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Understanding the Political Party Think Tank Landscape: A Categorization of Their Functions and Audiences

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Abstract
Political party think tanks (PPTTs) are important to the performance of parties' core functions. Despite their importance, they have largely escaped academic attention. To understand the role of PPTTs in contemporary politics, we develop a typology of their key functions (distinguishing between political party and think tank functions), and target audiences (distinguishing between internal and external target groups). Based on a comprehensive literature review and 22 in-depth interviews with leading representatives of PPTTs in the Netherlands and Flanders, we identify four types of PPTTs: Party Assistants, Party Supporters, Party Promoters and Party Intellectuals. The characteristics of the four types of PPTTs are illustrated through the analysis of four paradigmatic cases: the Study Centre Open Vld as an example of a Party Assistant, the Scientific Bureau GroenLinks as an example of a Party Supporter, the Renaissance Institute as an example of a Party Promoter, and the TeldersFoundation as an example of a Party Intellectual.

Political party think tanks (PPTTs) are often described as the 'brains' of political parties (De Winter and Dumont 2006: 965). They can contribute to the execution of functions that parties are likely to neglect because of their focus on winning the next elections (e.g. Poguntke 1994), such as elite formation, socialization, interest articulation and aggregation, and ideological development. Moreover, they can document and interpret the long-term societal trends that are key to future-oriented policymaking when parties are in office. Their contribution is especially important to a vital representative democracy, given that political parties are more than ever absorbed by day-to-day party-political issues and have difficulties fulfilling their intermediary role (Caramani 2017). Hence, studying PPTTs offers

important insights into the broader functioning of political parties, given that the latter need to adapt to changing circumstances in politics and society.

PPTTs share some functional characteristics with non-partisan think tanks (Mendizabal 2021; Weaver and McGann 2006), such as their focus on research and policy advice. However, they differ fundamentally from such think tanks in that they are formally linked to *one* political party, with which they have statutory, organizational, legal or financial connections. Additionally, they are often recognized by state legislation and usually receive public funding. Commonly, their staff members are current or former party officials, party members or at least loyal supporters of the party and its ideology. Moreover, PPTTs are organized around the core issues and ideology of the mother party (Miragliotta 2018, 2021; Pattyn et al. 2017a; Weaver and McGann 2006).

Although PPTTs exist all over the world (e.g. Gagatek and Van Hecke 2014; Miragliotta 2021; Pattyn et al. 2017a), they are most prevalent in Western Europe (Weaver and McGann 2006). The first PPTTs were established in this region in the 1920s and the number of PPTTs has expanded significantly since then, with most PPTTs being established between the 1950s and 1970s. Currently, more than 150 PPTTs can be identified in Europe.[1] Despite their prevalence, relatively little is known about the functions PPTTs perform, the audiences they target and the day-to-day relationship they maintain with the political party they are linked to. Although case studies of specific PPTTs exist,[2] comparative research is scarce and the role that PPTTs play in parties' development and policy-making remains undertheorized.

The lack of knowledge about PPTTs stands in stark contrast with our knowledge of (non)-partisan think tanks, which have been extensively studied (e.g. Abelson and Rastrick 2021; Medvetz 2012; Ruser 2018). It can therefore be expected that PPTTs play a different role in politics from other types of think tanks, and that existing findings about the role of think tanks are not always, or only partially, applicable to PPTTs. It is thus imperative to examine the role of this specific type of political organization.

This article studies the varying roles of PPTTs in West European democracies. First, it conceptualizes their roles by focusing on the potential functions they perform and audiences they target, using a review of the literatures on the functions and audiences of both political parties and think tanks. Second, it develops a typology of PPTTs, using an abductive approach in which the conceptualization described above is combined in an iterative process with a comparative analysis of contemporary PPTTs in the Netherlands and Flanders.[3] The comparison between the Netherlands and Flanders is premised on the fact that they have similar party and political systems, but differ when it comes to the legal framework and formal position of PPTTs. In the Netherlands the autonomy of PPTTs is partially secured by legislation, while in Flanders PPTTs have more intimate links with their party. To collect rich information on the roles of PPTTs, we conducted in-depth interviews with leading representatives of the 22 PPTTs that are linked to parties with parliamentary representation in the Netherlands and Flanders.

