters-as-signaling” hypothesis, political actors appear to concentrate their efforts on closely fought districts, and seem to be little inclined to invest resources in races where they do not stand a chance of winning. Moreover, while it’s true that posterizing targets voters, it also targets the opposition, and the primary purpose of this effort does not seem to be one of imprinting a candidate’s name or affiliation in the mind of the public. Rather the message that posterizing carries to all actors in the election, supporters, opponents and undecided seems to be “We fight to win!”.

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4.4. **Conclusions: It’s Signaling of Competitiveness, Not Information**

We are now in a position to conduct an initial evaluation of the “posters-as-information” and “posters-as-signaling” hypotheses, based on information obtained through in-depth interviews with party officials closely involved in the decision making process and practice of poster campaigns. Complementing Chapter 3, which dealt primarily with the message that each individual poster is supposed to convey, this Chapter has tackled the issue of postering (or the top right cell in Table 1.1). Keeping in mind that it originates from a limited sample of party elites, the available information nonetheless allows us to draw some preliminary conclusions about postering.

First, the possibility that postering is conducted with the primary purpose of conveying ballot-relevant information (like name, party affiliation and/or ideological identity) to voters receives almost no support. This does not necessarily mean that postering campaigns are not meant, to some extent, to make candidates “known”. But the “knowledge” they are supposed to convey does not concern factual indentifying information about a candidate. Rather, there seems to be a consensus among elites that voters must be familiarized with their *face*, and particularly with the face of a new candidate. The purpose of creating this familiarity seems less intent on just showing a candidate’s pretty face, although that is certainly part of the equation. Rather, the main purpose of showing “their face everywhere” seems to be that of building a feeling of trust in the candidate’s strong qualifications for the elected position for which they are running.
The fact that French and Belgian elites agree that only candidates who truly have a chance of winning should do postering mounts another strong challenge against the view that postering is used to increase a candidate’s [name/party] recognition among constituents. In the words of a Belgian party official “it makes no sense to have a postering campaign if one is not already well known”. French elites are equally reluctant to fight for lost causes, and focus their postering especially on closely fought races where they have a shot at victory.

Moreover, there is a considerable consensus emerging from the interviews that postering campaigns are primarily a tool for signaling the electoral strength and competitiveness of an actor. Consistent with the proposed importance of the visual and spatial character of poster campaigns, the key word that elites use to judge the rationale behind postering campaigns is “presence”. Belgian elites believe that the visual presence of a party through its posters can indicate a “change in the balance of power” in a district. Belgian heads of list are “afraid” not to do postering, cannot “afford to be absent”, because who doesn’t do it “est zéro” in the election. Similarly, the main reason to do postering in France is “to show the incumbent that he’s not all that powerful”, to claim that a certain district “is the [party’s/candidate’s] territory”. Just as in Belgium, in France, postering of a candidate can show that he is “somebody important”, who has the means to win the election and is so close in achieving it. Postering speaks therefore volumes to everybody, supporters, opponents, and undecided, but its message does not seem to be “this is our candidate’s name”, but rather, “our candidate has strong electoral potential”.

These rich insights obtained through qualitative research have provided a major
contribution to a first understanding of the rationales behind poster campaigns. But how widespread are these beliefs? And how do postering strategies differ as a function of an actor’s winning potential? Chapter 5 takes the leap from the insights collected through the 22 interviews to a wider survey of party officials in France and francophone Belgium.
Chapter 5:
Signaling and Informing through Poster Campaigns: Survey Evidence

We have seen so far that party elites seem to assign two important roles to posters in elections. The primary one is routed in their ability to convey the “presence” of a candidate and/or her party on the district battleground. Judging from the elite interviews evidence, this visual “presence” in the space of a district is perceived as a “must do” for any actor with credible electoral hopes. This is because it signals that the candidate and or party possess the necessary determination and electoral strength to effectively emerge victorious at the ballot count. Posters seem to equally play another function. In an environment bustling with competing information and multiple candidates, posters help making candidates “known” to voters. On the one hand, this involves increasing voters’ familiarity with candidates’ names or party affiliation. But not all information is expressed in words: the candidate’s face itself emerged as an important element designed to convey to voters the candidate’s suitability for office.

This chapter is motivated by two questions: To what extent can elites’ opinions in Chapters 3 and 4 be generalized? And to what extent is posterizing strategic as a function of a political actor’s winning potential? I address both these questions by means of a web survey of 100+ party members in each of France and francophone Belgium. The survey
results generally confirm and enrich elites’ opinion: posters are regarded as important communication tools to achieve a number of key purposes in the campaign, among which signaling the strength of one’s campaign, and making a candidate known to voters stand out. Moreover, this chapter presents the first round of evidence in favor of the strategic underpinnings of postering in campaigns. In a nutshell, I show that, consistent with their optimal party strategies, major party members are more likely than their minor competitors to regard posters as important devices of signaling electoral strength and competitiveness. For major party respondents only, posters’ signaling value is a significant determinant of their importance in close elections, and in wooing undecided and leaning voters to the party cause. Conversely, minor party members emphasize posters’ perceived informational role in rating their communication importance in these elections.

This chapter is structured as follows. The first two sections introduce the web survey design and present descriptive evidence on the different communication roles of posters in the election, with particular emphasis on their informational and signaling functions. The subsequent two sections delve deeper into major and minor parties’ campaign strategies and into the roles assigned to postering as a function of a respondent’s party status. Conclusions follow.

5.1. The Survey Design

Nurtured by insights drawn from elite interviews, the survey was designed with two goals in mind. The first one was to identify a consensus (if any) on posters’ roles in elections, and to obtain more contextual information about the practice of postering on
the campaign battlefield. In this sense, the survey aimed to gather information about poster beliefs and experiences from the same population targeted in the interviews, that is, from party officials with considerable experience with their party’s election campaigns and with a variety of ideological and party backgrounds. Running the survey on the web allowed for an increased sample size, and for more geographical variation in the sample. The second goal was to provide the necessary tools to explore the strategy behind poster campaigns, and particularly to observe the differences, if any between major parties and minor ones in the importance each attach to posters’ informational and signaling potential.

Before going into the description of the main variables of interest, this section describes the respondent recruitment procedures, the sample structure, the study timeline and the survey instrument.

5.1.1. Sampling and Recruitment Procedures

The difficulty of random sampling in the context of a web-based survey is well documented, and this problem is particularly salient when little data exists about the target population (Tuten, Urban, & Bosnjak, 2002). To start with France, the most recent data place the total population of party members in 1999 at 615,219 (Mair & van Biezen, 2001, p. 7). The same source puts the number of party members for 1999 across the whole of Belgium at 408,804. Moreover, beside their relative obsolescence, these data do not include estimates of the number of members by party, nor any indication of the regional distribution of this population. Nor do parties themselves provide these figures.

In the absence of a data base with contact addresses for all party membership, the
recruitment to the survey in both countries therefore occurred both directly and indirectly.

In **France**, the survey advertisement effort targeted individuals in charge of local or federal party and party-affiliated youth organizations, as well as party officials with e-mail addresses available online. These individuals would not only be asked to complete the survey, but also to forward it to “the party members affiliated with their local/federal party group”. The selection of direct contacts was made with three goals in mind: (1) to provide a reasonable geographical distribution of respondents, (2) to maximize the survey reach within both federal and local organizations, and (3) to ensure that party members of all ages could be made aware of the survey, by targeting regular as well as youth party-affiliated organizations.

To achieve these goals, three in-depth web search algorithms were employed to create a database of 793 French party e-mail addresses from five parties. **First**, some parties publish a directory with all the websites from the party-affiliated groups; where such a resource was available, the researcher visited every page in the directory and collected any e-mail address provided as contact. **Second**, in cases where the party national website provided only a few links to its regional organizations, local contacts were collected by visiting the links to local groups’ websites available on each regional webpage. This search included also any links to other party organizations listed as “Friends” on local groups’ websites. **Third**, additional searches on Google were performed to find pages in the ten most populated French cities. All three algorithms were employed to find both elites involved in regular party organizations, as well as those involved in youth organizations. Consistent with existing party websites research (Jankowski et al., 2007), major parties (Socialist Party, Union for a Popular Majority,
Union for a French Democracy/Democratic Movement) are significantly more present on the web than smaller ones (Greens, Communist Party). This affected the number of contacts identified by party (see Table 5.1).

Continental France is organized into 94 administrative départements, with 70% of the country’s population concentrated in 46 of them, and 30% of the population living in the ten principal urban agglomerations.\(^1\) Consequently, for each party, a recruitment e-mail was sent to at least one e-mail address for each departmental regular party federation, and to at least one e-mail address for each departmental youth federation, in each of the 94 departments. To avoid oversampling less populated areas, the efforts concentrated on finding as many party contacts as possible for the 46 most populated departments, and for the ten most populated cities, with special attention to Paris, Lyon and Marseille, the three biggest French cities.

A similar indirect recruitment strategy was applied in francophone Belgium to create a database of 540 party contacts (see Table 5.1). Survey recruitment e-mails were sent to party officials from all four parties represented in the National Assembly (Reformist Movement, Socialist party, the Greens and the Humanist Democratic Centre), using two contact-identifying algorithms. First, an e-mail invitation to participate in and to distribute the survey went to each of the six party federations (corresponding to the six legislative districts) for each party. Second, the contact effort focused on identifying individuals in charge of local organizations. With the exception of the Belgian Greens, parties’ internet pages are organized among very similar lines. This made it easier to identify local organization contacts by using the rubric “The party close to you” on each

\(^{1}\)www.insee.fr (1999 Census Data)
Table 5.1. Survey Recruitment: Number of E-mail Addresses Contacted by Party

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party (Country)</th>
<th>Number of E-mail Addresses</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Socialist Party (France)</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union for a Popular Majority (France)</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union for a French Democracy/ Democratic Movement (France)</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greens (France)</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French Communist Party (France)</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reformist Movement (Belgium)</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist party (Belgium)</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanist Democratic Centre (Belgium)</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greens (Belgium)</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>France (Total)</strong></td>
<td><strong>793</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Belgium (Total)</strong></td>
<td><strong>540</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of the parties’ national websites. Under this website rubric, parties publish the e-mail addresses of local organization leaders, local representatives, and individuals in charge of party communication at the local level.

One of the smallest countries in Europe, Belgium is also the second most densely populated country on the continent. As a result, a recruitment e-mail was sent to at least one party official from each local organization listed on their party’s website, in an attempt to ensure an even coverage of the whole francophone region. Moreover, given that about 67% of the population is concentrated in the regions of Brussels, Charleroi, Liege and Namur, all local party officials available for contact in these areas were informed about the survey and asked for assistance in its further distribution among the members of their local organization.

5.1.2. Survey Pretest and Timeline

The researcher contacted the previously interviewed French and Belgian elites at the beginning of December 2008 to request feedback and assistance in the dissemination of the survey to party members in their constituency. This first contact yielded some much needed feedback with regard to question wording and comprehension, and helped remove some remaining software problems.

Survey responses were collected between December 2008 and March 2009, during which time four e-mails were sent to French and Belgian addresses requesting their participation.

5.1.3. **Response Rates and Sample Representativeness**

The exact response rate cannot be calculated due to the indirect component of the survey recruitment. However, the number of French responses (N=238) represents a little over 30% of those contacted. In the Belgian case, the number of respondents (N=163) is the equivalent of 31% of those contacted. These percentages are higher than those usually reported for responses to web surveys, and comparable with mail surveys (e.g. Kaplowitz, Hadlock, & Levine, 2004). Considering the length of the survey (around 15 minutes) and the absence of any monetary rewards, these responses strongly suggest party members’ interest in the research.

The absence of even a partial list of party members made random- or cluster sampling impossible. Therefore, as with many other web surveys it is difficult to assess the representativeness of the sample for the party member population (e.g. Weisberg, 2005; Couper, 2000). The biggest threat to the representativeness of survey results comes from self selection biases, and this issue deserves some consideration before moving forward.

The lack of monetary incentives and the fact that respondents were required to actively go on a webpage and answer 15 minutes-worth of questions both make it likely that self selection did impact the final sample composition. That is, it is likely those who responded to the researcher’s call harbored greater interest and knowledge in campaigns than those who chose not to participate. Yet, having a potentially more interested and more knowledgeable sample does not necessarily invalidate the results. If we are to discover why parties use posters, we need to query those who know and have opinions of their parties’ election communication strategies. And judging by the characteristics of the
sample, those who chose to participate in this research were more informed and interested in campaigns than perhaps the general party member population. The sample is dominated by middle-aged, long-time politically active party members (a majority had taken part in at least two legislative campaigns), with experience of poster campaigns in the field (only 20-25% had no practical experience of them, see Table 5.2.).

A more dangerous bias would be to have a sample that lacks objectivity, that is, a sample that constantly overrates posters importance. In order to avoid responses from people who simply thought that “posters are great”, all the descriptions of the study consistently emphasized its prior elite-research aspect, and its potential contribution to a “better understand the objectives and the dynamics of poster campaigns in the context of parties and candidates’ electoral strategies”. The recruitment e-mail contained only a brief summary of the questions that respondents should expect. Moreover, participation rates to the survey took off only after repeated e-mail contacts (42% of the French and 32% of the Belgian participants responded only at the fourth and last call for participation), suggesting that the strategies in fending off over-enthusiastic respondents were successful. In fact, the evolution of the response rates suggests that most respondents experienced an initial reluctance to participate in this research.

5.1.4. The Survey Tool

As previously noted, the average response time for the questionnaire was expected to be around 15 minutes. After reading a brief description of the purposes of the study, respondents were asked to introduce a password to access the rest of the survey. 

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3 This part of the survey is available online at [http://polisci.osu.edu/grads/ddumitrescu/survey](http://polisci.osu.edu/grads/ddumitrescu/survey)
Table 5.2. French and Belgian Sample Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>Belgium</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Std.dev</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political experience (years)</td>
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<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience with poster campaigns</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0=none, 4=participant in more</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>than 5 postering activities)</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1=male)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban district</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1=urban, 4=rural)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1=Left, 5=Right)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party place in 2007 at the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>district level</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Self declared)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary party function:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self declared activists</td>
<td>67.8% (N=118)</td>
<td>42.1% (N=45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self declared candidates</td>
<td>21.3% (N=37)</td>
<td>43.0% (N=46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self declared party employees</td>
<td>10.9% (N=19)</td>
<td>15% (N=16)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The survey had a sober blue and white design, with questions spread out over eight pages, organized by topic. Respondents were notified of their progress at the top of each page. With the notable exceptions discussed immediately below, the response options to all the questions were randomized. Moreover, all questions had a “Don’t know” option.4

In sum, both the design of the study and the number of respondents should allow us to draw more confident conclusions about the roles of poster at election time than a limited number of elite interviews. This chapter now proceeds to a description of the main study variables and of the results.

5.2. The Role of Posters in Campaigns: a First Overview of Results

5.2.1. The “Posters Importance” Variables

After providing some information about their experience with poster campaigns and their party’s electoral results in the last legislative contest, both French and Belgian respondents were asked a set of questions with regard to the importance of posters in their parties’ election campaigns. Preceding this battery of questions was the following statement:

“We would like now to know more about how postering contributed to your election campaign. The following questions are about 8 goals that political actors usually pursue in their campaign activities and about role that poster campaigns may have in attaining them. In considering each of these goals, please refer to the district where you were most active in the 2007 legislative elections.”

4 A copy of the survey instrument is available from the author.
Each individual “posters importance” item was then preceded by the same question: “In your opinion, how important were poster campaigns in attaining the following goal?” The eight listed campaign goals were the following: (a) “Inform voters about your electoral program”, (b) “Make your candidate known to voters”, (c) “Show voters that your party’s campaign is competitive in the district”, (d) “Show the opposition party that your party’s campaign is competitive in the district”, (e) “Mobilize activists”, (f) “Mobilize regular voters at the polls”, (g) “Convince undecided voters” and (h) “Convince leaning voters”. All these items were listed on a single page, and their order was randomized. Each had the same 5-point rating scale, labeled as “Not at all important”, “Not too important”, “Somewhat important”, “Important” “Very Important”. To increase measurement reliability, the response options were always listed from less to more important. A “Don’t Know” option was also provided, and less than 1% of the sample chose it, showing that participants clearly understood these campaign goals and felt confident enough to offer an opinion about the importance of posters in achieving them.

Respondents who gave any importance at all to posters for “Making the candidate known to voters” were also asked to identify what, in their opinion, was the most important thing that posters helped make known about a candidate: her face, name, party affiliation, ideology, list number (for Belgians only) or “other”.
Table 5.3. Importance of Posters in Achieving Campaign Goals: French and Belgian Samples (T-statistics of Mean Difference from Average)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>France Mean importance</th>
<th>France Difference from “Somewhat important” (3)#</th>
<th>France N</th>
<th>Belgium Mean importance</th>
<th>Belgium Difference from “Somewhat important” (3)#</th>
<th>Belgium N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Informing voters about the party program</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>-6.72**</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>-5.85**</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making candidates known</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>9.87**</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>8.17**</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show competitiveness to voters</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>9.73**</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>5.29**</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show competitiveness to the opposition</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>7.56**</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>3.05**</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobilize activists</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>2.41**</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>2.73**</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobilize regular voters</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>2.98**</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>-2.50**</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convince undecided voters</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>3.75**</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convince leaning voters</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>3.86**</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>2.96**</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall importance (Mean rating)</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>5.38**</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>2.82**</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall importance for potential voters (undecided and leaning combined)</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>2.57**</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>4.01**</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ** Indicates significance at p=.05 or better
# This column lists t-statistics for significant differences from the average value of the rating scale (3).
5.2.2. Overall Importance of Posters in the Achievement of Campaign Goals: French and Belgian Sample Results

How important a tool are posters in the campaign? Table 5.3 presents the mean ratings of importance of posters for the different campaign goals, and their difference from the average “Somewhat important” (coded as 3) for both France and Belgium. Higher numbers indicate higher attached importance to posters in attaining each goal. Several findings stand out.

First, posters are rated significantly higher than “Somewhat important” for achieving six of 8 goals in each country. Moreover, by averaging their estimated contribution to each of the 8 objectives, posters’ overall importance to the campaign significantly exceeds the average point on the scale. By averaging their ratings in wooing undecided and leaning voters, we see that again, posters exceed average importance, showing that this form of communication is not to be dismissed in the arsenal of tools that parties use for winning new votes.

Second, consistent with elite interviews, Table 5.3 shows that both the French and the Belgian give significantly high ratings to posters for their role in helping the party convey its competitiveness in the district. Moreover, further analysis reveal some interesting patterns of similarities and differences between the two countries. In particular, compared to the message of strength that posters are perceived to send to voters, Belgian participants seem less keen to regard them as signals of competitiveness intended for the opposition (the t-statistic for the difference in the mean ratings reaches statistical significance at p=.03, one-tailed, t=1.86). The strong ratings that posters get in Belgium for signaling a party’s campaign competitiveness to voters echo therefore the
previously cited remark of a Belgian candidate: “postering, in general, serves one purpose only: people take it as an indication of the determination one has in the campaign. That is, your determination to win the election”. As we would expect from the interviews, in France posters are seen as sending important signals of electoral competitiveness to both voters and the opposition (the difference between the mean ratings is t=0.7, ns), confirming elites’ opinions that postering is as much a question of “showing incumbent that he’s not that powerful” as it is an issue of showing voters “look we are campaigning, we have the means to do an [extensive] campaign, vote for us”.

Moreover, further cross national tests reveal no significant difference in the ratings that party members in France and Belgium assign to posters’ role of signaling role to voters (t=1.02, ns). But the French are significantly more likely to consider posters as more important in their fight against the opposition than do Belgian respondents (the t-statistic for the difference between the two means reaches significance at p=.03, one-tailed, t=-1.9). This difference is not surprising, given the bi-polar character of the French electoral system that contrasts so much with the Belgian consensual way of doing politics. In fact, governments in Belgium are consistently formed by more than one party. Not only do the Greens and the CDH usually act as junior coalition partners, but recent governments have contained both Socialist and Reformist Movement ministers (the two major parties on the left and the right, respectively), which consequently blurs the usual opposition lines.

