United in Diversity, Divided by Algorithms?

A Cross-National Examination of the Role of Ad Delivery Algorithms for Political Campaigns during the 2024 European Parliament Elections

Fabio Votta, Simon Kruschinski, Mads Fuglsang Hove, Anamaria Dutceac Segesten, Márton Bene, Christina Gahn, Linn Sandberg, Jan Zilinsky, Claes de Vreese, James P. Cross, Ruth Dassonneville, Tom Dobber and Benjamin Guinaudeau

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Introduction

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3. Advent of social media and targeted advertisement disrupts traditional campaigns and challenge regulations

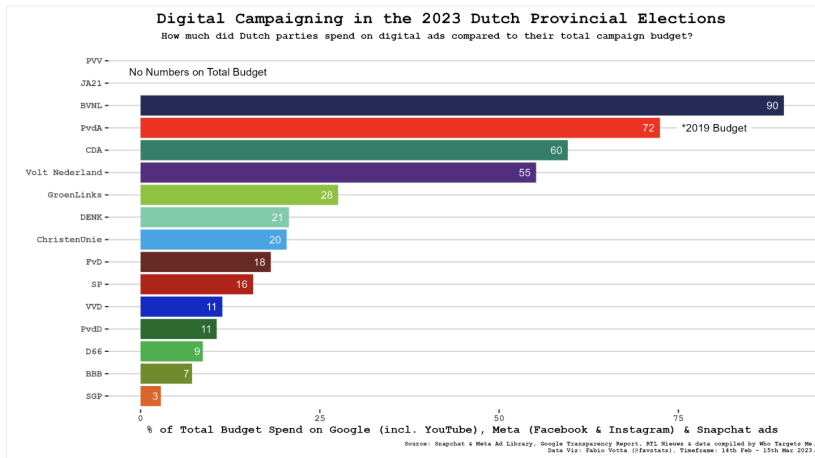# Party, Campaigns, and Social Media

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2. Uneven playing field for parties:
   ▷ 'Natural': Over-represented voter bases on social media
   ▷ Artificial: Market-specific cost advantages

Party, Campaigns, and Social Media

▷ 2023 Dutch election: 64% of total expenditures in the last campaign week

Digital Campaigning in the 2023 Dutch Provincial Elections
How much did Dutch parties spend on digital ads compared to their total campaign budget?

Party	%
PVV	No Numbers on Total Budget
JA21	
BVNL	90
PvdA	72 *2019 Budget
CDA	60
Volt Nederland	55
GroenLinks	28
DENK	21
ChristenUnie	20
FvD	18
SP	16
VVD	11
PvdD	11
D66	9
BBB	7
SGP	3

% of Total Budget Spend on Google (incl. YouTube), Meta (Facebook & Instagram) & Snapchat ads

Source: Snapchat & Meta Ad Library, Google Transparency Report, RTL Nieuws & data compiled by Who Targets Me.
Data Viz: Fabio Votta (@favstats). Timeframe: 14th Feb – 15th Mar 2023.

Research Questions

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3. Our approach: Audit study using real party accounts