On the other hand, we see that consistent with what we would expect, posters receive consistent poor marks for their ability in helping an actor inform the public about their electoral program. Equally, a cross national test of the mean ratings for posters’
informational value reveals no difference between the two countries. But the survey results appear to differ in one respect from the interviews: respondents in both countries give very high marks to posters’ importance in making a candidate “known”. The mean rating of this poster function in France is not significantly different from that of “showing competitiveness to voters” ($t=1.28$, ns). But in Belgium, this function is rated as significantly more valued than all others (the mean difference between the value attached to posters for making a candidate known, and the value attached to them for signaling competitiveness to voters is significant, $t=3.02$, $p=.01$). How does this affect the understanding that we have been able to form about posters’ goals from elites? To set light on this question, respondents were asked “what exactly is the most important aspect of a candidate that posters help convey?”.

Figure 5.1 plots the distribution of responses to this question in the two countries. We see that, in Belgium, the greater value attached to posters’ contribution in making a candidate known does not equate automatically to them having an informational function. Consistent with the interviews which revealed that “the most important part of the poster is the face” – what Belgian respondents seem to find effective to transmit through posters is not their information on the ballot, but rather their physical demeanor. The candidate’s face, that is, her attempt to show voters’ her good governing credentials through nonverbal means, is by far the most important item that posters convey about her, followed by the name. The relatively low importance of the party and of the list number in a country where seats are allocated by party lists is only apparently surprising. In fact, as elite interviews pointed out, the association between parties and colors is ingrained in the public spirit, and this information would already be conveyed to voters by the color of
Figure 5.1. Most Important Feature of a Candidate that Posters Make Known.

Entries in charts represent valid response percentages. ($N_{Fr}=163$, $N_{Bel}=98$).
a candidate’s poster.

By contrast, in France, the party is the one emerging as being the most important item about the candidate that posters help convey, followed by the face and the name. On the one hand, this dominance is not surprising, given that by all accounts, voters’ party identification is the one driving the choice in the first round of elections (Fleury & Lewis-Beck, 1993). This suggests that posters play a more extensive an informational function than conveyed in the interviews with elites. On the other hand, given that no elite interviewee had identified the party as the most important element in the poster, this anomaly suggested the need for an additional investigation of the likelihood of choosing “party” over “face” as the most important element conveyed by posters. A multinomial logit regression reveals that, controlling for a respondent’s political experience, the *incumbency status of a candidate* does indeed influence the probability of the face becoming the most important element that posters convey (Log likelihood $\chi^2 (6)=11.54$, $p=.07$). In other words, if the party’s candidate is the district’s incumbent, there is a .42 probability that her face is considered the most important element conveyed by posters, as compared to the .32 probability of selecting the party. Lack of incumbency status modifies these probabilities as .21 of choosing “face” and .51 of choosing “party” as the most important poster element.⁵

In short, while providing general support for elites’ statements, these results also help bring some nuance to them. On the one hand, both samples confirm the elite consensus with regard to posters’ role of signaling electoral competitiveness to voters. However, the French sample gives significantly more support to the “posters-as-

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⁵ Results are available in full from the author. The baseline respondent has been active in politics for 8 years.
information” hypothesis than previous evidence would have led us to expect. In particular, without necessarily contradicting posters’ signaling function (which should be particularly relevant for candidates with high winning potential), it seems that this form of communication does help convey certain identifying information. This is particularly so for those candidates without incumbency status.

The results from Belgian respondents also reflect previous elite statements. On the one hand, they agree with the French on the role of posters of showing competitiveness in campaign. On the other hand, they help reveal even more the important role of nonverbal aspects of poster content (as opposed to ballot identifying information). This suggests the belief that, in order to pass a credible message of determination, sheer numbers of posters are not enough. Rather, the content of the poster itself must reflect that determination.

Finally, this preliminary examination of the survey results reinforces the confidence in the reliability of the survey instrument. On the one hand, as we would expect, the response distribution on the four major variables of interest in the two countries is almost identical, as seen in Figure 5.2. The French and the Belgians also give similar ratings to posters for their mobilizing role of the activist base (t_{difference}=.03, ns). On the other hand, the results do reveal two important expected patterns of difference, consistent with the incentives provided by each electoral system. In the first place, Belgians give significantly lower ratings to posters’ ability of mobilizing supporters to vote (t-statistic for the difference from the French t=-3.82, p=.00). The fact of the matter is the Belgium has a compulsory voting system, and while turnout in Belgium is not perfect (a fact that one Belgian head of list complained about), it eliminates the burden that French parties have in making sure that their rank and file cast their ballots. Given
1. Inform voters of your party program ($N_{Fr}=169$, $N_{Bel}=102$)

2. Make your candidate known to voters ($N_{Fr}=170$, $N_{Bel}=100$)

3. Show competitiveness to voters ($N_{Fr}=168$, $N_{Bel}=101$)

4. Show competitiveness to the opposition ($N_{Fr}=170$, $N_{Bel}=100$)

Figure 5.2. Importance of Posters for Achieving Campaign Goals. Entries in charts represent response percentages. The total number of responses to each item is provided in parentheses.
the nearly perfect turnout however, undecided voters become significantly more important, as the advisor to a major party head of list argued: “we see in all the polls that there are a lot of undecided voters, and these undecided the often make up their mind in the last week before the elections; so we must be present [in terms of posterings] for those people, particularly in the last week before elections”. Consistent with this view, Belgian respondents are significantly more likely than the French to find posters more effective in wooing these voters to their side (t\_difference=2.53, p=.01).

In sum, this first appraisal of the survey results substantiates the reliability of the survey instrument, and fuels the suspicion that posters do not play a unidimensional role; rather, they combine signaling and informational elements. This begs the question: to what extent does an actor’s emphasis on either of these roles reflect their optimal communication strategies?

5.3. Making the Most of the Campaign: Major and Minor Party Strategies

If poster communication is strategic, then we should observe that, due to expected differences in campaign resources and in winning potential, major and minor parties should place different emphases on posters’ informational and signaling contribution to their campaign.

In particular, from a communication perspective, all else equal, we would expect major parties to have significantly greater opportunity to publicize their electoral program and candidates on TV, than minor parties. In France, parties are provided free time on the national media (TV and radio), and this time is allocated proportionally based on a party’s previous share of the vote. Moreover, not only do smaller parties get less free
time than major ones, but larger parties also have other indirect means of advertising themselves on TV: their leaders are likely to be in the news programs more often than the minor party leaders. For example, the first round of the 2007 French presidential election (which preceded the legislative elections by a month) was a contest between the leaders of the three major parties in France. Their candidates, Nicolas Sarkozy, Ségolène Royal and François Bayrou not only debated each other face-to-face on television, but their movements were incessantly reported in the news. In contrast, the other six presidential first-round contenders got only minimal amount of coverage.

The pattern of television exposure is slightly different in Belgium: on the one hand, in the interest of fairness, the francophone public media RTBF awarded each of the 4 parties represented in the Federal Chamber the opportunity to debate each other prior to the 2007 election. This basically put minor parties (the Greens and the Humanist democratic Centre) on an equal footing with their larger counterparts (the Reformist Movement and the Socialists), and allowed them more access to TV than French minor parties. Not only that, but the two minor parties are not strangers to being in government: the precursor of the CDH had been in government from 1958-1999, and the Greens were part of the “purple green coalition” that ruled Belgium from 1999-2003. At the time of the 2007 campaign however, the two major parties, the Reformist Movement and the Socialists enjoyed the benefit of having received extensive coverage for being in government in the previous parliament.

In addition, both French and Belgian parties operate under conditions of increased voter volatility (e.g. Webb, Farrell & Holliday, 2002; Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000). In France, Bélanger et al. (2006) report that fully 37% of their sample (interviewed before
and after the 2002 French presidential contest) changed party identification from one wave to the next, just one month later. Volatility is more likely to be costly to major parties: Matland & Studlar (2004) argue that volatility is more likely to lead to significant turnover rates in majoritarian systems. French studies have also shown that voter volatility results in a “high percentage of marginal seats” (Kreuzer & Stepan 2003, p.133, citing Ysmal, 1994).

Reviewing the Belgian partisan landscape, Deschouwer (2002) observes: “paraphrasing the commercial slogan of a well known distribution company, in Belgium it is often the case that you have to earn your voters every day” (2002, p. 158). Given the mechanical effects of the d’Hondt formula and the fragmentation of the Belgian party landscape, voter volatility can deny a major party the privilege of forming the next government, as it was the case with the Socialists in the 2007 election. What one interviewee considered to be the “demise of the Socialists” in the 2007 election, resulted in fact from just a 2.16% variation in the vote at the federal level compared with 2003. Yet this small percentage caused the Socialists, the 2003 election winners, to lose 20% of their seats, and to accept a backseat in the ensuing government formation. At the same time, volatility can lead to gains for minor parties on the rise: winning about 2% more of the vote allowed the Greens to double their seats in the federal lower chamber from 4 to 8, and a mere .59% vote rise gave the CHD 25% more seats than they had had following the 2003 elections (from 8 to 10 seats, respectively).6

Volatility can therefore have a significant influence on both major and minor parties at the polls. But there is ground to argue that major parties’ strategy of

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counteracting its effects might be different from that of minor parties. In particular, research on major and niche party success at the polls (Adams et al., 2006) reveals that niche parties (the Greens, the Communists and the Extreme Right) are much more likely to improve their electoral results by maintaining a clear ideological line, rather than by drifting toward the median voter’s position. The reverse appears to be true for major parties. This suggests that rather than putting up a show of electoral competitiveness, which would pit them against actors with significantly higher winning potential, minor Belgian parties might gather more support by informing the public of their electoral program and the quality of their candidates.

In short, *if poster use is the result of strategic choice by political actors then:* confronted with different opportunities to advertise themselves, and with the prospect of turning volatility in their favor, we would expect **major parties** in both contexts to use posters primarily for their signaling of competitiveness purposes. Conversely, **minor parties** should be more likely to use posters as (additional) informational tools, despite their imperfections in this regard.

### 5.4. The Strategic Use of Posters: Survey Evidence

#### 5.4.1. The “Major Party” Variable

Respondents’ party was not directly asked for in the survey. The already sensitive nature of the topic (particularly in France) was a strong enough reason to expect initial reluctance to participate among targeted party members, and this weighed heavily on the decision to *not* record any individual identifying information.

The survey recorded nevertheless a number of pieces of information that allow us
to impute the majority or minority status of each participant’s party. For France, respondents were asked about the place in which their candidate had finished the first round of legislative elections in their district. They were also asked to estimate the percentage of vote she had won. A separate question asked if the candidate had passed the 5% threshold required in France to be eligible for campaign reimbursements. These three variables were used to compute a “major party” variable, based on 4 decision-making rules. First, respondents whose candidate had occupied one of the first three places received a 1 on the “major party variable”. Second, respondents whose party did not make over 5% in the first round received a “0” on this variable. Moreover, respondents were also asked to report their ideological position on a scale from 1 (Left) to 5 (Right). If none of the first two criteria could be used to determine the majority or minority status of a respondent’s party, a third one was applied: respondents who reported a centrist ideology (3) were classified as “major party” (all these respondents reported election results around 10%). Previously unclassified left winning respondents who reported a place lower than 3, and a score greater than 10% were coded as “major party”; left wing respondents who reported in between 5% and 9% received a “0” on this variable. Overall, this resulted in 114 “major party” candidates and 60 “minor party” candidates.7

For Belgium, respondents who reported their party coming first in their district were coded as “major party”. Respondents reporting second placement received “major party” status, except if the vote percentage and number of seats declared matched closely

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7 This coding can potentially assign a majority status to a respondent’s minor party if the respondent were actually active in a minor party stronghold. While some coding error cannot be dismissed, only 9% of the members of the French National Assembly come from minor parties.
the only district in which CDH came in second. All other places with a reported vote share of less than 20% were coded as minor parties. This resulted in 52 major party respondents and 48 minor party ones.

### 5.4.2. Party Poster Strategies: Results

The survey data allows us to perform several tests with regard to the signaling and informational value that posters have for major vs. minor parties. Results of the first such test are provided in Table 5.4 which reports t-test differences of mean ratings between major and minor parties for posters’ signaling role in elections. Further analyses will go deeper into the independent effect of a respondent’s status on the signaling value attached to posters, and into the mechanics of posters’ importance in various electoral conditions.

But first, Table 5.4. provides preliminary evidence that major parties are significantly more likely in both countries to attach greater value to posters’ ability to signal the competitiveness of their campaign to voters. Moreover, given that the two variables (i.e. signaling competitiveness to voters and to the opposition) are correlated at .45 for the French and .54 for the Belgian sample, a mean “signaling” rating was also computed. In both countries, major party respondents are likely to attach greater overall signaling value to posters than are members of minor parties.

As we would expect, Belgian major and minor parties differ less strongly in respect to posters’ role of showing competitiveness to voters. This is not necessarily surprising, given the similar communication opportunities available to all federally represented parties, and the strong voter volatility effects on party results. In the 2007 election, while major parties were on the decline (the Socialists in particular), minor
Table 5.4. The Signaling Value of Posters by Party Type in France and Belgium

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of poster for:</th>
<th>Party type</th>
<th>FRANCE</th>
<th>BELGIUM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
<td><strong>T</strong>-statistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signaling competitiveness to voters</td>
<td>Major party</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>3.34**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minor party</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signaling competitiveness to the opposition</td>
<td>Major party</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>1.92**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minor party</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>3.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Row entries represent results of Independent-samples T tests. ** Indicates significance at p=.05 or better (one-tailed). * Indicates significance at p=.10 or better (one tailed)
parties were clearly on the rise (both the Greens and the CDH had performed very well in previous local elections) – and small number of vote changes was behind this pattern of rise and decline.

Interestingly however, French minor parties seem to hold the same views with regard to the role of posters of signaling strength to opposition parties as their major counterparts. Since the mean ratings for both major and minor parties are significantly different from 3 (t=3.67, p=.00 for minor parties, and t=6.67, p=.00 for major parties), the possibility that posters do not play a signaling role can be safely dismissed. Rather the failure to observe a difference between the signaling value of posters as a message intended for the “opposition” fits pretty well in the mechanics of the French electoral system. According to Baldini & Pappalardo’s (2009) extensive analysis of the two round French voting system, the system provides minor parties with significant incentives to campaign at the first round. This impetus is not necessarily to win the seat. Rather, any improvement in minor parties their vote share can positively reflect on their bargaining power between the two rounds when major parties of the same ideological lineage will, more often than not, have to strike a coalition in order to secure the seat.8

The importance of the party’s majority status emerges equally in the course of a second test. Separate regression analyses for the two samples (presented in Tables 5.5 and 5.6) show that a respondent’s party status has an independent effect on the value they attach to posters as signals to voters even controlling for individual experience within the party and experience with the practice of poster campaigns.

8 There were no major differences between major and minor parties in the value they attach to posters for making the candidate known or for informing voters of the party’s electoral program, therefore those results have been omitted from the table.
Table 5.5. Dependent Variables: Posters’ Importance for Signaling Campaign Competitiveness in France

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Signaling Competitiveness to Voters</th>
<th>Signaling Competitiveness (Mean)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Major party model</td>
<td>Second round model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major party (Yes=1)</td>
<td>.35** (.15)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second round entrants (Yes=1)</td>
<td>- .36** (.17)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party experience (years)</td>
<td>-.03** (.01)</td>
<td>-.03** (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poster experience (Number of postering activities)</td>
<td>.11** (.05)</td>
<td>.11** (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.42** (.2)</td>
<td>3.41** (.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries represent regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. ** Indicates significance at p=.05 or better. * Indicates significance at p=.11 or better.
Table 5.6. Dependent Variable: Posters’ Importance for Signaling Campaign Competitiveness (Mean rating) in Belgium

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Signaling Competitiveness (Mean)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major party (Yes=1)</td>
<td>.35* ( .17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party experience (years)</td>
<td>.03* ( .016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poster experience (number of poster activities)</td>
<td>.03 ( .05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.84** (.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries represent regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. ** Indicates significance at p=.05 or better. * Indicates significance at p=.10 or better.
French major party participants are significantly more likely to assign higher importance to posters in their efforts to prove their electoral strength to voters; they are also marginally more inclined to regard posters as more important in their overall efforts of showing campaign competitiveness to both voters and the opposition. Consistent with the expectation that an actor’s winning potential influences the role assigned to posters in his campaign, second round competitors (i.e. those reporting first or second place for their candidate at the first round) assign stronger signaling potential to this form of communication than candidates who exit the electoral stage at the first round. Belgian results show marginal differences in poster signaling importance between the two types of party respondents, albeit in the expected direction.

**The Role of Poster in Wooing Undecided Voters**

The final part of this chapter presents more stringent tests of the rationality of poster use in campaigns. To start with, we would expect major and minor parties to make use of different poster functions when using them to reach various voters. Major parties should give, for example, greater importance to posters’ signaling value when using this form of communication to try to bring undecided voters to their side. Conversely, minor parties should try to exploit more posters’ informational value to win their votes.

A simple difference of means reveals that, consistent with a predominantly signaling role of posters, major French parties rate posters as more important tools for wooing the undecided (t=-1.85, p=.03 one tailed) and the leaning (t=1.63, p=.052 one tailed) than minor party respondents. Is this increased importance given to posters by major parties due to posters’ signaling or rather due to their informational role? Table 5.7
Table 5.7. Dependent Variables: Posters’ Importance in Wooing Voters with Uncertain Allegiances (French Results)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Wooing Undecided voters</th>
<th>Wooing Leaning Voters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Major parties</td>
<td>Minor parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signal campaign competitiveness</td>
<td>.24** (.12)</td>
<td>.22 (.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make candidate known</td>
<td>.24** (.09)</td>
<td>-.02 (.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform voters about electoral program</td>
<td>.25** (.07)</td>
<td>.32** (.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party experience (years)</td>
<td>.003 (.01)</td>
<td>-.03 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poster experience (number of postering activities)</td>
<td>.12** (.06)</td>
<td>-.03 (.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.39 (.56)</td>
<td>1.8 (.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries represent regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.
**Indicates significance at p=.05 or better.
*Indicates significance at p=.10 or better.
examines this question separately for the major and the minor party respondents in the French sample, while controlling for individual political and poster campaign experience. The dependent variable is the importance that poster campaigns have in convincing undecided or leaning voters to cast their ballot for the party.

The results provide significant support for the dual purpose of posters in elections and for the argument of their strategic use in line with parties’ optimal campaign strategies. Major party respondents are significantly inclined to evaluate posters’ contribution to wooing undecided voters based on their evaluation of posters’ signaling potential. The greater the perceived signaling value of posters, the more these respondents are likely to value posters’ contribution in increasing the party’s voter base. Conversely, minor party respondents are likely to judge the importance of posters in attracting undecided voters based on posters’ perceived effectiveness in informing voters, and not on their signaling potential. The importance of posters’ role in making the candidate known for major parties only should also be noted as it will become again the focus of Chapter 7; as it will be argued there, major French parties have significant incentives to encourage also a personal vote (e.g. Kreuzer, 2000) as a means of trying to counteract the negative effects of voter volatility. The same pattern of results is seen when it comes to posters importance in wooing leaning voters: major French parties, but not minor ones, are more likely to judge posters’ effectiveness in this regard based on their signaling potential, and their ability to make their candidate known.

Unexpectedly, however, the importance that major parties attach to posters in enlarging the voter base does not depend only of posters’ signaling potential or of that of making their candidates known, but also of their informational role. Given that posters
are credited with very little power in conveying a party’s electoral program to voters, a median rating of their informational potential (i.e. “Not too important”, “2”) will lead, all else equal, to an increase of posters’ role in wooing undecided voters by .5 on a 5 point scale. Conversely, a median rating of posters’ signaling potential (“Important”, “4”) will lead to increase of 1 in the 5 point dependent variable. On the other hand, it might be that parties hope that posters’ street presence acts as a trigger for voters to pay more attention to information reaching them through other communication channels. This explanation is consistent with at least one elite account, who recalled organizing postering activities the same night that their candidate would be on TV. Seeing posters the second day, he explained, would remind people of the candidate and help her stay on their minds for longer (major party official).

Table 5.8 presents the Belgian results with posters’ importance in wooing undecided voters as a dependent variable. The analysis is again split by party type, and the results mirror the patterns in the French sample. The more they value posters’ signaling function, the more importance do Belgian major party respondents attach to posters’ role in wooing new voters to the party’s cause. This is consistent with the argument made by a head of list’s advisor concerning the importance of the “undecided” for whom one “must be very present”. Significantly, minor party respondents do not seem to base their evaluation on the signaling potential of posters; rather for these respondents, it is posters’ ability to communicate the party program that seems to make a difference. The greater the perceived ability of posters to convey the party’s program, the more likely it is for minor party respondents to consider them as important in convincing undecided voters. The importance of making candidates known is noted by both types of
Table 5.8. Dependent Variable: Posters’ Importance in Wooing Undecided Voters (Belgian Results)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Major parties</th>
<th>Minor parties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signal campaign competitiveness</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.13)</td>
<td>(.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make candidate known</td>
<td>.43**</td>
<td>.33**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.13)</td>
<td>(.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform voters about electoral program</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>.38**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.1)</td>
<td>(.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party experience (years)</td>
<td>-.003</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.02)</td>
<td>(.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poster experience (number of postering activities)</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.07)</td>
<td>(10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>1.59**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.67)</td>
<td>(.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries represent regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. ** Indicates significance at p=.05 or better.
respondents when judging posters’ communication importance for undecided voters. Given the preferential component of the Belgian system, this is to be expected. All candidates have strong incentives for self promotion, because the higher their number of individual votes, the higher the likelihood of them getting one of the seats allocated to the party.

**The Role of Postering in Close Elections and Winning Situations**

If poster campaigns have an underlining strategic component, then different parties should use them to send different messages when winning is possible but uncertain. French respondents were asked to rate the importance of doing postering in neighborhoods where the electoral result is expected to be close on a five point scale. Overall, postering in these neighborhoods is perceived to be of “importance” or “great importance” (mean rating=3.83, t (mean>3)=8.8, p=.00). Moreover, major parties tend to value postering in these circumstances more than minor parties (t=1.96, p=.02 one-tailed).

Belgian parties were asked about the importance of doing postering in neighborhoods where they expect their party to perform better than in previous elections. While this is not the same as “close election”, it still taps into the importance of postering when winning is possible but uncertain, particularly for major parties like the Socialists and the Reformist Movement. These parties have constantly shared the first two places in each district, with very similar electoral shares. Consistent with the argument that posters signal strength, Belgian major party respondents are more likely to consider postering in these neighborhoods as “Important” or “Very Important” (mean rating=3.55, t
Conversely, respondents from minor parties tend to assign average or less than average importance to this type of campaign in neighborhoods where they believe that an improvement in the results is at hand (mean rating=2.78, t(mean>3)=-1.1, ns).

To gauge what drives perceptions about the importance of postering when victory is at hand but still uncertain, separate regression analyses were conducted for major and minor parties in France and Belgium. Results for the minor party sample in Belgium were not significant. The rest of these results are presented in Table 5.9. The dependent variables in Table 5.9 is respondents’ estimated importance of postering in neighborhoods where a close outcome (France), respectively an improved vote share (Belgium), is expected.

The results match again the patterns observed with regard to posters importance in wooing undecided and leaning voters. Major party elites are significantly more likely to judge posters effectiveness in these neighborhoods on the basis of their signaling ability; in return, minor party members are marginally more likely to try to use posters in these districts to improve knowledge of their candidate. Two findings stand out from this analysis. On the one hand, there is the strong significant coefficient associated to the signaling terms for major parties in both contexts. On the other hand, not only do coefficients for the informing or signaling function of posters reach lower significance for French minor party respondents, but they fail to achieve any significance in the analysis of the Belgian minor party sample. Taken together with the significantly higher importance that major parties attach to postering in these consequential neighborhoods, these results seem to indicate that postering is indeed the province of major parties, and
Table 5.9. What Makes Posters Important in Close Electoral Contests and Winning Situations? French and Belgian Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Postering in close contests (France)</th>
<th>Postering in winning contests (Belgium)†</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Major parties</td>
<td>Minor parties</td>
<td>Major parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signal campaign competitiveness</td>
<td>.30** (.13)</td>
<td>.13 (.20)</td>
<td>.45** (.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make candidate known</td>
<td>.11 (.09)</td>
<td>.32* (.18)</td>
<td>.13 (.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform voters about electoral program</td>
<td>.12 (.08)</td>
<td>.01 (.19)</td>
<td>.08 (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party experience (years)</td>
<td>.001 (.02)</td>
<td>-.04 (.03)</td>
<td>.01 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poster experience (number of postering activities)</td>
<td>.02 (.06)</td>
<td>-.08 (.15)</td>
<td>.001 (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.03** (.6)</td>
<td>2.4** (1.01)</td>
<td>1.02 (.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries represent regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. ** Indicates significance at p=.05 or better. *Indicates significance at p=.10 or better.

† Results for Belgian minor parties were not significant (analyses available from the author).
that they are perceived as credible signals of campaign competitiveness.

**Poster Placement in Crowded Areas**

Respondents in both countries were asked to evaluate the importance of placing posters in locations with lots of passersby expected, using the same five-point “Importance” scale described for the other variables. Both major and minor party respondents, in both countries seem to assign very high importance to these places (all mean ratings exceed average importance, with the lowest t-statistic for any of the four groups being $t=4.53$, $p=.00$). But what function of posters most exactly drives this importance? The first three columns of Table 5.10 examine the determinants of poster placement in crowded areas in the French case.

First, when the whole sample is considered, we see that the importance of making posters visible to a lot of people is *not* driven by informational considerations. Rather, it seems that what makes parties target crowded places (as the one in Paris in Figure 2.1) is the signaling value of the poster displays. When the analysis is broken down by party majority status however, we are able to apprehend a more complex picture. By using respondents’ direct evaluations of posters’ signaling value to voters and to the opposition separately, we can see that different party types would seem to target significantly different “passersby”: Major party respondents are more likely to choose to poster in crowded places in an effort to emphasize their campaign strength to voters; on the other hand, minor parties seem to target just the opposition.\(^9\) This suggests, once more, that

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9 Additional analyses using the mean signaling value (used in the other regressions) as independent variable showed similar signaling significance (and lack of significance for the informational variables) for both party groups. Results are available from the author.
Table 5.10. Dependent Variable: Importance of Postering in Crowded Places

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>France Major parties</th>
<th>France Minor parties</th>
<th>France Whole sample</th>
<th>Belgium Major parties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signal campaign competitiveness to voters</td>
<td>.28** (.09)</td>
<td>.14 (.13)</td>
<td>.25** (.07)</td>
<td>.19 (.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signal campaign competitiveness to opposition</td>
<td>-.05 (.06)</td>
<td>.39** (.10)</td>
<td>.07 (.06)</td>
<td>.33** (.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make candidate known</td>
<td>.025 (.06)</td>
<td>-.003 (.12)</td>
<td>.02 (.06)</td>
<td>.43** (.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform voters about electoral program</td>
<td>.03 (.05)</td>
<td>.139 (.12)</td>
<td>.05 (.06)</td>
<td>.11 (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major party (Yes=1)</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>-.003 (.13)</td>
<td>.11 (.13)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party experience (years)</td>
<td>-.004 (.01)</td>
<td>.01 (.02)</td>
<td>-.003 (.01)</td>
<td>.02 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poster experience (number of postering activities)</td>
<td>.05 (.04)</td>
<td>.02 (.08)</td>
<td>.05 (.04)</td>
<td>-.01 (.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.34** (.39)</td>
<td>1.92** (.68)</td>
<td>2.90** (.36)</td>
<td>.76 (.78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries represent regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. ** Indicates significance at p=.05 or better.
posters are seen by parties as transmitting credible signals: No voter would expect minor parties to actually gather the strength to win passage to the second round over night. However, a reminder of one’s “presence” might come in useful for any minor party who wants to have a say in the alliances that major parties are forced to strike at the second round (Baldini & Pappalardo, 2009, Chapter 7).

The right side column in Table 5.10 presents the determinants of the poster placement in the Belgian sample. Separate analyses for the “minor party” respondents in the sample, or for the whole Belgian sample produced no significant results and are not displayed in the table.

Unlike the French, Belgian major parties appear to regard postering in crowded places more as a fight for turf with the opposition. This might be because unlike in France, postering in crowded places usually occurs primarily on the public boards put at the joint disposal of parties by municipal authorities – and not in just any crowded location as in France. In fact, a number of major party Belgian elites complained about the continuous covering of their posters by the opposition, and used this as a justification for their retaliation by covering the opposition posters in turn. Unsurprisingly, postering in crowded places also allows major party candidates to make themselves known – that is, to show their face – to as many voters as possible.

The second issue to note with regard to the Belgian results is the lack of significance for the minor party group in the sample, despite the relatively high importance that this group attaches to postering in these places. While the survey only allows us to speculate why this might be the case, the apparent lack of relationship between poster placement choice and poster functions might be due to the fact that minor
parties rarely get a shot at ensuring that their posters remain visible on the public boards. This speculation would, in fact, be consistent with previous elites statements, particularly that of a minor party one, who remarked “[with postering] everybody knows there’s a muscle contest between parties, and particularly between the two major parties, MR and PS, which in certain district areas just cover all the boards in red or blue”.

5.5. Conclusions

Using an original survey of 100+ party members in each of France and Belgium, this chapter has uncovered significant evidence that posters are an important electoral communication tool for all parties in an election, and has provided substantial ammunition in favor of the argument that major and minor parties use postering for significantly different reasons consistent with their optimal electoral strategies.

The chapter began by looking at the two country samples in their entirety. Consistent with the argument that posters are primarily used for signaling, this function appears to be the one that posters are most valued for in elections in France. A similar, albeit slightly more complex pattern of poster functions is apparent in Belgium, where posters’ ability to make a candidate known is the only one exceeding the signaling of competitiveness function in importance. Further analyses of the main candidate feature that posters help publicize have revealed however the predominance of nonverbal signals of candidate quality over ballot identifying information, thereby confirming the conclusions of Chapter 3.

More importantly, these surveys of party members allow us to uncover the complexity of messages that postering helps transmit and to test the strategic
underpinnings of poster use. By breaking down the data analysis by the majority status of respondents’ parties, we see that respondents active in major parties are significantly more likely to attach greater value to posters’ signaling function than minor party respondents. Moreover, in both countries, major party officials are significantly more likely to value posters for their signaling potential when targeting undecided and leaning voters, as well as when attempts are made to tilt the balance in close elections. Conversely, faced with similar problems of reaching undecided and leaning voters, or with close elections, minor party respondents appear to value posters primarily for their informational role. These findings support therefore the assertion that “posters-as-signaling” and “posters-as-information” are not mutually exclusive hypotheses. Rather, once we consider the strategic underpinnings of posting, the expectations laid under each of these hypotheses in Chapter 2 get substantial support.

Some results in this chapter suggest that posters might play more than just one role for each party group. In particular, posters’ role of making the candidate known by conveying primarily her party affiliation emerges quite prominently for major party respondents, and posters’ role of signaling competitiveness to the opposition is sometimes of concern for minor parties. Rather than challenging the assumptions that major parties use posters primarily for signaling and minor parties use them primarily for information, these findings indicate that more analyses are needed for us to get a clearer picture of the roles that political actors assign to posters. Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 provide these supplementary analyses. Chapter 7 uses original software to analyze the marriage between verbal information and nonverbal cues in French candidates’ posters as a function of their party’s majority status.
Chapter 6 provides further evidence that signaling by posters is the province of candidates with significant winning potential only, who make strategic postering decisions in response to messages from their opponents and to the electoral conditions at hand.
Chapter 6:

Their Posters, Our Posters: A Game Theoretical Model of Postering Dynamics

Previous elite interviews and survey evidence have provided considerable support for the “posters-as-signaling” hypothesis. Not only do elites in face-to-face interviews converge on the fact that “posters create a climate of competition” (France) or a “war of colors” (Belgium), but this assessment is reinforced by surveyed party officials who, in both countries, pinpoint posters’ ability to signal electoral competitiveness as an important reason for their use in campaigns. The party officials survey also points to important differences in minor and major parties’ rationales for postering. That is, when trying to attract undecided and leaning voters, or to tilt the balance in a close election, major parties are significantly more likely than minor ones to employ posters for signaling purposes. On the other hand, it seems that when the latter are faced with close contests and uncertain voter allegiances, they are more likely to rely on posters’ informational baggage. These differences reflect the expectations emerging from both the “posters-as-signaling” and the “posters-as-information” hypotheses, and lend support to the argument that posters act as credible signals of electoral competitiveness.
This chapter presents further evidence for this argument by providing a game theoretical model of the rationality of poster campaign spending and by testing its main predictions using data from the 1997 French legislative election. More specifically, the chapter addresses two issues unexplored in previous chapters. The first issue involves the interactive nature of postering activities between different actors in the same district. Street observations and elite interviews provide ample evidence that postering activities are highly dynamic, with actors responding the postering initiatives of others. Yet, since survey responses cannot be matched to specific constituencies, the survey offers limited possibility for a more nuanced understanding of the local dynamics of postering. The second issue concerns the variations in actors’ postering behavior when electoral circumstances themselves vary. The fact of the matter is that even for major parties, there are times when the need to signal strength might not be pressing, like when there is no real challenge to their winning in a district. Since no contextual data was recorded about the respondent’s constituency, the survey could not be used to explore the impact that district-specific conditions (like a party’s historical strength in it, or the presence of a strong challenge to their dominance) might have on actors’ postering behavior. Assuming that postering has an important signaling value, this chapter shows that actors’ postering behavior is rational with respect to both these issues, that is, their poster spending is influenced by their opponents’ postering and reflects the degree of uncertainty about the outcome in their district.

Absent any available Belgian poster expenditures, this chapter focuses uniquely on the French case. I begin by discussing the theoretical incentives that major French party actors have for signaling their electoral competitiveness in view of the electoral context in which they find themselves, and present more survey evidence that indeed, postering fulfills a signaling value for candidates with significant winning potential. Since minor candidates assign little value to postering as signals, the second part of the chapter proposes a simplified game theoretical model of poster interactions.
The game is restricted to the top two candidates for the seat, and, for simplicity reasons, considers only the first round of elections. By modeling poster spending as a function of the interaction between the two major actors (who in turn, are conditioned by the desire to appeal to voters as well as to their own activists), we are able to prove the existence of a Nash Equilibrium of poster behavior. The section discusses its uniqueness and derives predictions of actors’ behavior under conditions of expected close elections. The final part of the chapter tests these predictions using candidate-level spending data in the 1997 legislative elections.

6.1 Incentives for Signaling Competitiveness in the French System

The relative weakness of French parties (Baldini & Pappalardo, 2009, p. 50), together with the importance of “powerful local notables” in French politics (Elgie, 2005, p. 129) can significantly complicate the task that major party candidates have in winning the seat in their district. For one, these factors act as strong incentives for major candidates to actively seek (also) a personal vote from their constituents. As Kreuzer & Stephan (2003) note, with regard to the French legislative elections, “because of the high electoral volatility, even the ‘stars’ of the political scene can be easily voted out. Only a local anchorage with intensive effort at the base and some more local or regional elective mandates can significantly enlarge the chances of re-election [...]. On the other hand, a strong identification of the candidates with national party politics and/or a concentration on governmental affairs can diminish the chances of re-election” (2003, p. 132). In fact, the importance of local notability for electoral success is so “entrenched” that in the 1997-2000 French legislature, “97% of all deputies simultaneously held some sort of elected office at the local level” (Elgie, 2005, p. 131).
In addition to the pressure of cultivating a personal vote, increasing voter volatility further complicates major party candidates’ efforts to win office in the French system (as discussed in Chapter 5). On the one hand, there is evidence that volatility has a strong impact on incumbent turnover rates (Ysmal, 1994). Moreover, even if it doesn’t cause them to lose the seat, volatility can nonetheless seriously affect the margin of political maneuver enjoyed by major election contenders, due to the two-round mechanics of the electoral system. As Baldini & Pappalardo’s (2009) note, the two-round system seriously undermines major parties’ electoral power by providing significant incentives for many minor parties to run in the first round. Despite their low likelihood of getting the seat, these parties might hope to improve their bargaining position at the second ballot, when coalitions are often needed to win the seat (Baldini & Pappalardo, 2009, p. 53).

Faced with increasing electoral unpredictability and under pressure for proving their personal electoral worth, major party candidates have therefore significant incentives to signal their electoral competitiveness both in the first and second round.

Voter volatility affects minor parties too, but as Chapter 5 makes it clear, there are theoretical arguments to believe that these parties benefit from employing different strategies than major ones in response to voters’ waning political attachments. Adams et al.’s study (2006) effectively shows that, unlike major parties, niche parties (the Greens, the Communists and the Extreme Right) get punished at the polls when giving their programs a mainstream appeal. While this study focuses on party programs, it should also have implications on party communications. In particular, rather than using posters to allude to their presumed electoral strength, minor political actors might be better off using this medium to straightforwardly provide information about themselves and their ideological positions. Results presented Chapter 5 suggest that this is indeed the primary reason motivating minor parties’ use of posters.

This chapter presents additional evidence that restricts posters’ signaling function
to candidates with high winning potential only.

One of the questions in the survey of political members asked participants to estimate how the volume of their own party posterings had varied in the course of the last legislative campaign in their own district. They had to choose between the following response options: “remained constant throughout the campaign”, “increased by a little as the campaign advanced”, “increased by a lot as the campaign advanced”, “increased at the beginning and at the end of the campaign, but was constant in the middle of it”, and “increased at the beginning and then remained constant for the rest of the campaign”. If posters are used for signaling purposes, then, all else equal, candidates with significant chances of winning should be more prone to significantly increase their number of posters as the campaign advances. Close to a majority, 49.5% (N=51) of those whose party candidate qualified for the second round estimated that their party’s posterings volume “had increased by a lot” as the campaign advanced, as compared to only 25.7% (N=9) of those whose party candidate had not qualified for the second round.1

It might be argued that candidates who qualified for the second round had undoubtedly more resources at their disposal than the rest of their opponents. But Table 6.1 provides persuasive evidence that this does not explain these differences in responses. In fact, results of the multinomial logit analysis in Table 6.1 show that, as far as second round entrants are concerned,2 this choice is governed by the perceived importance they give to posters’ ability to signal campaign competitiveness. A minus sign in the table indicates higher likelihood that respondents whose candidate competed in the second round would estimate that their party’s posterings had increased by a lot as the campaign advanced. As the first column in Table 6.1 shows, posters’ signaling potential to voters dissuades second round entrants from maintaining a con-

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1Second round status and major party status correlate at .75 in the survey sample.
2A similar analysis for the group of respondents whose candidate did not take part in the second round yielded no significant results. Analyses are available from the author.
Table 6.1. Second Round Entrants: Evolution of Own Postering Volume in the 2007 Legislative Elections (Multinomial Logit Results)†

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Constant volume as campaign advanced</th>
<th>Slightly increased as campaign advanced</th>
<th>Increased at beginning and end of campaign</th>
<th>Increased at beginning then constant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signal campaign competitiveness to voters</td>
<td>-1.02** (0.47)</td>
<td>-.64 (0.54)</td>
<td>.15 (0.84)</td>
<td>.39 (1.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-2.4 (0.36)</td>
<td>-.78** (0.39)</td>
<td>-.91 (0.60)</td>
<td>-.82 (1.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make candidate known</td>
<td>.40 (0.39)</td>
<td>.49 (0.45)</td>
<td>1.50* (0.78)</td>
<td>33.5 (3629.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform voters about electoral program</td>
<td>.33 (0.28)</td>
<td>.35 (0.28)</td>
<td>-2.39** (1.02)</td>
<td>-2.23 (1.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition postering pace</td>
<td>.13** (0.39)</td>
<td>-.66 (0.43)</td>
<td>.22 (0.68)</td>
<td>-17.4 (4001.53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party experience (years)</td>
<td>-.02 (0.05)</td>
<td>-.05 (0.06)</td>
<td>-.35* (0.19)</td>
<td>.06 (0.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poster experience (number of postering activities)</td>
<td>.10 (0.23)</td>
<td>.37 (0.29)</td>
<td>-.25 (0.57)</td>
<td>15.3 (4002.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.29 (2.1)</td>
<td>1.59 (2.49)</td>
<td>2.14 (3.22)</td>
<td>-209.8 (.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>78</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log Likelihood</td>
<td>-69.93</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo-R²</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood Ratio of Joint Significance of Coefficients</td>
<td>$\chi^2_{(28)} = 57.86$ (p = .0008)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Multinomial logit results with standard errors in parentheses. The baseline category is “Increased postering volume by a lot as campaign advanced”. Data from Chapter 5 survey.