Builds upon Votta et al. 2024

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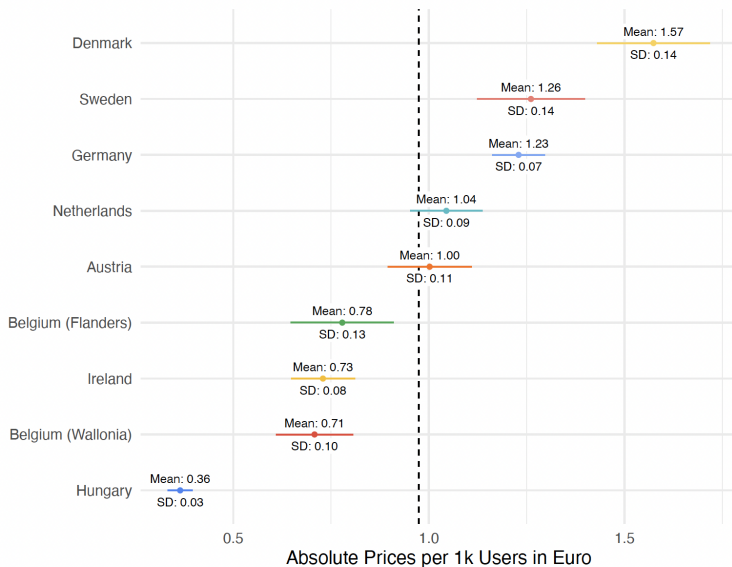
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4. **Implications:**
   - ▷ Equal prices would suggest that targeted ads do not distort competition
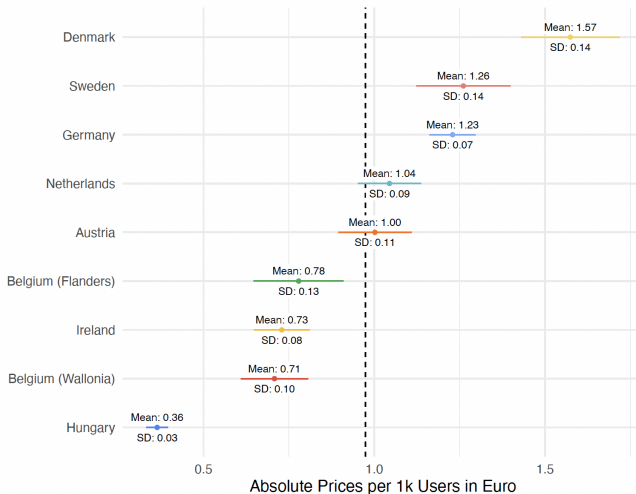
Do Parties Pay the Same Price?

▷ **High variance across countries**

Denmark — Mean: 1.57, SD: 0.14
Sweden — Mean: 1.26, SD: 0.14
Germany — Mean: 1.23, SD: 0.07
Netherlands — Mean: 1.04, SD: 0.09
Austria — Mean: 1.00, SD: 0.11
Belgium (Flanders) — Mean: 0.78, SD: 0.13
Ireland — Mean: 0.73, SD: 0.08
Belgium (Wallonia) — Mean: 0.71, SD: 0.10
Hungary — Mean: 0.36, SD: 0.03

Absolute Prices per 1k Users in Euro
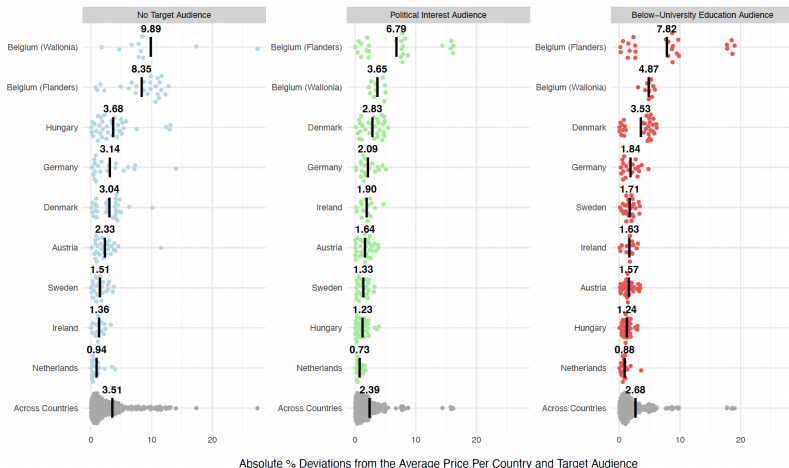
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Do Parties Pay the Same Price?

▷ **Within-country differences**:
  ▷ 4% average variation (max 27%)
  ▷ Small differences but millions of additional campaign reaches

Do Parties Pay the Same Price?