** Indicates significance at p=.05 or better. *Indicates significance at p=.10 or better.

†Similar analyses revealed no significance for non-second round entrants
stant posterling volume throughout the campaign, and motivates them to increase the pace of their posterling activities. As the second column shows, a minimal increase in the posterling pace is not enough to establish their credibility. Instead, to show the opposition that they are strong, they are motivated to resort to even more posterling. Moreover, in line with the expectation of a dynamic inter-player interaction in poster campaigns, an increase in the opposition posterling volume provides also a strong incentive to increase one’s own posterling “by a lot”, as opposed to keeping it at constant levels throughout the campaign (first table column). Among party members whose candidate had made it to the second round, only 8% (N=9) of the sample estimated that their posterling volume had “increased at the beginning and at the end of the campaign, but was constant in the middle of it” and only 5% (N=5) estimated that it had “increased at the beginning and then remained constant for the rest of the campaign”.

Consistent with the argument that major actors use posters to convey the strength of their campaign to everybody, second round entrants are more likely to respond to opposition posterling for this very same reason, i.e. for showing that they are competitive. Respondents in the survey were asked to evaluate how important it was to do posterling in areas where a large and visible presence of opposition posters existed. Table 6.2 presents the results of the analyses for both second-round entrants and the rest of the sample, using the “importance of responding to opposition posterling” as a dependent variable. The results show that while second-round entrants regard opposition posters as credible signals of competitiveness, minor parties regard the same display as a limitation of the space they use for conveying information.

3 Respondents were also asked to estimate how the volume of the opposition posterling had varied in the course of the campaign, using the same response options: “remained constant throughout the campaign”, “increased by a little as the campaign advanced”, “increased by a lot as the campaign advanced”, “increased at the beginning and at the end of the campaign, but was constant in the middle of it”, “increased at the beginning and then remained constant for the rest of the campaign”. 30% of the second round entrants (N=29) and 30% of the non second round entrants (N=9) estimated that the opposition posterling had increased by a lot as the campaign advanced.
Table 6.2. Dependent Variable: Importance of Responding to Opposition Postering

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Second Round Entrants</th>
<th>Non-Second Round Entrants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signal campaign competitiveness to voters</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>(.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signal campaign competitiveness to opposition</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.11)</td>
<td>(.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make candidate known</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-.22**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.11)</td>
<td>(.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform voters about electoral program</td>
<td>-.02**</td>
<td>.29*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.003)</td>
<td>(.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party experience (years)</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.01)</td>
<td>(.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poster experience (number of postering activities)</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.06)</td>
<td>(.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.14**</td>
<td>3.18**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.44)</td>
<td>(.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-test for joint significance of coefficients</td>
<td>F( 6, 102) = 23.23</td>
<td>F( 6, 32) = 2.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>p=.00</td>
<td>p=.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R^2</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries represent regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. ** Indicates significance at p=.05 or better. * Indicates significance at p=.10 or better
Data from Chapter 5 survey.
Finally, respondents were also asked about the frequency of their postering activities toward the end of the campaign, prior to the first round. Based on information obtained through elite interviews, the frequency scale ranged from “less than once a week” (coded as 1) to “several times a day” (coded as 6). Reinforcing the confidence in the importance that posters have for major parties, second round entrants more likely to do more frequent postering activities (Mean frequency = 3.64) than the rest of the sample (Mean frequency=2.57, t-statistic for the difference t=3.92, p=.00). Moreover, Table 6.3 shows that this discrepancy can be explained, as we would expect, by parties’ very different rationales to do postering. Whereas the main motivation behind this increased postering pace for those qualified for the second round is provided by posters’ signaling value, minor parties choose to refresh their street poster presence based on their estimated need to make their candidates known.

To get a better idea of these results, assume that all respondents consider posters to be as “Important” a tool of showing credibility to voters and as they are for making their candidates known (i.e. on the scale of 1 to 5 they give both these functions a 4). Then, all else equal, second round entrants are likely to choose to renew their street postering presence every two days or every day, while minor candidates are likely to do so only once a week.

There are therefore strong theoretical and practical reasons to expect poster campaigns to be used for signaling purposes, and there are also strong reasons to expect this function to be restricted to those with the better chance of winning the election (i.e., in the French context, those who enter in the second round of elections). Moreover, if actors use this electioneering tool rationally, then their postering strategies should adapt to the particular electoral conditions under which they are running. The next section explores actors’ postering rationality by means of a formal model.
Table 6.3. Dependent Variable: Postering Frequency at the End of Campaign

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Second Round Entrants</th>
<th>Non-Second Round Entrants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signal campaign competitiveness to voters</td>
<td>.43** (.18)</td>
<td>.01 (.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signal campaign competitiveness to opposition</td>
<td>-.07 (.13)</td>
<td>-.007 (.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make candidate known</td>
<td>-.34** (.14)</td>
<td>-.82** (.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform voters about electoral program</td>
<td>.02** (.004)</td>
<td>.28 (.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party experience (years)</td>
<td>.03 (.02)</td>
<td>-.03 (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poster experience (number of postering activities)</td>
<td>.31 (.29)</td>
<td>-.23 (.63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.05 (.88)</td>
<td>5.71** (1.75)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

F-test for joint significance of coefficients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>F-test for joint significance of coefficients</th>
<th>F(6, 77) =10.60</th>
<th>F(6, 19) = 2.39</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries represent regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. ** Indicates significance at p=.05 or better. Data from Chapter 5 survey.
6.2 A Game Theoretical Model of Postering Behavior

To explore how leading French legislative candidates modify their strategies in response to their opponents’ poster campaigns and to their expectations of the district outcome, I develop a two-player formal model of postering campaign interactions. The basic idea of the game is inspired by street observations and by the insights obtained through elite interviews: The Challenger starts the postering “war” for visual supremacy at the beginning of the campaign; the Incumbent estimates the Challenger’s “threat” and responds with some postering herself; the Challenger observes the Incumbent’s postering effort, updates his beliefs about the Incumbent’s threat and makes another postering move, and so on and so forth; the succession of moves accelerates as the first round of the election approaches and ends on election day. While this is a dynamic game, we observe only the final outcome, that is, the total posters-related spending of both the Incumbent and the Challenger. This formal model has two purposes: first, to determine whether a Nash Equilibrium of postering can be reached through this interaction. The second purpose is to better understand the impact of political actors’ expectations about the election outcome on their postering strategies.

6.2.1 Postering Utilities

This model relies on a previous one of campaign spending (Erikson & Palfrey, 2000). I adapt it for postering activities by defining different utility functions. The electoral utility of postering is defined as a function of the Incumbent’s probability of winning \( P \), the cost of postering \( K \) and the satisfaction \( Q \) that activists derive from having posters in public space. The Incumbent’s probability of winning is itself a function of (the electoral effect of) her own postering, \( I \), of the Challenger’s postering, \( C \), and of
an *a priori* Incumbent margin of winning, $m$. The *a priori* margin of winning helps define each actors’ expectations of the outcome; it is a function of previously known electoral results, and can be thought of as a combination of the Incumbent’s personal popularity in the district and the support her party enjoys in the same district (e.g. her party’s result in the latest electoral contest in the district). Activists’ satisfaction is a function of both candidates’ postering. In light of previous insights from French elite interviews, activists on each side are assumed to derive satisfaction from seeing that their own candidate is “more present” in the streets than her direct opponent.

Putting all these together, we write the utility function for Incumbents from doing postering $I$, when the challenger does postering $C$ as:

$$U_I = P_I(I, C, m) + Q(I - C) - K_I$$

Similarly, the utility function for Challengers from doing postering $C$ is:

$$U_C = 1 - P_C(I, C, m) + Q(C - I) - K_C,$$

where $P_I$ and $P_C$ represent the probability that the Incumbent will win as estimated by the Incumbent and Challenger, respectively.

The expected margin with which the Incumbent will win the election $M$ is a function of her *a priori* margin of winning ($m$) and of a number of postering-related parameters: the effect of her own postering ($g_I(I)$) and the effect of Challenger’s postering ($g_C(C)$). The effects of postering $g_I(I)$ and $g_C(C)$ are expected to vary depending on the actual strength of the candidate (indicated by her type $\theta$). Incumbents can be of “High” or “Low” and Challengers can be of “Weak” or “Strong” type. In the context of the French elections, the type of a candidate could be interpreted as the credibility of her ”‘local notable”’ status (as indicated, for example, by the number of years she has held local elected office). Last, $M$ depends also of some
random noise $\epsilon$, which can be interpreted as representing the effect of external events that are not under the control of either player, but which could potentially affect the district electoral outcome (as, for example, an unforeseen national emergency to which both the Incumbent’s and the Challenger’s party must react). It is important to note that, since both players are serious seat contenders, $M$ is assumed to be the expected margin of Incumbent winning the *the seat*, and not just the first round of the vote.

In mathematical terms, the Incumbent’s expected margin of winning $M$ can effectively be written as:

$$M = m + g_I^\theta(I) - [ng_C^S(C) + (1 - n)g_C^W(C)] + \epsilon,$$

where $n$ is a function of $C$, and represents the Incumbent’s estimated probability that the Challenger is of type “Strong”.

Similarly, the same $M$ is estimated by the Challenger as:

$$M = m + [rg_I^S(I) + (1 - r)g_I^W(I)] - g_C^\theta(C) + \epsilon,$$

where $r$ is a function of $C$, and represents the Challenger’s estimated probability that the Incumbent is of type “High”.

For simplification purposes let us hereafter note the expressions

$$m + g_I^\theta(I) - [ng_C^S(C) + (1 - n)g_C^W(C)] = \pi_I$$

$$m + [rg_I^S(I) + (1 - r)g_I^W(I)] - g_C^\theta(C) = \pi_C$$

Given these electoral outcome expectations, the incumbent wins if and only if $M > 0$, that is, iff $\epsilon > -\pi_I$ and $\epsilon > -\pi_C$. Assume that $\epsilon$ is normally distributed and centered on zero (i.e. assume that an Incumbent’s likelihood of winning is not
affected by the presence of some major external event over which she has no control). From an Incumbent’s point of view, her probability of winning can therefore be written as:

$$P_I(I = \text{wins}) = 1 - \int_{-\infty}^{-\pi_I} \phi(t) dt$$  \hspace{1cm} (7)

And, similarly, from the Challenger’s point of view:

$$P_C(I = \text{wins}) = 1 - \int_{-\infty}^{-\pi_C} \phi(t) dt$$ \hspace{1cm} (8)

Using (6), (7) and (8), we can write the two utilities from postering for the Incumbent and Challenger as:

$$U_I = 1 - \int_{-\infty}^{-\pi_I} \phi(t) dt + Q(I - C) - K_I(I)$$ \hspace{1cm} (9)

$$U_C = \int_{-\infty}^{-\pi_C} \phi(t) dt - Q(I - C) - K_C(C)$$ \hspace{1cm} (10)

Assume that for both players, the cost of postering starts from very low ($K_I(0) = 0, K_C(0) = 0$), and then increases very rapidly ($K' > 0, K'' > 0$). This rapid increase is not due less to the cost of the posters themselves, and more to the losses candidates incur by not allocating that money to a different campaign activity that presumably could win them more votes. Further assumptions can be made about a player’s electoral gains from postering ($g$). Electoral gains increase at first for any type ($g' > 0$); however, they do so at a slower pace the higher the postering level ($g'' < 0$). Furthermore, $g$ is assumed to be higher, and increase more rapidly for High/Strong types than for Low/Weak ones (i.e. $(g^H_I)' > (g^L_I)'$, $(g^S_C)' > (g^W_C)'$). Both the electoral gain function and the cost function are represented in Figure 6.1. Finally, for simplicity purposes, rather than assuming two different functions expressing
activists’ satisfaction, suppose that $Q$ is symmetric function with regard to the x axis (i.e. $Q(C-I) = -Q(I-C)$), as in Figure 6.2. Activists’ satisfaction increases at first, but the pace starts declining at higher levels of poster dominance of one’s candidate (i.e. $Q' > 0$; $Q''$ is negative for $I - C > 0$ and positive for $I - C < 0$).

\[ g(I) \]

**Figure 6.1.** Incumbent’s electoral returns, $g$, and costs of posterizing, $K$, as a function of their own posterizing $I$

\[ Q(I-C) \]

**Figure 6.2.** Activists’ satisfaction function
6.2.2 Nash Equilibrium

Proposition 1 Assuming that utilities from postering take the form of equations (10) and (11), there is at least one postering Nash Equilibrium, defined as a pair of optimal levels of postering \((I^*, C^*)\) from which none of the two players has incentive to deviate.

Proof of Proposition 1. To uncover the existence of a Nash Equilibrium, we maximize the equations (10) and (11) in \(I\) and \(C\), thereby obtaining:

\[
F_I = \frac{\partial(U_I)}{\partial I} = \phi(\pi_I^*)(g_i(I^*))' + Q'(I^* - C^*) - K'_I(I^*) = 0
\]

\[
F_C = \frac{\partial(U_C)}{\partial C} = \phi(\pi_C^*)(g_C(C^*))' + Q'(I^* - C^*) - K'_C(C^*) = 0
\]

By varying the Incumbent’s postering \(I\) from 0 to \(\infty\), we see that for all \(m\) and \(C\) there exists at least one \(I^*\) maximizing the equation (11). Similarly, for all \(I\) and \(m\), there exists at least one \(C^*\) that maximizes (12).

6.2.3 Uniqueness of Postering Equilibrium

Assume (as all the evidence leads us to believe) that neither the Incumbent nor the Challenger knows from the start what the postering equilibrium will be. Rather, an equilibrium point is reached through a dynamic process of mutual adjustment and re-adjustment to the postering of the other player, so that, in effect, the evolution of the two-player interaction can be represented as in Figure 6.3. The Challenger starts the game, by doing postering \(C = C^* + \delta C_1\) at Step 1, where \(\delta\) represents a small deviation from the quantity of postering in equilibrium. At Step 2, the Incumbent observes the Challenger’s postering, and responds with her own \(I = I^* + \delta I_1\). At Step 3, it is the Challenger’s turn to respond to the Incumbent’s postering by doing his own \(C = C^* + \delta C_2\). At Step 4, the incumbent does \(I = I^* + \delta I_1\). And so on, and so forth: this interaction process continues until election day.
Given the proven existence of a Nash Equilibrium, we must assume that each player wants to maximize her electoral utility from posterering at each step of the game. Moreover, \( \delta \) becomes smaller and smaller, until the two players converge on the equilibrium point \((I^*, C^*)\). In effect, after the first three steps of the game, we have:

\[
\begin{aligned}
F_I(I^* + \delta I_1, C^* + \delta C_1, m) &= 0 \\
F_C(I^* + \delta I_1, C^* + \delta C_2, m) &= 0,
\end{aligned}
\]

with \( \delta C_1 < \delta C_2 \). After three other more steps of the game, we have:

\[
\begin{aligned}
F_I(I^* + \delta I_2, C^* + \delta C_2, m) &= 0 \\
F_C(I^* + \delta I_2, C^* + \delta C_3, m) &= 0,
\end{aligned}
\]

with \( \delta I_1 < \delta I_2 \)

The equilibrium uniqueness depends on the properties of the \((I^*, C^*)\) equilibrium point, which we can investigate using Taylor’s series. With Taylor’s expansion, the equation system (13) can be approximated to:

\[
\begin{aligned}
F_I(I^*, C^*, m) + \delta I_1 \frac{\partial F_I}{\partial I}(I^*, C^*, m) + \delta C_1 \frac{\partial F_I}{\partial C}(I^*, C^*, m) &= 0 \\
F_C(I^*, C^*, m) + \delta I_1 \frac{\partial F_C}{\partial I}(I^*, C^*, m) + \delta C_2 \frac{\partial F_C}{\partial C}(I^*, C^*, m) &= 0
\end{aligned}
\]
Similarly, the equation system (14) can be approximated to:

\[
\begin{align*}
F_I(I^*, C^*, m) + \delta I_2 \frac{\partial F_I}{\partial I}(I^*, C^*, m) + \delta C_2 \frac{\partial F_I}{\partial C}(I^*, C^*, m) &= 0 \\
F_C(I^*, C^*, m) + \delta I_2 \frac{\partial F_C}{\partial I}(I^*, C^*, m) + \delta C_3 \frac{\partial F_C}{\partial C}(I^*, C^*, m) &= 0
\end{align*}
\]

(16)

A simple calculation shows that, for \( n \) iterations of the interaction, \( \delta I_n = \delta I_1 A^{n-1} \), and \( \delta C_n = \delta C_1 A^{n-1} \), where \( A = \frac{\partial F_C}{\partial C} \frac{\partial F_I}{\partial I} + \frac{\partial F_C}{\partial I} \frac{\partial F_I}{\partial C} \).

The equilibrium is unique if and only if \( A < 1 \), that is, iff:

\[
\frac{\partial F_C}{\partial C} \frac{\partial F_I}{\partial I} - \frac{\partial F_C}{\partial I} \frac{\partial F_I}{\partial C} > 0
\]

(17)

**Proposition 2** When the Incumbent’s postering exceeds the Challenger’s, the existence of a unique Nash Equilibrium is assured when postering costs increase sufficiently rapidly. Moreover, a unique Nash Equilibrium is almost always observed even when costs do not increase at a fast pace.

**Proof of Proposition 2.** When the Incumbent’s postering exceeds the Challenger’s we can see that three of the terms in \( A \) never change sign. That is, (1) \( \frac{\partial F_I}{\partial I} < 0 \), (2) \( \frac{\partial F_C}{\partial I} < 0 \) and (3) \( \frac{\partial F_I}{\partial C} < 0 \). A sufficient (but not necessary) condition for the postering equilibrium to be unique then is that \( \partial F_C \partial C < 0 \). This translates into the following inequality:

\[
\frac{\partial F_C}{\partial C} = -\phi'(\pi_C)(g_C^\theta)^2 + \phi(\pi_C)(g_C^\theta)'' - Q''(I - C) - K_C''(C) < 0
\]

(18)

The negative inequality assumption in equation (18) is not unwarranted, given that costs for postering are expected to increase extremely rapidly (i.e. \( K_C'' > 0 \)). Moreover, only in very rare cases could this assumption not hold: when the election result is expected to be midway between close and lopsided (\( \phi(\pi_C) \neq 0 \)), and when activists’

\[\text{footnote}{Erikson & Palfrey (2000) make the same assumption of rising costs in their model.}\]
dissatisfaction with the Incumbent’s postering dominance increases very rapidly ($Q''$ is high). However, given the other terms of $A$, it is safe to assume that even in these cases $A < 1$.

**Proposition 3** If the costs of postering rise sufficiently fast, there is also a unique postering equilibrium when the Challenger does more postering than the Incumbent. Moreover, the equilibrium uniqueness is favored when either:

1. Activists’ satisfaction has reached its maximum, or

2. The Challenger estimates that the election will be closer than the Incumbent expects

3. The Challenger estimates that he gets better electoral returns from postering than the Incumbent.

Proof of Proposition 3. The analysis becomes a little more complicated when the Challenger has the upper hand in terms of postering. In this case, the sign of $\frac{\partial F_C}{\partial I} \frac{\partial F_I}{\partial C}$ depends on (a) the speed with which activists change the satisfaction they derive from postering ($Q''$), (b) the beliefs that each of the players harbors about the election outcome ($\phi'(\pi_I)$ and $\phi'(\pi_C)$) and their expected electoral benefits from postering ($g_I$ and $g_C$).

Just as in the previous case, if we assume that postering costs rise sufficiently quickly, $\frac{\partial F_C}{\partial I} \frac{\partial F_I}{\partial C}$ will always be negative and able to offset any sign change in the other terms. Moreover, a series of simple calculations leads to three observations about the conditions under which, all else equal, the uniqueness of the postering equilibrium is favored:

First, irrespective of all other parameters, $\frac{\partial F_C}{\partial I} \frac{\partial F_I}{\partial C}$ will always be negative, and a unique equilibrium will always be observed when the Challenger’s activists reach complete satisfaction with the level of postering (i.e. $Q'' \rightarrow 0$).
Assume however that activists’ satisfaction has not reached its maximum. Then, by developing the expression in equation (17), we can see that a unique equilibrium will always be favored when \( \phi'(\pi^*_I) < \phi'(\pi^*_C) \). This means that we should always expect a unique posterering equilibrium when the Challenger believes the election to be closer than the Incumbent believes. The same development also shows that the possibility for a unique equilibrium increases when \((g^0_C)' > (g^0_I)'\) and when \((g^0_C)'' > (g^0_I)''\).

In other words, neither the Challenger, nor the Incumbent will have any incentives to deviate from the equilibrium if the Challenger estimates that her electoral returns for posterering are higher, and decreasing less rapidly than the Incumbent’s. Note that this condition makes it more likely that, in the case of a unique posterering equilibrium, the Challenger is either of type “Strong”, or if his type is “Weak”, the Incumbent is also of type “Low”.

### 6.2.4 The Evolution of the Posterering Equilibrium in Close Elections

If posters are used as credible signals of electoral competitiveness, then posterering should, all else equal, increase when the Incumbent’s a priori margin of winning is waning. The reasoning behind this expectation is simple: electoral uncertainty should give competitive actors additional incentives to prove their “strength”, adding to the credibility of their winning potential.

To evaluate the posterering behavior under conditions of an expected close elections, we take the total derivatives of equations 11 and 12 with respect to \(m\) and set each equation to zero. In matrix terms, this equation system is equivalent with:

\[
\begin{pmatrix}
\frac{\partial F_I}{\partial I} & \frac{\partial F_I}{\partial C} \\
\frac{\partial F_C}{\partial I} & \frac{\partial F_C}{\partial C}
\end{pmatrix}
\begin{pmatrix}
\frac{dI^*}{dm} \\
\frac{dC^*}{dm}
\end{pmatrix} =
\begin{pmatrix}
-\frac{\partial F_I}{\partial m} \\
-\frac{\partial F_C}{\partial m}
\end{pmatrix},
\]

(19)
To evaluate the evolution of the postering equilibrium when elections are expected to be close, we must thus evaluate the signs of \( \frac{dI^*}{dm} \) and \( \frac{dC^*}{dm} \), given by:

\[
\frac{dI^*}{dm} = \frac{1}{\det M} \left( \frac{\partial F_I}{\partial C} \frac{\partial F_C}{\partial m} - \frac{\partial F_C}{\partial I} \frac{\partial F_I}{\partial m} \right) 
\]

(20)

\[
\frac{dC^*}{dm} = \frac{1}{\det \Gamma} \left( \frac{\partial F_C}{\partial I} \frac{\partial F_I}{\partial m} - \frac{\partial F_I}{\partial C} \frac{\partial F_C}{\partial m} \right),
\]

(21)

where \( \det \Gamma \) is the determinant of the left side matrix. It is important to note that this determinant is identical to the condition of equilibrium uniqueness (equation17). By assuming that this determinant is always positive, we automatically place ourselves under conditions of equilibrium uniqueness in close elections. Moreover, this also means that the signs of \( \frac{dI^*}{dm} \) and \( \frac{dC^*}{dm} \) depend of the signs of \( \frac{\partial F_I}{\partial C} \frac{\partial F_C}{\partial m} \) and \( \frac{\partial F_C}{\partial I} \frac{\partial F_I}{\partial m} \), respectively.

**Proposition 4** When the Incumbent’s postering exceeds the Challenger’s, Incumbents will always engage in more postering the closer the election outcome is perceived to be.

*Proof of Proposition 4.* A simple calculation shows that when \( I > C \), \( \frac{\partial F_I}{\partial C} \frac{\partial F_C}{\partial m} < 0 \), ensuring that in all cases, \( \frac{dI^*}{dm} < 0 \).

**Corollary 1** “High” type Incumbents will increase their postering more than “Low” type incumbents, the closer the election outcome is expected to be.

*Proof.* Our term of focus, \( \frac{dI^*}{dm} \), decreases the higher the value of \( \frac{\partial F_I}{\partial C} \). All else equal, \( \frac{\partial F_{I=High}}{\partial C} > \frac{\partial F_{I=Low}}{\partial C} \).

**Proposition 5** When the a priori margin of winning \( m \) of the Incumbent decreases and \( I > C \), Challengers will choose to do more postering if:

1. Their activists dissatisfaction has reached its maximum, or
2. They estimate that, in order to have a similar electoral effect, they need to do more postering than the Incumbent, or

3. They estimate that, despite the expected closeness of the outcome, they are still trailing behind.

**Proof of Proposition 5.** The Challenger’s postering behavior when the Incumbent has the upper hand in terms of postering is less straightforward. For simplicity’s sake, assume that both players know if the other player is Strong (High) or Weak (Low). Then, a closer examination of equation (21) shows that the Challenger’s will increase postering in close elections only when the following inequality holds:

\[
Q''[\pi^*_C \phi(\pi^*_C) (g^\theta_C)' - \pi^*_I \phi(\pi^*_I) (g^\theta_I)' ] \geq 0
\]

(22)

The first conclusion is that, in close elections, Challengers will choose to increase their postering when their activists have reached the bottom of their dissatisfaction with the Incumbent’s postering dominance (that is, \(Q'' \to 0\)). In this case, the Challenger has incentives to cater to his activists and improve their morale and to show that they shouldn’t be “counted out” of the electoral race just yet.

Consider now the case when \(Q''\) is not in the vicinity of zero (i.e. the Incumbent’s postering exceeds the Challenger’s, but this difference is not overwhelming). In this case, the Challenger will choose to do more postering if and only if \((\pi^*_C \phi(\pi^*_C) (g^\theta_C)') - \pi^*_I \phi(\pi^*_I) (g^\theta_I)' \leq 0\).

While this expression depends on the exact values of the electoral gain functions for each type and the Incumbent’s expected margin of winning, we can nevertheless analyze it in two cases of interest.

First, assume that both the Incumbent and the Challenger harbor similar expectations with regard to the Incumbent’s margin of winning (i.e. \(\pi^*_I \approx \pi^*_C\)). In this case, the Challenger will increase his postering only if \((g^\theta_I)' > (g^\theta_C)'\), that is, only when he
estimates that in order to match the electoral effect of the Incumbent’s postering, he needs to do more postering than her. In this sense, all else equal, we can expect Challengers to be more willing to increase their postering when facing a “High” rather than a “Low” Incumbent. Moreover, all else equal again, “Weak” Challengers should do more postering than “Strong” ones under these conditions.

Suppose now that the Challenger estimates that both he and the Incumbent receive similar electoral returns from postering (i.e. \( (g^\theta_I)' \approx (g^\theta_C)' \)).\(^5\) In this case, Challengers will increase their postering if \( \phi'(\pi^*_I) > \phi'(\pi^*_C) \), that is, if despite the expectation of a close electoral outcome, they believe they are still considerably trailing behind.

By examining these two cases simultaneously, we see that, all else equal, “Strong” type Challengers should be less likely to increase their postering when facing a “Low” type Incumbent. This makes intuitive sense, because presumably “Strong” Challengers would be much better off by allocating financial resources to other campaign activities than posters when facing a lower quality opponent.

**Proposition 6** When the Challenger’s postering exceeds the Incumbent’s, both Challenger and Incumbent are more likely to engage in increased postering the closer the election is expected to be.

**Proof of Proposition 6.** As in the previous case, we can see that the sign of the two terms of interest, \( \frac{dI^*}{dm} \) and \( \frac{dC^*}{dm} \) depends of (a) activists’ satisfaction from postering \( (Q'' \), (b) of the expectations each player harbors about the closeness of the election outcome \( (\phi'(\pi^*_I) \) and \( \phi'(\pi^*_C) \)), as well as (c) of the expected electoral gains each of them derives from postering \( ((g^\theta_I)' \) and \( (g^\theta_C)' \)).

By expanding the terms in equations (20) and (21) a simple calculation shows that, irrespective of all other terms, both players will increase their postering when

---

\(^5\)Note that this assumption excludes cases in which “Weak” Challengers are facing “High” Incumbents, or the reverse.
activists' satisfaction has reached either its maximum or its minimum. Moreover, by keeping activists' satisfaction constant, \( \phi'(\pi^*_C)(g^\theta_C)' > \phi'(\pi^*_I)(g^\theta_I)' \) becomes a sufficient condition for both players to increase their postering in close elections when \( I < C \). These conditions are both identical with those favoring a unique equilibrium, as discussed in the previous section. The simple existence of a unique equilibrium in the case of \( I < C \) (as assured by \( A = \text{det}\Gamma > 0 \)) makes it therefore extremely likely that both players will increase their postering the closer they perceive the election outcome to be.

In short, under all conditions, there is good reason to expect increases in postering from both the Incumbent and the Challenger, the closer the election is expected to be.

This prediction is tested in the next section using expenditure data from the French 1997 elections.

### 6.3 Poster Spending Strategies in the 1997 French Legislative Elections

A primary test of the main model prediction can be conducted using an original expenditure data set from the 1997 French legislative elections, collected from the French Archives. The data set includes detailed poster expenses of candidates in the 21 Parisian constituencies, as found in their campaign expenses declarations. In France, all candidates are entitled to state aid for a minimal number of posters, intended for display on special state-provided billboards next to all voting locations. Candidates are, however, required to declare all additional expenses for posters that do not qualify for the above state reimbursement. In particular, a certain section of their election expenditures declaration focuses on the additional money spent on poster prints. Candidates are also required to declare expenses they incurred as part of the organization of their campaign (in the case of posters, that would mean for example,
glue or brushes). They can also declare transportation costs, like for example, the gas used to get from one postering location to the other.

A detailed examination of the expenditure files of the 40 Incumbents and Challengers who competed in the first and second round of the 1997 legislative elections in the 21 districts of Paris\(^6\) shows that, with the exception of one Incumbent, all candidates reported expenses incurred for additional poster prints. Unfortunately, candidates differ in their decision to include transportation receipts and/or receipts for postering-related materials (like glue or brushes). While these expenses certainly exist for every candidate, a non-significant number chose to ignore them, by declaring them as zero or by not providing any details about them and simply citing a round number. Consequently, the analyses below use only the “spending for additional poster prints” since it is the most reliable proxy for “spending on postering”.

The game theoretical model predicts that both Incumbents and Challengers will increase their postering the slimmer the Incumbent’s a priori margin of winning \(m\).

The analysis employs three different measures for this a priori margin. The first is the most recent indication of Incumbent’s support in the district: her margin of victory in the last legislative election prior to 1997, calculated as the vote percentage separating her from her opponent in the final round of that election. The second measure is the most recent indication of support for the Incumbent’s party in the district: the party’s electoral margin in the last presidential election prior to 1997. Third, an average was computed between the Incumbent’s own margin of victory in the 1993 legislative election and her party’s winning margin in the previous 1995 presidential election. Table 6.4 gives the distribution of dependent and the independent variables in the sample, with the Incumbent’s margin of winning measured in percentages and the “Additional poster prints expenses” expressed in French Francs.

\(^6\)Data for two Incumbents were missing from the Archives files
Table 6.4. 1997 Legislative Candidates: Sample Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. dev.</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Entire Sample</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional poster prints expenses</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>18964.85</td>
<td>9956.959</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>40723.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(French Francs)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993 Legislative margin of winning (%)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>63.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995 Presidential margin of winning (%)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
<td>70.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average margin of winning 1993-1995 (%)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>67.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Incumbents Only</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional poster prints expenses</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19462.5</td>
<td>10616.3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>38329.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(French Francs)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political experience</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Years since first elected position)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Challengers Only</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional poster prints expenses</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18514.6</td>
<td>9562.5</td>
<td>4892</td>
<td>40723.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(French Francs)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political experience</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5.14</td>
<td>6.02</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Years since first elected position)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6.5. Dependent Variable: Additional Poster Prints Expenses (French Francs)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Entire Sample</th>
<th>Incumbents Only</th>
<th>Challengers Only</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1 (`93 margin)</td>
<td>Model 2 (`95 margin)</td>
<td>Model 3 (combined margin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1 (`93 margin)</td>
<td>Model 2 (`95 margin)</td>
<td>Model 3 (combined margin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1 (`93 margin)</td>
<td>Model 2 (`95 margin)</td>
<td>Model 3 (combined margin)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Independent variables**

1993 Legislative margin of winning

-249.8** (79.21) - - -308.91** (130.87) - - -227.66** (103.69)

1995 Presidential margin of winning

-185.44** (72.19) - - -196.08 (124.8) - - -188.5* (92.1)

Average margin of winning 1993-1995

-217.9** (76.13) - - -250.15* (129.32) - - -209.97** (98.2)

Constant

23783.3** (2301.32) 21581.8** (2009.6) 22626.7** (2150.8) 23700.8** (3422.57) 20616.5** (3105.5) 22002.9** (3274.9) 24211.1** (3223.2) 22514.7** (2752.2) 23369.7** (2975.02)

Adj. R square

.20 .13 .17 .23 .09 .15 .16 .13 .15

N

37 37 37 16 16 16 21 21 21

Note: Entries represent regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. ** Indicates significance at p=.05 or better. * Indicates significance at p=.10 or better.
Table 6.5 provides a first test of the prediction that postering will increase the slimmer the Incumbent’s a priori margin of winning, using the proxies described above for both the amount of postering (I and C respectively) and Incumbent a priori margin of winning (m). The results are presented without three Incumbent outliers, who, despite having a handsome previous electoral advantage in the constituency, engaged in lavish spending on additional posters. The main prediction of the model receives support for all three measures of winning margin, and it is robust not only in the entire sample, but also when we consider Incumbents and Challengers separately. In effect, the data show that, as the a priori margin of winning increases, expenditures on additional poster prints decrease, with 6 of the 9 coefficients for m significant at p=.05 level, and two other significant at p=.07 level. Moreover, the variation in the previous Incumbent margin of winning explains between 9 and 23% of the variation in candidates’ decision to purchase additional poster prints for their election campaign.

One surprise in Table 6.5 is that the winning margin measures matter less for Incumbents than for Challengers and this finding warrants additional discussion. One possible reason for this difference could be the specific circumstances of the 1997 legislative election in France. In fact, while the previous one, in 1993, had seen a landslide win for the center-right (20 of the 21 elected MPs for Paris were from the RPR, the major party on the center-right, or its allies), the 1997 election was triggered by the unexpected dissolution of the French National Assembly against the background of significant citizen dissatisfaction with the center-right government. The election gave the Socialists a resounding victory and led only to the second period of “co-habitation” in the history of the Fifth French Republic. The explanation here

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7 The exclusion of these outliers increased the correlation between the Incumbent’s previous margin of winning and her additional poster spending from −.15 to −.45. The outliers were determined by means of scatterplots. The mean additional spending without the three outliers decreases from 19462.5 to 17399.1 French Francs for the Incumbent sample.

8 Interestingly, controlling for a candidate’s prior political experience did not yield any significant results, and given the low number of cases, the variable was dropped from the tests. Results are available from the author.
is that Incumbents might have felt less safe, and therefore more likely to spend more on posterizing even when objective measures indicated the safety of their seat.

There is however an alternative way to increase our confidence in the direction and significance of the relation between an Incumbent’s a priori margin of winning and candidates’ additional spending on posters. While collecting additional data might be a future long-term solution, the reliability of the coefficients presented in Table 6.5 can be verified by means of bootstrapping. This allows us to provide estimates of the independent variable coefficient in many random subsamples of cases selected from the original sample. By selecting a large enough number of subsamples we can obtain a sufficiently large number of estimated coefficients to make a more informed judgment of their sign and significance. If the relationship between the two variables is the one predicted by the model, then we should observe that 95% of the estimated coefficients for the independent variable are negative.

To provide an additional test of the main prediction, a nonparametric bootstrapping technique was therefore applied to the whole sample, and also separately to the Incumbent and to the Challenger samples. When the whole candidate sample was bootstrapped, this resulted in 1500 different subsamples of N=17 candidates. Another 1500 different samples of N=17 were created just from the Challenger sample, and another 1500 different subsamples of N=12 were created just from the Incumbent sample. Table 6.6 presents the bootstrap estimate (i.e. the average estimated coefficient over the 1500 samples in each case) of the effect that the a priori margin of winning has on additional purchases of poster prints.

Table 6.6 reinforces the confidence in the main prediction of the model. The negative intervals in which the a priori margin of winning coefficient is expected to fall show that in competitive districts all major contenders for the seat choose to do more posterizing. This finding is consistent across all the nine models in the Table, for all measures of the Incumbent’s previous electoral advantage. Eight of 9 estimated
Table 6.6. The Impact of the a Priori Margin of Winning on Additional Poster Prints Expenses (Nonparametric Bootstrap Estimates)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Entire Sample</th>
<th>Incumbents Only</th>
<th>Challengers Only</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Number of replications=1500)</td>
<td>(Number of replications=1500)</td>
<td>(Number of replications=1500)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Observed estimate</td>
<td>Bias</td>
<td>Std. Error</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993 Legislative margin of winning</td>
<td>-163.4</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>79.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995 Presidential margin of winning</td>
<td>-126.9</td>
<td>-2.2</td>
<td>61.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average margin of winning 1993-1995</td>
<td>-145.7</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>70.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The estimated bootstrap model is “Y=a +b*(a priori margin)”. Original sample sizes for each group are identical with those reported in Table 6.5. The bootstrap sample size for the entire sample and the Challenger group is N_B= 17, and for the Incumbent group is N_B=12. Reported confidence interval values assume the normal distribution for the entire sample and the Challenger group. For the Incumbent group, confidence interval values are bias-corrected.
coefficients for the “a priori margin of winning” are significant at p=.05 and in the expected direction. As expected, the same bias observed in the original sample of Incumbents translates into the bootstrap estimates of the a priori margin of winning, justifying the bias correction in the confidence intervals. All other confidence intervals assume a normal distribution of the data.

6.4 Conclusions

Acting on previous evidence of posters’ role of signaling an actor’s electoral competitiveness, this chapter has accomplished three things. The first section has provided additional survey-based support for the assumption that signaling by postering is the domain of actors with significant winning potential only. Most importantly however, this chapter has provided a theoretical model which allows us to predict how rational, credible contenders will respond not only to the postering of their closest opponent, but also to the electoral conditions under which they compete in the district. By confirming the main prediction of the game theoretical model, the data analysis of poster expenditures in the 1997 election addresses both aspects of actors’ postering strategies. First, an increased reliance on postering in close elections is expected to be observed only when a unique Nash Equilibrium exists in the model. In other words, the significance of the results is an implicit proof that Challengers and Incumbents do indeed engage in a dynamic interaction when it comes to postering. Second, the consistently negative sign and significance of the coefficient for the “a priori margin of winning” in the 1997 data analyses shows that resources to this type of campaign increase when the need for signaling electoral strength is most pressing, and decrease in conditions of lopsided elections.