▷ **Most variation with "No Targetting"**
  ▷ algorithm more free → more bias

Absolute % Deviations from the Average Price Per Country and Target Audience

Three Types of Factors Likely to Affect the Price Differences

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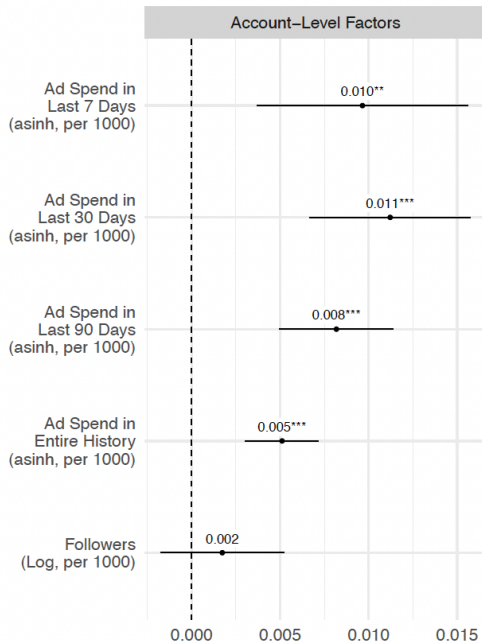
3. **Market-level factors**:
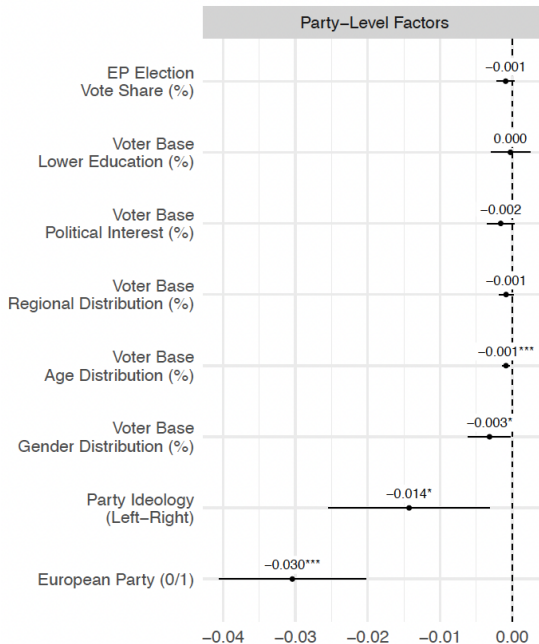   ▷ Audience size, ad competition

What Drives Price Differences?

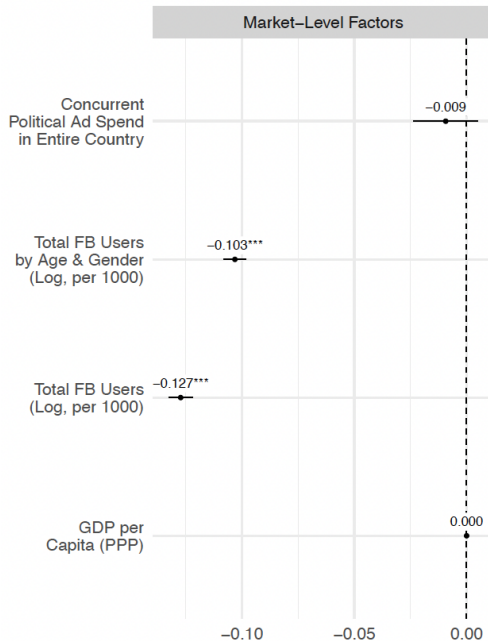⚠ Disclaimer: Low statistical power requires caution when drawing conclusions ⚠

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Party-Level Factors

EP Election Vote Share (%)	−0.001
Voter Base Lower Education (%)	0.000
Voter Base Political Interest (%)	−0.002
Voter Base Regional Distribution (%)	−0.001
Voter Base Age Distribution (%)	−0.001***
Voter Base Gender Distribution (%)	−0.003*
Party Ideology (Left–Right)	−0.014*
European Party (0/1)	−0.030***

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4. Calls for stricter regulation to preserve democracy
   ▷ Algorithmic fairness
   ▷ Algorithmic access for independent researchers