The theoretical and empirical analyses in this chapter contribute in two ways to our understanding of poster campaigns. On one hand, they provide additional
confirmation that posters are an important tool in the campaign arsenals of major party candidates in particular, one which is used rationally: the reliance on posters is a direct function of the uncertainty about the outcome and the behavior of other candidates. At the same time, the simplicity of the model means that it can be easily adapted to other multiparty electoral settings with single member districts (e.g. the SMP vote in Germany, or the SMP elections in India).

This chapter concludes the discussion of political actors’ postering behavior. But strategic choices with regard to poster campaigns involve not only their number, but also their content. My final chapter examines Cell # 1 of Table 1.1 in more detail, and in doing so, explores the rationales for the visual characteristics of posters.
Chapter 7:

Know Me, Love Me, Fear Me: The Anatomy of Candidate Poster Design in the 2007 French Legislative Elections

Previous chapters have provided significant evidence that political actors make strategic decision with regard to the sheer number and spatial placement of posters due to the signaling and informational value of this type of communication. This chapter shifts the focus of attention from the phenomenon of postering to the content of posters themselves, to its signaling and informational value, and to candidates’ poster content choices.

Are candidates strategic in their poster content decisions? That is, are visual messages in posters influenced by candidates’ stakes in the election? Or is poster content more or less uniform across the entire candidate pool, irrespective of their winning potential? This is the problem. The fact is that, while posters offer little space for complex argumentations, there is significant evidence pointing to the importance of nonverbal (visual) communication in voters’ evaluation of candidates in a variety of systems (for a recent review, see Ottati & Deiger, 2002). Research has provided strong evidence of the importance of emotional reactions to political stimuli (e.g. Marcus, 2002),

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1 A version of this chapter is will appear as an article in Political Communication (2009).
and of the persuasive power of visuals in candidate TV political ads (Brader, 2005). On the other hand, while poster campaigns are district-based, local campaigns can be quite effective in improving fortunes at the polls, especially in systems where candidates have incentives to seek a personal vote (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Denver, Hands & MacAllister, 2004; Carty & Eagles, 1999). Moreover, research on major and niche parties (Adams et al., 2006) suggests that candidates from these different parties might follow different strategies to improve their electoral performance.

Building on the interviews with French political elites and research on visual communication, emotions in politics, and major/niche party strategies, this chapter provides compelling evidence that candidates not only use posters as an important tool to provide key factual and nonverbal information about themselves, but that poster content is strategic, depending upon the candidate’s political status. In a nutshell, I show that whereas major party candidates rely on their own visuals to signal their high-quality credentials for the job (which they can hope to win), niche candidates, with no real shot to a parliament seat, emphasize party and ideological cues to highlight their commitment to their party.

To address poster communication purposes, this chapter complements Chapter 3 by engaging in a computerized spatial poster content analysis of 256 candidate posters in the first round of the 2007 French legislative elections. France is an excellent case, since

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2 Alternatively, poster design could be approached from a semiotic perspective, focused on the identification of cultural political visual symbols and their expected effect (e.g. Jowett & O’Donnell, 2006). Research (e.g. Quéré, 1991) provides evidence that candidates are eager to associate themselves with symbols (colors, iconic objects). A purely semiotic analysis has two downsides, however. The first is the difficulty of identifying corresponding symbols (colors, shapes, objects) in different cultural settings, thereby hindering future comparative analysis of poster content. Second, by forcing (political) advertising into a culturally determined frame, we risk overlooking the nonverbal side of it that does not take advantage of culturally determined symbols.
its system and political traditions provide different incentives to candidates for either a personal or a party-vote. The chapter proceeds by discussing the theoretical foundations for poster content communication and candidate strategy. It then introduces the data and data analysis computer tool. I then test 12 propositions regarding major and niche candidates’ strategies for making voters “know” them, “love” their good qualities and the impact of these strategies at the polls. Conclusions follow.

7.1. Communicating through Posters: Factual vs. Nonverbal Information

One of the most important roles of election campaigns is to inform the public about parties, candidates and their policies (e.g. Schmitt-Beck & Farrell, 2002), and elites are among the main actors disseminating this information to the public (Zaller, 1992). Faced with an incredibly complex political world, people often rely on information cues to reduce the cognitive load in political decisions (e.g. Lupia, 1992, Sniderman, Brody & Tetlock, 1991). Lau (2003, p. 45) lists several such rules of thumb: when citizens are unfamiliar with candidates in an election, they can vote by “applying partisan [affiliation] and ideological” cues; similarly, voting for the person recommended by a trustworthy source, or whose name sounds most familiar can be other decision shortcuts.

Posters, we have seen, can play this informational role, particularly for actors without a real chance of winning the election. Given the limited space on posters, and how ordinary people process political information, we would expect the informational role of posters to be focused on conveying easy-to-process information cues: the candidate’s name, the party on behalf of whom they run, and where they stand on important issues (through a short slogan). Chapter 3 provides significant elite
confirmation that name recognition and partisan cues are indeed important aspects that political actors attempt to transmit through their poster design.

Yet we have seen also posters’ role is not reduced by any means to helping publicize ballot-related information on a candidate. Instead, in most elite interviews, the primary element mentioned in relation to what the poster had to convey was the candidate’s picture. “We had to put up his face everywhere” [so people can vote for the candidate]; “People are able to tell just by looking at a [candidate’s] poster “I don’t like this person, I don’t feel like voting for her’” – these are just some quotations that many respondents echoed in their interviews.

The importance of nonverbal information for voters’ evaluation of candidates has been proven both in the US and in France (McHugo et al., 1985, Sullivan & Masters, 1988, Masters & Sullivan, 1989, Sullivan, 1996; see Glaser & Salovey, 1998, and Ottati & Deiger, 2002 for reviews). Voters exposed to visual images-only of candidates can accurately identify the positive emotions candidates express, and react to them automatically by facial expressions (McHugo et al., 1985). Emotional reactions to candidates’ facial display of happiness and prior political attitudes significantly influence voters’ opinions of candidates (Masters & Sullivan, 1989, Sullivan, 1996). Rosenberg and colleagues (1986, 1987) proved furthermore that voters can infer candidates’ “congressional demeanor” from pictures only, and this affects election results.

There is significant evidence, outside political world, that people attend to nonverbal communication and behave accordingly, often automatically (Manusov & Patterson, 2006, provide a rich review on nonverbal communication and social interactions). Most of our evaluation of our immediate environment (e.g. people we see,
spaces we find ourselves in) is coordinated by the brain “outside the experience of the mind” (Marcus, 2002, p. 53). As such, even if we seldom become aware, the human brain is trained to both always respond to our immediate environment, primarily through automatic emotional reactions, as well as recognize nonverbal messages from others. Moreover, evolutionary psychology work on facial expressions provides evidence that “facial displays” are primarily “social tools” signaling behavioral intents, and presuppose social interaction (Fridlung & Russell, 2006, p. 311). Therefore, not only is the picture of a candidate likely to convey nonverbal information, but it will also be most likely interpreted as a signal of behavioral intent.

Significant evidence has emerged in previous chapters that major parties tend to use poster campaigns to signal their electoral strength and credibility. Much of this signaling function has to do with sheer posterizing in the streets, and with responding to the postering done by the other actors engaged in the fight for the seat. Yet, the signaling function of posterizing only highlights the importance of nonverbal messages that posters are perceived to send, and substantiates the expectation that poster content itself might be employed to convey to voters two kind of messages: On the one hand, they would be used to provide “factual” information about the candidates (consistent with the “posters-as-information” hypothesis). On the other hand they would also convey “nonverbal” cues through the candidate picture, signaling behavioral intent (and consistent with the “posters-as-signaling” hypothesis).

Nonverbal information is however not restricted to facial signals. In their analysis of the communicational power of visual designs in images, Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) argue that “[visual] communication requires that participants make their message
maximally understandable in a particular context, [and] therefore they choose forms of expression which they believe to be maximally transparent to other participants” (2006, p. 13, emphasis added). Moreover, given that images are socially constructed, communication by visuals is influenced both by physical social interactions with others, as well as by the way we communicate in words (i.e. our reading and writing from top to bottom, and from left to right); as a result, “the placement of the elements [in an image] endows them with specific information values relative to each other” (2006, p. 177), and so does shot angle, the posture, the gaze of participants represented in the images.

Given the ability of sending both factual and nonverbal messages through poster content, then, if candidates use poster content strategically, how should it vary with candidates’ winning potential? It is to this question that this chapter turns next, by outlining major and niche party candidate strategies in the French system. Data analysis and results follow.


The study of the importance of poster content for candidate strategy rests on the assumption that candidate-focused campaigning is perceived to make some difference at the polls, and that (at least some) candidates have incentives to seek a personal vote. From this point of view, France, with its two-round majority electoral system, provides an interesting theoretical and empirical case: its system encourages multiparty competition at the first round, and inter-block (left-right) competition at the second round. To win a seat, a candidate must have at least 50%+1 votes in the first round; if no winner emerges after the first ballot, only candidates having obtained over 12.5% of the
vote (calculated under perfect turnout) advance to the second round.

On one hand, it has been argued that the French system, with its closed ballot (precluding voters from expressing a separate preference for a candidate from the party) gives candidates little incentives to seek a personal vote (Carey & Shugart, 1995). However, given the importance of the first round results for the run-off, and the high voter volatility, empirical studies have shown that these incentives are quite high, at least for some candidates: Analyzing the campaign strategies of RPR (the major party on the right until 2002) candidates, Kreuzer (2000) concludes: “in France… voting procedures create significant incentives for personal vote seeking, while campaigning regulations and political finance laws reinforce this effect” (2000, p. 299). Moreover, examining the local vote in 23 democracies, Morgenstern & Swindle (2005) conclude that, for parties with over 10% of the vote, Majoritarian systems significantly encourage local vote seeking. In addition, volatility has been strongly linked to turnover rates, especially in Majoritarian systems (e.g. Matland & Studlar, 2004). In France, voter volatility results in a “high percentage of marginal seats” (Kreuzer & Stephan 2003, p. 133); and Bélanger et al. (2006) report that 37% of their sample (interviewed for the 2002 French presidential contest) changed partisanship from one wave to the next, over just one month.

In short, the first round multiparty competition (which results in sometimes over ten candidates competing in the first round) and high levels of voter volatility create strong incentives for French major party candidates (who actually have a shot at winning the seat) to encourage voters to vote for their person, and not necessarily for the party. This concurs with recent work on the incentives that major and niche parties have in pursuing different strategies at the polls. Looking across 20 years of Western European
election results as a function of party policy shifts, Adams et al. (2006) find that, while mainstream parties win votes by responding to public opinion shifts, niche parties (Greens, Communists and extreme-right parties) get punished by moderating their policy positions. Thus, major parties, in an effort to attract as many votes as possible, could actually benefit from candidates’ personal vote seeking, while niche candidates have strong incentives to demonstrate their strict accordance with the party line.

In a nutshell, then, if poster content is strategic, we should observe significant differences between major and niche party candidate posters. More specifically, we would expect major party candidates’ posters to be more focused on the individual candidate, whereas niche party candidates’ posters should be more focused on the party. This should be apparent both in candidate pictures (with major party candidates more likely to visually signal their high suitability for the job) and poster design. With regard to poster design, we would expect major candidates to make greater use of posters’ signaling potential and thereby favor nonverbal cues over information in their poster communication to voters; in contrast, we would expect niche candidates to favor the provision of factual information over nonverbal cues. These expectations are tested by means of a high precision spatial content analysis on a large number of candidate posters using an original computer software.

7.3. Data and Measures

Pictures of candidate posters were taken for 256 party candidates prior to the first round of the 2007 French legislative elections, in 31 districts in Paris and its suburbs.3

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3 The poster image data base is available on the author’s website.
The French law requires candidates to display A0 standard size posters on special billboards, and the raw data was collected by taking pictures of all the available posters on those billboards. The candidate sample accounts, on average, for 94% of the total votes cast per district in the first round of legislative elections (and 92% of the party votes cast in the first round of the 2007 presidential elections).

A special image analysis software was designed to analyze the poster content by electronically isolating certain elements on each poster. Poster images were first uploaded in the software; at step two, the user, through a high precision selection tool, would isolate each piece of “factual information” on the poster (candidate name, party name, party logo, slogan, endorsements and any additional contact information), as well as the candidate’s face, head (face and hair), and body. At step three, for each selection, the software reported spatial coordinates, area, and gravity centers on both horizontal and vertical axes, in pixels. Since these pixels data depended on the picture quality, the area of the entire poster was also recorded. At step four, therefore, to create perfectly comparable data, all raw numerical variables were divided by the corresponding entire poster area and coordinates.

All variables used in the analysis are therefore percentages of the entire poster occupied by each element (party, candidate face, body etc.). Elements’ positions (top, bottom, left, right coordinates), their vertical and horizontal gravity centers, were also divided by the coordinates of the entire poster selection, making candidate emphases in their poster design perfectly comparable.

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4 More information about the software is available from the author.
5 The selections are defined by the user, and therefore entail some error in reporting the areas and coordinates. An analysis of the selection errors, using geometric figures (circles, squares, triangles) of previously determined areas and coordinates indicate however that these errors average under 1%.
Figure 7.1. Example of Candidate Posters Without and With Selections. Posters containing selections are displayed second and fourth from the left. Left: UMP candidate, Paris, 5th district. Right: Workers’ Fight party candidate (Lutte Ouvrière), Paris 13th district. Selections appear in different colors, sometimes superposed (e.g. blue for the candidate’s face, green for the candidate’s head and orange for the candidate’s entire body on the poster).
Figure 7.1 gives an example of one major and one niche candidate poster with and without selections.

**Major Party.** Following Adams et al. (2006), this dichotomous independent variable is similar to the one used in Chapter 5, and distinguishes between candidates affiliated to major, mainstream parties (right wing UMP, left wing PS, centrist UDF-Modem =1, N=84) and niche parties (far right, far left, green =0). The centrist UDF-Modem was included among major parties due François Bayrou’s excellent score in the immediately preceding 2007 first round of presidential elections.

**Elected office.** French representatives can, and often do, cumulate several offices. Moreover, local notables are so important to French politics, that often the ability of one’s keeping a seat depends on their ability to secure local office too (Elgie, 2005). This variable reflects the latest elected office detained by a candidate prior to the 2007 elections, based on their published bibliographies on the internet, and serves as a control for the effect that a candidate’s party affiliation has on poster design. “Elected office” takes a value of “4” for incumbents (N=26), “3” for highly visible elected officials (e.g. mayors, representatives changing constituencies, N=11), “2” for minor elected office (local councilor, N=60), “1” for ex-elected office (ex local councilor, N=4), and “0” for no elected office in the past or present (N=155). The variable is correlated at .51 with “Major party”. “Major party” is also correlated at .34 with a dichotomous “Incumbent” variable.

**What’s on the Posters? Factual and Nonverbal Information**

A first look at the 256 French legislative candidate posters under analysis shows that a majority of them display both factual and nonverbal information. As summarized in
Table 7.1., virtually every poster in the sample features the most important piece of factual information voters must remember in the voting booth: the name of the candidate (98.8%). Virtually every poster features also the most important piece of nonverbal information: the picture of the candidate (96.5%). A strong majority of posters (88%) also contains a short slogan, which often (in 89% of cases) provide voters with accurate cues of the candidate’s ideology or political attachments (e.g., words like “protect”, “true leftist candidate” for the left vs. “for a presidential majority” for the right). This shows, then, that candidates do encourage the use of ideological cues, at least by displaying them.

A significant majority of candidate posters also contain some sign of party affiliation (92%) encouraging the use of partisan cues. A further inquiry into the form of these cues shows however that about a third (N=79) of the candidates choose to display only the party logo, despite the fact that it is the name of the party that will be printed on the ballot. Given voters’ expected familiarity with major parties, as well as the differences in their media coverage, the display of the party logo as a unique party affiliation cue might suffice to transmit this crucial piece of information to voters for major parties, but not for niche ones. Putting this assumption to the test, Table 7.2. shows that Major party candidates are significantly more likely to cue voters by displaying only the logo of their party of affiliation, even when controlling for elected office. The expected probability for a male candidate elected to a minor local office to display their party logo as their only affiliation cue is .81 when they belong to a major party, as compared to .46 when they belong to a niche party. This supports the expected differences in major and niche party candidates’ strategies: whereas a major party’s logo
Table 7.1. What’s on the Poster? Factual and Nonverbal Information Elements in Posters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate Name</th>
<th>Candidate Picture</th>
<th>Party LOGO or Party Name</th>
<th>Party LOGO</th>
<th>Party Name</th>
<th>Slogan</th>
<th>Endorsements</th>
<th>Additional Contact Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>98.8% (253)</td>
<td>96.5% (247)</td>
<td>92% (238)</td>
<td>74.2% (190)</td>
<td>62.1% (159)</td>
<td>81.3% (208)</td>
<td>65.6% (168)</td>
<td>36.3% (93)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Cells indicate frequencies with the number of posters containing each element in parentheses. (Total N=256).
Table 7.2. Use of Party Affiliation Cues by Party Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Partisan cue: Party Logo Only (Yes=1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major Party (UMP, PS, UDF=1)</td>
<td>1.62** (.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected office</td>
<td>.13 (.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>-.39 (.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-1.39 (.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log-likelihood Chi square</td>
<td>41.88**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo-R²</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Logit regression results. Cell entries represent coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. ** Indicates significance at .05 or better.
might be enough to activate a party heuristic while saving poster space for other elements (like self-candidate promotion), the emphasis on the full party name in niche candidates’ posters indicates that ‘sticking with the party’ is seen as the most viable strategy for a good electoral performance, irrespective of a candidate’s local notoriety.

7.4. **Know Me, Love Me, Fear Me**…

7.4.1. **Know Me… But Let Me Show You How!**

One of the most important purposes of posters, according to elite and survey evidence, is to “make the candidate known” to voters. This is, however, not limited to just providing easy-to-process factual information and a visual image of her, as in Table 7.1. According to visual design theories (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, 177), the poster design itself, through the placement of each piece of factual and nonverbal information, can guide voters through information cues. First, even if the party name, party logo, and slogan are on the poster, choices in design can indicate which element is more important in evaluating the candidate: the larger an element is portrayed, the more importance it acquires (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 176; Messaris, 1994). Second, the disposition of the elements in a picture also endows them with particular visual information relative to each other: On a top-bottom dimension, elements placed in the poster more to the top are seen as more important (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 177). Finally, the visual composition of a poster can also place a certain element at its center, in which case the element (be it party name or logo, candidate or slogan) becomes the key to understanding the message.

If candidates are strategic in their poster electioneering, then we would expect
major and minor party candidates to provide voters with significant different “poster reading guides.” Specifically, we would expect major party candidates to strategically focus voters’ attention on themselves rather than on party- or ideology-specific cues. The reverse should be true for niche candidates.

By manipulating the size of the different cues, we would expect major party candidates to (1) put lesser emphasis on their party affiliation and (2) lesser emphasis in size on their ideological stances by displaying them in smaller sizes than their niche opponents. Moreover, (3) the area of all factual information (excluding the candidate’s name), should be smaller in major party candidates’ posters than in niche candidate’s posters. Consistent with a major party candidate’s expected self promotion strategy, we should observe the reverse for candidate specific elements: (4) a candidate’s name, (5) their body and (6) their face should be displayed in considerable larger sizes for major party candidates than for niche ones.

Table 7.3 examines the extent to which a candidate’s affiliation to a major party influences the relative importance of different types of information on posters, controlling for prior elected office.

As can be seen from the results, voters are significantly encouraged to pay attention to the personal visual qualities of major party candidates. If we calculate the predicted values for a male candidate holding minor local office for the first table column, then a major party candidate’s picture is expected to take up, on average, about 42% of the poster area, while niche candidates take up only 16%. Belonging to a major party is not the only predictor influencing the candidate picture size; yet it is the most important one. All else equal, a major party affiliation leads to an increase of about 25%
Table 7.3. What’s Important in the Poster? Size of Nonverbal and Factual Information Elements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Party (UMP, PS, UDF = 1)</th>
<th>Candidate FACE Area</th>
<th>Candidate PICTURE Area</th>
<th>Candidate NAME Area</th>
<th>PARTY Area</th>
<th>SLOGAN Area</th>
<th>Total INFORMATION Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.07** (.008)</td>
<td>.25** (.02)</td>
<td>.02** (.005)</td>
<td>-.04** (.007)</td>
<td>-.06** (.01)</td>
<td>-.08** (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected office</td>
<td>-.001 (.003)</td>
<td>.014** (.007)</td>
<td>.001 (.002)</td>
<td>-.001 (.002)</td>
<td>.000 (.004)</td>
<td>-.016** (.005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>.005 (.006)</td>
<td>-.01 (.01)</td>
<td>.008** (.004)</td>
<td>.007 (.006)</td>
<td>-.01 (.01)</td>
<td>.01 (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.04** (.005)</td>
<td>.15** (.01)</td>
<td>.04** (.003)</td>
<td>.05** (.004)</td>
<td>.14** (.008)</td>
<td>.21** (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: OLS Regression results with standard errors in parentheses. ** Indicates significance at .05 or better. +++ Area taken by party cues, ideological cues (slogan), endorsements and other contact information, as a percentage of the poster.
in the expected poster area taken by the candidate’s picture; conversely, the expected impact of one unit change in the “Elected office” variable (say, from mayor to incumbent) leads only to about 1% increase. Moreover, moving to the second table column, voters are enticed to pay close attention to major candidates’ face; this expectedly takes about 11% of the poster, as compared to about 4% of the poster area for niche candidates. A major party affiliation explains a healthy percent of the poster area taken up by candidate-specific visual information, indicating that candidates make strategic choices in their poster design based on their party’s governing potential.

As the third column illustrates, candidates also follow different strategies with regard to the importance they give to their name. Even controlling for local office holding, major party candidates tend to print their name on average almost 1.5 times larger than niche ones (the predicted “candidate name” area takes about 7% of the poster for major candidates and 5% for niche ones). Moreover, if size is an indication of importance, voters are significantly encouraged to focus on name recognition rather than party for major candidates (the expected area ratio of name to party for these candidates is 9:1). Conversely, voters are encouraged to pay significantly more balanced attention to both the candidate’s name and her party when the candidate belongs to a niche party (expected area ratio of 3:1).

Turning our attention to the remaining columns, major party candidates are significantly less likely than niche ones to emphasize both ideological and party cues on their posters. In fact, as the last column in Table 7.3 shows, they are less likely to

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6 Coefficients confidence intervals and standardized values are available from the author.
7 Based on regression analysis. The dependent variable is the ratio between the area allocated to a candidate’s name and the area allocated to her party affiliation on the poster (Mean=4.1, Standard deviation=8.3, N=235). The independent variables are the same as in Table 3, and the ratios included in the text are based on calculated predicted dependent variable values. Results are available from the author.
emphasize factual information altogether (except, of course, their name). Again, while the tendency to reduce the size of non-candidate specific information provided in the poster (i.e. party cues, slogan, endorsements and additional contact information) grows the more prominent one is in local/national politics; yet the impact of belonging to a major party is significantly stronger.

In short, there is strong evidence so far that major and niche party candidates use significantly different poster designs, and that these are consistent with their parties’ optimal election strategies: niche candidates are significantly more likely to emphasize the display of their party affiliation and ideological commitments, while major party candidates are significantly more likely focus voters’ attention on their persona, through their visuals and name.

Candidates can also influence the importance voters attach to different cues by manipulating their top-bottom placement in the poster: the more to the top or central a piece of information is, the more value it acquires relative to other elements (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). If major party candidates seek a more personal vote, and niche candidates seek a party one, we would expect the position of the party cue on the poster to follow suit: specifically, (7) the party cue should figure higher on niche candidates’ posters than on major party ones’. Table 7.4 examines the impact of major party affiliation on this top-bottom poster design strategy.

The “top placement” variable is the difference between the top coordinate of the poster and that of the party cue (divided by poster height); lower values indicate higher placement. As Table 7.4 shows, the above expectation receives significant support: niche candidates are significantly more likely than major party ones to place the “party” more
Table 7.4. What’s important? Placement of the Party Cue on the Top-Bottom Poster Axis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Party (UMP, PS, UDF = 1)</th>
<th>Party cue: Top Placement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.23** (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected office</td>
<td>-.03 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>-.03 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.56** (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: OLS regression results (standard errors in parentheses). See text for the description of the dependent variable. ** Indicates significance at .05.
to the top, as an important cue, even controlling for local office holding. On the poster vertical axis, this means an estimated about 20 pct points higher. This reinforces the previous findings regarding the importance, by size, of the party cue, showing that niche candidates stick consistently, across poster design choices, with the optimal poll strategy – that of emphasizing their party allegiance. The reverse strategy is assumed by major party candidates, who significantly minimize the importance of the party cue both by size and bottom poster placement.\(^8\)

Finally, if major party candidates are after a personal vote, we would expect them to occupy the place of honor on the poster: that is, (8) **their face should figure more to the top and center of the poster**. Table 7.5 examines the position of a candidates’ face on the poster as a function of their major party affiliation, and controlling for local elected office. The dependent variable for top placement of the candidate’s face on the poster is computed as for Table 4, by dividing the top coordinate of the “Candidate face” element on the poster by the poster’s height. Smaller values indicate a more top placement. To avoid any type II errors due to the use of “passport-file” poster designs (in which the candidate picture is placed to the top left, like in Figure 2, bottom), the size of the candidate’s picture was introduced as a control. The dependent variable in the second column is the absolute value of the difference between the two horizontal gravity centers: that of the candidate’s face and that of the entire poster; it is further divided by the poster width, to make all values comparable. Smaller values indicate more centeredness.

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\(^8\) An analysis of the top-bottom placement of the ideological cue (slogan) on the poster revealed no significant differences between major and niche candidates; nor was the “elected office” coefficient significant. Moreover, an analysis of the top-bottom position of the candidate’s name revealed that major party candidates are significantly more likely to place it *more to the bottom*, than their niche counterparts. This indicates that major party candidates’ might not pursue an “all out” strategy of self promotion, at least in so far as factual information is concerned. Results are available from the author.
Table 7.5. What’s Important? Top and Center Placement of Candidate’s Face on the Poster

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Candidate Face: Top Placement</th>
<th>Candidate Face: Center Placement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major Party (UMP, PS, UDF = 1)</td>
<td>.14** (.04)</td>
<td>-.12** (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected office</td>
<td>.026** (.01)</td>
<td>-.006 (.004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Party*Candidate picture area</td>
<td>-.54** (.11)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected office*Candidate picture area</td>
<td>-.08** (.03)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate picture area</td>
<td>.75** (.06)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>.00 (.01)</td>
<td>.01 (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.20** (.01)</td>
<td>.22** (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: OLS Regression results (standard errors in parentheses). ** Indicates significance at .05 or better.
Results in Table 7.5 confirm that major and niche candidates follow different self-promotion strategies. Looking first at the left side column, major party candidates are significantly more likely to place themselves more to the top of the poster, once the size of the picture has been controlled for. Placing oneself at the top is not just the domain of “major party” candidates: the higher one’s local elected office, the more to the top of the poster she is likely to place herself; yet, as before, the party affiliation has the strongest impact on this design choice. The right side table column further supports our general expectation relative to the strategic poster differences between major and niche candidates: major candidates are significantly more likely than niche ones to design the poster around their face, as a central “key” to its “reading”.

Finally, this section has so far looked at the provision of factual vs. nonverbal information in posters in isolation from each other. We must not forget, however, that posters put considerable spatial constraints on candidates’ communication, and, according to the conventional wisdom in advertising (Ogilvy, 1983, cited by Meyers, 1999, p. 101), cluttering too much information in a poster risks reducing their effectiveness. Candidates are thus always faced with a trade-off relative to the information they believe is important for voters to have.

When it comes to the tough choice of what to put in a poster, we would again expect (9) major party candidates to greater use of posters’ signaling potential than their niche opponents, by favoring visual self promotion at the expense of factual information. To test this “trade-off” hypothesis, a dependent variable was computed as the ratio of “visual only” information (i.e. the area taken by the candidate’s picture) to all

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9 Major party candidates are also significantly more likely to place their name more to the center of the poster (on the horizontal axis) than niche candidates, by about 9 pct. points. Results are available from the author.
“factual” information (party, ideology cues, name, contact information) on the poster.

Table 7.6 provides additional evidence that “major party” candidates consistently entice voters’ to focus on the candidate’s persona at the expense of any other information in the poster, even the candidate name. Candidates belonging to a party with significant governing potential are likely to give on average about 3 times more space to their own visuals, than to all other information, whereas for niche party candidates this ratio is about .8 (indicating the extent to which niche candidates favor hard core information relative to promoting their own looks).

In short, major and niche candidates give voters distinctively different directions in what’s important to “know” about them from their posters. More importantly, these directions follow the optimal strategy for themselves and their party: while major party candidates tend to favor self-promotion, thereby seeking to add a personal vote to the party vote, niche ones strongly emphasize their partisan commitment. Moreover, Tables 7.3 and 7.6 provide strong evidence of the importance major party candidates attach to nonverbal cues in their poster electioneering strategies. It is to these nonverbal cues – making up for an expected 43% of a major candidate’s poster – that this chapter now turns.

7.4.2. LOVE ME…! Candidates’ Body Language and Photographic Choices

The literature on nonverbal communication is replete with evidence that people respond to nonverbal signals, often unconsciously (Manusov & Patterson, 2006). Moreover, facial expressions are likely to be automatically interpreted as a signal of

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10 A separate dependent variable for the information trade-off was computed by dividing the “visual only” information to all the factual information area (except the candidate’s name). Results closely replicate the ones presented in Table 6, and are available from the author.
Table 7.6. Trading “Factual” for “Visual-only” Information in Posters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CANDIDATE PICTURE to FACTUAL INFORMATION Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major Party (UMP, PS, UDF = 1)</td>
<td>2.19** (.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected office</td>
<td>.11 (.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>-.31** (.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.81** (.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: OLS Regression results (standard errors in parentheses). ** Indicates significance at .05 or better.
behavioral intent (Fridlung & Russell, 2006, p. 311). Given that the candidate’s face and body are in themselves a communication repository, how do poster visual-only strategies differ as a function of a candidate belonging to a major or niche party? Do all candidates send similar nonverbal messages of behavioral intent, or are these messages influenced by their party’s different governing potential?

Candidates are interlocked in a battle with each other for the good favors of the electorate; yet, according to virtually every elite interviewed, displaying too much aggressiveness in posters (as well as negative campaign tactics) would only “scare voters away”. Instead, voters should be enticed to see the candidate for what she “is,” that is, a highly qualified person. Visual design theories suggest several ways in which nonverbal cues could be used to send a positive self promotion message about the candidate’s openness, closeness to voters, and interest in their problems; in short, about her suitability for government:

According to Kress & van Leeuwen (2006), pictures establish a social-like relationship between the people “represented” in the image and the viewer. Thus, like in direct everyday social contacts, the candidate looking directly in the camera, and therefore, into the viewer’s eyes, is effectively “addressing the viewers with a visual ‘you’” (2006, p. 117), thereby engaging in a direct, unmediated contact with the onlookers. Not only can the candidate signal that she has nothing to hide by looking voters in the eyes, as well as constant attention to viewers as discussion partners; Direct eye-contact effectively signals that “the [represented] participant’s gaze demands something from the viewer” (2006, p. 117, emphasis added) – presumably their vote. At the same time, eye-contact can also be an effective nonverbal sign of dominance
(Burgoon & Dunbar, 2006, p. 287), and as such, its credibility is enhanced the higher the status of the sender. Moreover, the range of the picture shot (close-up, middle range or far) is a statement of the degree of intimacy that the person represented in the image claims with the viewer: the closer the shot, the closer the person appears to stand to the viewer, and the greater the social degree of intimacy is implied to be (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 124). A close-up picture would thus hand candidates another tool of expressing their interest and familiarity with voters’ problems and point of view.

Since posters should make voters “know” the candidate, and see her for the qualified person she is, then we would expect major party candidates to significantly rely on nonverbal body and photographic language to signal their high suitability for government. That is, even controlling for elected office, (10) we would expect major party candidates to be more likely to make eye contact with the viewers and (11) to picture themselves closer to voters than niche candidates. Conversely, niche candidates, expected to take a back seat relative to the party, should be less likely to draw attention to their persona by gazing into voters’ eyes, and less likely to claim an intimate relationship through a close photo shot.

To determine whether a candidate was making eye contact or not, two independent coders judged each candidate picture. The agreement level was at 90%; the remaining 10% of the cases were coded after discussion. Fifty-three percent of 245 candidates were judged to make eye contact (N=130). The “Eye contact” variable is correlated at .22 with the “Major party” variable, and at .31 with “Elected office”.

A preliminary examination of the likelihood to make eye contact showed that, while the “Elected office” variable had a significant effect, the “major party” coefficient
only approached significance (p<.17). It would seem therefore that only a preexisting elected record can entitle one to “approach voters with a visual ‘you’.” Nevertheless, the separate effect of a “major party” affiliation becomes significant once we control for offices with highest voter visibility through a dichotomous variable (Incumbents and mayors = “1”, N=37). Table 7.7 presents these results.

Supporting the importance of nonverbal signals for major candidates’ campaign messages, Table 7.7 shows that major party candidates are indeed more likely to use eye-contact to signal their governing credentials, sincerity and attentiveness to voters, once we control for visible elected office: male candidates from major parties, not holding a visible office, have an expected probability of eye contact of .62 compared to similar niche candidates who have an expected probability of eye contact of .45.

Candidates can also signal their credentials by photo range choices: The closer the shot, the socially closer the candidate appears to voters, signaling genuine interest in voters’ problems. To examine the degree of social closeness as indicated by a photo shot, the dependent variable is the area of the candidate head (face and hair) divided by the total area her picture occupies in the poster. Larger DV values indicate a closer shot. To avoid any type II errors due to the use of a “passport-file” poster design by certain candidates (as seen in Figure 2), the entire area taken by the candidate picture was introduced as a control.

Table 7.8 shows that the larger the area taken up by the candidate’s picture on the poster, the closer the picture shot will be for major party candidates, making the candidate appear closer to the viewer. Looking at the predicted values for the dependent variable, that means that for a male incumbent from a major party, the expected ratio of
Table 7.7. Signaling Candidate Job Suitability through Eye Contact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Eye contact (Yes=1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major Party</strong>&lt;br&gt;(UMP, PS, UDF=1)</td>
<td>.71**&lt;br&gt;(.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High Elected Office</strong>&lt;br&gt;(Incumbent, Mayor=1)</td>
<td>.93**&lt;br&gt;(.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Male</strong></td>
<td>.07&lt;br&gt;(.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constant</strong></td>
<td>-.26&lt;br&gt;(.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Log-likelihood Chi square</strong></td>
<td>17.22**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pseudo-R²</strong></td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Logit regression results. Cell entries represent coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. ** Indicates significance at .05.
face to body area is about .59 (as compared with .74 for a male niche party incumbent). More notably, a candidate’s elected office affects little this choice (the interaction coefficient between ‘Elected office’ and ‘Candidate picture area’ fails to reach statistical significance). Rather it is her party’s governing pedigree that makes a candidate want to express intimacy with voters’ problems.

To summarize, consistent with their optimal expected strategies, and consistent with the expectation that posters are taken to send credible signals, major party candidates are significantly more likely than niche candidates to rely on nonverbal means to signal their high suitability for office. The key role a candidate’s party affiliation plays in their nonverbal communication strategies is apparent even when controlling for highly visible elected office. Unlike niche party candidates, major party candidates are more likely to consistently promote themselves and their governing suitability at the expense of other factual information.

Results in previous chapters have outlined the importance that political actors assign to posters for signaling their electoral credibility to voters. If this signaling intent manifests itself in the content of posters too, and if poster content is taken to be a credible signal of candidate quality, then (12) variations in these poster visual strategies should influence both major and niche candidates’ performance at the polls. The next section examines the impact of visual design on 2007 legislative election returns.

---

11 Predicted ratios are calculated with a candidate picture area taking up 40% of the poster.
Table 7.8. Signaling Closeness to the Voters: Candidate Photo Close-up

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Candidate Photo Close-up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major Party (UMP, PS, UDF = 1)</td>
<td>-.15** (.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected office</td>
<td>-.04** (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Party*Candidate picture area</td>
<td>.62** (.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected office*Candidate picture area</td>
<td>.04 (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate picture area</td>
<td>-.42** (.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>-.05** (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.57** (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: OLS Regression results with standard errors in parentheses. ** Indicates significance at .05 or better.
7.4.3. FEAR ME…! Turning Visual Design Strategies into Votes

If posters provide credible signals of candidate suitability for office, then we would expect **eye contact to improve the vote share of major party candidates, but not that of niche candidates**. Moreover, if **poster design choices** send meaningful signals, we would expect both **major party candidates’ visual focus on the self, and niche party candidates’ visual focus on the party to pay off at the polls**. Table 7.9 and Table 7.10 test the effectiveness of both “eye-contact” visual signals and poster design choices in the first round of the 2007 French legislative contest, for major and niche party candidates.

The first column of Table 7.9 shows that making eye contact significantly improved major candidates’ vote share even when controlling for elected office and their party’s electoral strength at the district level.\(^\text{12}\) This was not the case for niche candidates, however. Moreover, the “Eye contact” coefficients for the two types of candidate are significantly different from each other (F=7.25, p=.008).

Using the same analysis framework, Table 7.10 provides evidence that employing the optimal visual strategy as determined by one’s party of affiliation can pay off at the polls. Given that voters observe posters peripherally, squared “Party area” and “Other information area” terms were introduced to account for any non linear effects this factual information might have.

The expectation that major party candidates benefit from emphasizing the self is confirmed: they get an additional tenth of a percent of the vote for every additional percentage their visuals occupy on the poster, while niche candidates lose about .07% of

\(^{12}\) The party’s strength at the district level was computed as the maximum score a party’s presidential candidate had obtained over the past two Presidential elections (2002 and 2007, first rounds only).
### Table 7.9. Fear Me: Winning Votes by Looking Voters in the Eye

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party electoral strength (District level)</th>
<th>2007 First Round Legislative Candidate Vote (%)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MAJOR PARTY CANDIDATES ONLY</td>
<td>NICHE PARTY CANDIDATES ONLY</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eye contact (Yes=1)</td>
<td>3.68**</td>
<td>-.35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.53)</td>
<td>(.74)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected office</td>
<td>1.71**</td>
<td>3.37**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.65)</td>
<td>(.37)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>-.33</td>
<td>-.48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.40)</td>
<td>(.72)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-7.37**</td>
<td>-1.58**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.1)</td>
<td>(.64)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>162</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: OLS regression results with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is the candidate’s percentage of votes in the first round of legislative elections as reported by the French Ministry of Interior. ** Indicates significance at .05 or better.
Table 7.10. Fear Me: Winning Votes by Displaying the Right Credentials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party electoral strength (District level)</th>
<th>2007 First Round Legislative Candidate Vote (%)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MAJOR PARTY CANDIDATES ONLY</td>
<td>NICHE PARTY CANDIDATES ONLY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party electoral strength</td>
<td>.87** (.08)</td>
<td>.94** (.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(District level)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eye contact (Yes=1)</td>
<td>2.48* (.147)</td>
<td>.13 (.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate picture area</td>
<td>.10** (.04)</td>
<td>-.07** (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Party” area</td>
<td>-1.26* (.69)</td>
<td>-1.84** (.32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Other information” area</td>
<td>.87** (.30)</td>
<td>.22* (.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Party” area (squared)</td>
<td>.05 (.05)</td>
<td>.10** (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Other information” area (squared)</td>
<td>-.021** (.01)</td>
<td>-.007** (.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected office</td>
<td>1.95** (.62)</td>
<td>2.49** (.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>.62 (1.37)</td>
<td>-.49 (.57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-12.82** (3.29)</td>
<td>2.86** (1.36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: OLS regression results with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is the candidate’s percentage of votes in the first round of legislative elections as reported by the French Ministry of Interior. “Other information” area is the area occupied on the poster by the slogan, endorsements and contact information. All “area” variables are scaled from 1-100. ** Indicates significance at .05 or better. *Indicates significance at .10 or better.
the vote for the same strategy. The eye contact variable is still significant, albeit at .10, but, again, only for major party candidates. Moreover, as expected, major party candidates appear to lose votes by over displaying the party cue (the squared term is not significant).

At the same time, other interesting patterns appear in Table 7.10. First, it seems that major party candidates would benefit from emphasizing their slogan, endorsements and contact more. That is, keeping all other variables fixed at their mean, the effect of “Other information” is maximized when it takes about 27% of the poster area. In contrast, about 70% of the major party candidates allocate only between 3 and 13% of their poster to this information item.\(^{13}\)

The effect of the “party area” variable on niche candidate success is perhaps the most interesting of all. Predicting electoral scores indicates that at first sight and all else equal, unless niche candidates allocate over 18% of the space to party on their poster, they are better off not including it at all! A closer look at the data clarifies this unexpected result: 89% of the niche candidates who don’t include the party cue appear to have done so because they had formed a pre-electoral coalition with other leftwing groups in the contest (centered on the Communist Party or the Alternative Left movement). This choice may have been counter-productive: according to the results, allocating more than 18% of the poster to the party would have given niche candidates a much bigger boost in their electoral share, as compared to the decision of not including it at all.

\(^{13}\) At the same time, doubling the “Other information” area from 13 to 27% of the poster only ads about 1.5% to one’s electoral score (compared to the 4% candidates would get by doubling the size of their visuals on the poster).
In short, these results seem to indicate that posters are designed to convey credible signals. Consistent with expectations, emphasizing their party helps niche candidates significantly, while an emphasis on self (together with eye contact and a limited emphasis on party) translates into a higher vote share for major party candidates.

7.5. Conclusions

Election posters are an important tool in the campaign communication arsenal of democratic candidates, for that there is no doubt. Previous chapters have supported this assumption by uncovering the rationales behind poster decisions for major and minor political actors in legislative election campaigns. But poster campaign strategy does not stop with poster patterns. Using an original candidate poster database from the 2007 French legislative elections and original spatial content analysis software, this chapter has shown that candidates hardly leave poster content at random. Rather, results from the 12 propositions tested in the chapter point to the same direction: decisions on poster content correspond to a candidate’s optimal electoral strategy, as dictated by her party’s winning potential. Niche candidates are consistently more likely to ask voters to evaluate them based on their partisan affiliation and ideology (by emphasizing those cues through size and placement on the poster). Conversely, in their attempt to boost their personal vote, major party candidates are significantly more likely to make use the signaling potential contained in poster visuals, and to ask voters to focus on the visuals and nonverbal cues of candidate quality rather than on factual information.

There is also evidence that candidates’ poster design strategies are electorally beneficial, although what makes for an effective strategy differs for major and niche candidates. Of course, the findings concerning the electoral gain that candidates derive
from having ‘the right’ poster visual design need to be kept in perspective. For one, these election results analyses are based on just one election, and on a limited sample of candidates. Moreover, in future research, they should be supplemented by additional studies of voter responses to posters. Yet, even taken as a correlation proof, these results boost the confidence in the strategic use of posters in campaigns.
Chapter 8: Conclusions

Political posters are not an outmoded communication vehicle, but remain an important tool in parties’ and candidates’ campaign communications efforts. By acknowledging posters’ spatial character, that is, their lasting presence in the confined battleground space of the district, we have been able to establish their campaign roles and importance in the past five chapters. In fact, despite their inability to convey lengthy, policy-related messages posters enable political actors to speak volumes.

The thorough study of the practices and rationales of poster campaigns in two very different electoral systems, the French and the Belgian ones, has uncovered significant evidence of their dual communication purpose as electioneering tools. The primary finding of this dissertation, emerging from Chapters 4, 5 and 6, is that political actors use posters’ constant spatial presence during the heat of the campaign to signal their electoral competitiveness. In other words, “the medium is the message,” and by exploiting posters’ spatial characteristic (the one feature that sets them apart from any other communication tools), political actors are able to effectively say to everybody’s face: “We’re here to win, and we have the resources and the willpower to do it!”

Moreover, as Chapters 3 and 7 show, the content of posters is an integral part of this act of self-assertion. In fact, by careful design and photo choices, political actors are able to convey a credible message that they possess the qualities needed to govern and win
people’s trust. In short then, despite their unsophisticated appearance, poster campaigns are able to convey credible signals of electoral quality and competitiveness.

They also fulfill a second communication function: that of providing voters with general information about the actors competing in the election. While secondary to signaling, this function nevertheless receives support from the survey data in Chapter 5. Moreover, the analysis of poster design choices in Chapter 7 provides strong indications that at least for certain party candidates, posters are indeed intended to alert voters to the verbal information that will be printed on the ballot.

This leads into the second major finding emerging from this dissertation: one of consistent actor rationality in so far as decisions on poster campaigns are concerned. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 provide strong and consistent evidence to this effect. As would be expected if posters and postering signal electoral competitiveness, major parties are significantly more likely to use this electioneering tool for the purposes of conveying the strength of their campaign than minor parties. Consistent with their needs and their optimal electoral strategies, these minor actors are, in turn, more likely to assign an informational role to posters.

The immediate conclusion emerging from four different empirical tests, using quantitative, formal and qualitative methods of investigation could not be clearer: posters are important signaling devices of electoral power for major political actors, and important informational outlets for minor ones.

Yet, I believe there is considerable ground to argue that the importance of integrating posters into our campaign communication research goes beyond this conclusion. The next section outlines the contributions that the study of posters brings to
the larger understanding of communication patterns in election campaigns. The final section of the conclusions elaborates on areas of further study.

**New Answers to Old Questions: Posters and the Research in Campaign Communications**

Paraphrasing Lasswell’s classic formula (1948), an impressive body of scholarly research currently provides theoretical explanations and comparative evidence about campaigns (see Table 8.1): We have a good understanding of “who [says]” (i.e. party and candidate strategies), “what [about]” (issues, leadership qualities, etc.), “where” (local vs. national level), through what “channels” (TV, print, traditional reach out campaigns, internet), using which “means” (verbal vs. non-verbal), to “whom” (voters) and “to what effect” (voter behavior effects underpinned by various psychological mechanisms).

Posters cannot compete with television or other electronic media in terms of the complexity of the messages they can convey, nor can they compete with them in terms of the breadth of audience reached. Yet, it is precisely by recognizing these constraints, and by outlining what sets posters apart as electioneering tools, that this study makes a meaningful contribution to the larger study of campaign communications. What sets posters apart from other electioneering techniques is their embeddedness in the physical space of the campaign battleground, and this spatial dimension leads us to consider anew the conventional wisdom of the campaign communication literature.
Table 8.1. What Do We Know About Campaigns and Where Do Posters Come In? An Overview of the Campaign Communication Research Foci and the Contributions of the Present Study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Who [says]</th>
<th>What</th>
<th>Where</th>
<th>Through what channels</th>
<th>By which means</th>
<th>To whom</th>
<th>To what effect?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Areas of substantive research</strong></td>
<td>Research on party and candidate communication strategies; leadership studies</td>
<td>Transmit information about issues, candidate character, leadership potential (with the purpose to get voters on one’s side)</td>
<td>National (TV), Local (Mails, Phone calls)</td>
<td>TV, internet, newspapers, mails, phone calls, door to door</td>
<td>Verbal (Spoken, Written)</td>
<td>Verbal+ Visual</td>
<td>Voters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contributions of the current study</strong></td>
<td>Posters are more important for major parties/candidates</td>
<td>Signaling of electoral competitiveness</td>
<td>Local, but only form of spatial campaigning (visible at the community level)</td>
<td>The community space where election takes place</td>
<td>Static (simple) visual cues</td>
<td>Multiple receivers: opposing candidates/parties, own and opposing activists, voters</td>
<td>See last section of the conclusions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
First and foremost, in a world of campaigns dominated by the electronic media, “what do political actors try to communicate through poster campaigns?” At first sight, this question has a very simple answer: posters *seem* to be particularly unequipped for transmitting anything other than just the candidate’s name and party, thereby producing a minimal informational effect. It is perhaps because of this first impression that posters were relegated to the footnotes of the campaign communications literature. Yet this answer is wrong. Why would candidates with exceptional name recognition (like the top three 2007 French presidential candidates, Nicolas Sarkozy, Ségolène Royal and François Bayrou) basically overwhelm other minor party presidential candidates when it comes to plastering the streets with posters? This question lacks an answer only as long as we take the transmission of verbal information to be at the core of all electoral communications. The fact is that this is not always the case. Once the spatial visual character of posters is taken into account, compelling reasons emerge to reject this verbal information assumption, in favor of the argument that posters’ primary function is to signal, through nonverbal means, the electoral competitiveness of particularly the major party actors contesting the race.

Recognition of the spatial visual character of poster campaigns also forces us to reconsider anew the question of “who” is primarily behind this type of campaigns. In contrast to the conventional view of posters as the province of unknown (and/or underfunded) political actors, Chapters 5 and 6 present compelling evidence that posters are particularly important in *major* actors’ electoral strategies. Thus, it would seem that establishing visual dominance in the spatial boundaries within which election occurs might be an important goal for major actors in all elections, not just in the two cases
studied here. In the case of the US, for example, overlooking the patterns of yard signs in high visibility elections, might lead us to commit a type II error and miss an important dynamic in major candidates’ electioneering efforts.

These conclusions about poster campaigns also make us reconsider the diversity of “channels” through which electoral communication occurs. In the case of posters the channel is one that has rarely been considered: the physical space of the community, the street. Given the importance that parties assign to postering, this might make us wonder if other street activities that parties organize do not also take advantage of the community space to advance their electoral message. When activists distribute leaflets, for example, are parties just concerned with the message (which not a lot of people read), or is it that they also want voters to see that they are active and present in the community and have supporters who are willing to spend time on getting them elected?

Also brought into question by the inquiry into poster campaigns is the diversity of “means” through which political actors communicate at election time, and particularly the importance of nonverbal cues in their messages. Unlike most other forms of campaigning, posters are a purely [static] visual medium of communication, dominated by non-verbal elements (e.g. a picture of the candidate). It is true that the study of poster visuals is not new, but previous research has tended to concentrate uniquely on the use of culturally constructed signs in them for propaganda purposes (e.g. Jowett & O'Donnell, 2005, Quéré, 1991). This study demonstrates that posters might hammer home the important message of an actor’s competitiveness in two simple ways. In fact, much of the postering function of signaling competitiveness occurs through the sheer repetition of posters in a restricted space. Consider the case of Belgium: color alone suffices as a
nonverbal cue to make the point of a party’s strength. Moreover, consider Chapter 7: the message of a poster can be decoded through an examination of simple ratios and positions of verbal vs. non-verbal elements in it. By outlining the visual simplicity of poster messages, not only does this study open the door for further cross-cultural examinations of this type of campaign, but it also speaks more generally to the still understudied topic of the nonverbal construction of political messages.

Finally, while poster campaigns are carried out at the district level, they are nevertheless distinctive from all other means of local campaigning. In fact, they are the only form of communication that is *openly witnessed by everybody* (voters and candidates and their opponents). Letters and calls target individual voters, whereas posters are there for everybody to see, and for everybody to know that everybody sees them. This opens the possibility, supported in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, that posters are not addressed uniquely to voters, but also to other actors competing in the elections, thereby widening the range of communication targets (*to whom*) that has been systematically considered in comparative campaign communication research.

In short there is very good reason to argue that this study of poster campaigns goes beyond the simple mapping of the communication functions of a particular electioneering tool, and beyond the mapping of political actors’ strategic choices in their use of it. It helps to broaden our perspectives in response to fundamental questions asked in the realm of campaigns, like “who [says]”, “what”, “through what channels”, “by what means”, and “to whom?”*. Yet the inquiry into poster campaigns is far from over, and the last section of this dissertation aims to outline two of the main directions that I believe further research should pursue.
Where Do We Go From Here?

There are, I believe two directions for further research. The first one is to widen our cross-national perspective: poster campaigns are common features of election campaigns in many democracies throughout the world, in many electoral systems, by actors with varying chances of success in the election. While the spatial embeddedness of poster campaigns in communities gives us reason to expect that they will always fulfill a signaling function for major parties, there are theoretical reasons to believe that postering strategies might differ when more than two serious candidates exist. In particular, one direction of study is the expansion of the game theoretical model to multi-polar, highly proportional party systems where frontrunners have incentives to respond not only to the postering of their immediate challengers, but also to that of minor parties in the system. Furthermore, open list PR systems, like the Belgian one, are likely to generate postering wars not only between different parties, but also between different candidates on the same list. Absent appropriate data on Belgian postering expenditures, this issue has not been addressed from a game theoretical point of view in the current study, but future formal modeling, coupled with appropriate expenditure data, could shed more light on the understudied topic of same-party candidate inter-dynamics in these systems. Moreover, in neither France nor Belgium can voters make a separate choice for a party and for a certain candidate. Yet other systems allow it (e.g. Germany), and the study of the interactions between candidate- and party-specific postering in countries where voters can distinguish between these two in their ballot choice is another direction worth pursuing from a game theoretical point of view.

The content of posters is another topic that deserves additional cross-national
attention. Already, candidates’ control over poster content in Belgium is significantly more restricted than the one enjoyed by French candidates, begging the question if other electoral systems have, as we would expect, an impact on the design of election posters. Moreover, both French and Belgian elites seem to operate on the same understanding of the behavioral signals that one must transmit through their poster pictures (e.g. eye contact, face closeness) – yet to what extent do these behavioral signals get replicated in political actors’ posters in non-Western cultures? Further exploration of these topics could contribute greatly to our understanding of the importance and use of nonverbal cues in political messages.

But perhaps the research direction of most immediate importance is the impact that posters have on voters’ attitudes and behavior. In essence this current study has demonstrated what parties think they are achieving through postering. Yet the extent to which they actually realize their goals remains to be determined.

Working within the theoretical premise that posters affect voters’ attitudes through a mechanism of attitude accessibility (Fazio, 1995), I carried out two experimental studies in an attempt to shed light on the individual level effects of posters. One of them explored the effects of exposure to an environmentalist group’s posters on a student sample in Columbus, OH (Dumitrescu, 2007). The posters were created especially for that study in collaboration with the local chapter of the Sierra Club and they combined visuals (the picture of a tree against a sunset sky) and a slogan. The poster message demanded that individuals take action on a Sierra Club environmental initiative. The study’s main hypothesis was that exposure to posters would increase the accessibility of attitudes toward the Sierra Club among those previously familiar with it. In line with
Zaller’s (1992) model of response to political communications, those with previous ambivalent attitudes toward the Sierra Club were expected to be most affected by the exposure to posters.

The study used a 2 x 2 between groups design (Exposure to posters: yes or no x Exposure_duration: short (2½ weeks) or long (3½ weeks)). In an attempt to emulate as closely as possible posters’ spatial visual characteristics in real life, the experimental manipulation took place in a space shared by all participants to the experiment (a classroom building). It also took advantage of the fact that this classroom space was used at different times of the day and week by different students, which allowed for differential group exposure. The manipulation involved putting up posters in this space only at the times when the experimental groups would come for class; moreover, to avoid contamination, they would only be up about half an hour before the group came to class and removed half an hour after it left. Students shared the classroom environment twice a week, and the longest exposure occurred over three and a half weeks (in other words, over 7 class visits). Knowledge of and attitudes toward the Sierra Club were measured before and after the exposure by means of a computer task. Attitude accessibility with regard to the group was measured only after the manipulation.

The results from the experiment gave some support for the increased attitude accessibility hypothesis: moderate supporters who had been exposed to posters were slightly quicker to express their attitude toward the Sierra Club in the aftermath of the experiment than the control group. However, behavioral measures did not reveal any change in the subjects’ estimated likelihood of taking action on the issue advocated by the posters. Also the low number of participants in the experiment (N=44 in total)
prevented more involved analyses of how exposure to posters had influenced subjects’ rating of the group itself.

In order to improve on the external validity of the study and gather new data, a similar experimental protocol was carried out in two neighborhoods in Paris, in the weeks before the start of the 2007 legislative campaign. The initial design of this study involved differential postering in two very similar neighborhoods in the same Paris constituency that parties usually targeted in their poster campaign activities. Participants in the study, who received a small payment for their participation, were actual French voters and had been randomly recruited using the phone book in the two neighborhoods. Participants first completed a pretest by mail, and then two weeks later, met with the researcher at a location close to the two neighborhoods for a 10 minutes posttest on the computer. In between the pretest and the posttest the poster manipulation was supposed to have taken place: more specifically, one of the parties involved in the election had agreed to do postering in just one neighborhood, but not in the other over the course of 10 days.

Unfortunately the experimental validity of this field study was fatally affected when the party that had agreed to the study manipulation backed out of the agreement the day before the postering manipulation was supposed to start. In the 10 days of “treatment” several parties did heavy postering in those areas, but without there being a clear difference between the two neighborhoods. Moreover, of the approximately 300 residents contacted about the study, only 78 completed the pretest, and only 31 the posttest.

These attempts at measuring the impact of posters highlight, I believe, several issues that are extremely relevant for future studies of posters’ effects on individual
attitudes and behavior. In the very first place, these previous experiences highlight the difficulty of designing valid experimental manipulations for a communication phenomenon that is so intrinsically embedded in the space of a community. Unlike electronic campaigns that can be reproduced quite straightforwardly in the controlled environment of a laboratory (e.g. Lau & Redlawsk, 2006), posters are part of a shared physical environment. Reproducing this shared space in a study comes, as the two studies showed, with a lot of design complications, and with a loss of control over the experiment for the researcher.

I believe that one possible answer to this spatial difficulty could be provided by the bourgeoning world of virtual reality. To circumvent the costs and lack of control associated with studying poster visual campaigns in the field, one research possibility is to develop a computer based experimental protocol to study people’s reaction to visual political signals in Second Life. Second Life is a virtual, three dimensional community replicating features of the real world, and counting over 10 million users worldwide. Not only do countries have “embassies” in this virtual world, and not only is there journalistic evidence that many people take their existence in Second Life as seriously as they do in the real one (thereby addressing the external validity problem), but also this virtual community offers three crucial advantages for the future of visual communications research: first, it is relatively inexpensive compared to field experiments, second, it allows for full control of the experimental environment, and third, it allows for the study of communication in a multiplicity of comparative contexts offered by the internet and a simple mouse click.
Previous experimental experience also highlights the need for a readjustment of the theoretical framework of poster effects. Both my previous studies assumed a mechanism of attitude accessibility at work. However, in light of this study of the rationale for poster campaigns, the main emerging hypothesis is that people associate the presence of posters with a display of strength on the part of the actor running the poster campaign. The extensive evidence pointing to a signaling intent for posters emphasizes the need to study how voters’ perceive this campaign communication phenomenon.

In short, this study of communication by poster campaigns has not only enriched our understanding of the rationales behind communication strategies in democratic election campaigns. It also opens new and exciting questions about the impact that a persistent visual presence in the space of a community has on people’s democratic electoral experience.
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