On the basis of the literature studied and the interviews conducted with PPTT representatives, we present a 2 × 2 typology that combines two main dimensions of PPTTs' roles: a *functional* dimension, which describes whether a PPTT performs

political party functions or think tank functions, and a *target audience* dimension, which examines whether a PPTT has an internal party target audience, or an external wider social and political audience. Within this typology PPTTs can be classified as either: (1) Party Assistants (PPTTs that primarily perform party functions and aim to influence party representatives, officials and members); (2) Party Supporters (PPTTs that primarily perform think tank functions and aim to influence party representatives, officials and members); (3) Party Promoters (PPTTs that primarily perform party functions, but aim to influence a broader audience); or (4) Party Intellectuals (PPTTs that primarily perform think tank functions and aim to influence a broader audience). While the first type of PPTTs resembles a mere department within the party in public or central office (Katz and Mair 1993), the fourth type of PPTT comes closest to the independent non-partisan think tank. On the basis of an in-depth analysis of the cases, we present four PPTTs that we consider paradigmatic examples: Studiedienst Open Vld (the Study Centre Open Vld) as an example of a Party Assistant, Wetenschappelijk Bureau GroenLinks (the Scientific Bureau GroenLinks) as a Party Supporter, Renaissance Instituut (the Renaissance Institute) as a Party Promoter, and TeldersStichting (the TeldersFoundation) as a Party Intellectual.

By conceptualizing and analysing the different approaches taken by PPTTs vis-à-vis their mother party, this article contributes to our broader understanding of party politics and think tanks. Most importantly, our research shows that PPTTs differ notably in the extent to which they focus on party functions or think tank functions, with variation occurring both between countries due to the legislative context, and within countries due to party and PPTT characteristics. These differences are likely to impact the ways in which PPTTs can guide political parties through the challenges they are facing as intermediaries between society and the state in representative democracies. Being too close to the mother party, for example, might hamper the updating of ideologies and rethinking of party models. Besides, the vast majority of PPTTs focus on an internal party audience consisting of the party leadership and membership, making them fundamentally different from non-partisan think tanks. In this respect, PPTTs are unique organizations in the party political and think tank landscape that deserve further study in and of themselves.

The article is structured as follows. In the first section, we develop a theoretical framework for analysis of the role of PPTTs. In the following section, we detail the research design and methodology of the study. The next section develops a new typology of the role of PPTTs and presents the analysis of the cases. The final section closes with conclusions and identifies avenues for future research on this under-researched type of political organization.

The role of political party think tanks: A theoretical framework

The European political landscape is populated by a wide variety of PPTTs. They exist in all party families and are organized at the European levels in ten European Political Foundations that are linked to the European party groups (Gagatek and Van Hecke 2014). Over 150 of these EPF members are PPTTs active in EU member states. Examples of PPTTs include the socialist or social democratic

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (Germany) and Kalevi Sorsa (Finland), the Christian democratic or conservative Politische Akademie der Volkspartei (Austria), the Anton Korošec Institute (Slovakia) or the Barankovics István Foundation (Hungary) and the liberal Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation (Sweden), the Liberal Democracy Programme (Denmark) or the Academy of Liberalism (Estonia). However, newer party families, such as green parties and far-right parties, have also established PPTTs in recent years.

Although going by different labels in different countries (e.g. 'scientific institutes' in the Netherlands, 'party study centres' in Belgium, 'political academies' in Austria and 'political foundations' in Germany), the organizations listed above can all be classified as PPTTs, since they share a number of characteristics, such as their statutory, organizational, legal or financial connections to a political party. PPTTs differ from other types of think tanks, given their formal links to a *specific* political party, which impacts their independence (Jezierska and Sörbom 2021; Miragliotta 2018, 2021). In that respect they are fundamentally different from: (1) non-partisan think tanks, which have no formal or informal ties to political parties and explicitly state political neutrality (e.g. Kelstrup 2017; Ruser 2018) and (2) partisan think tanks, which are formally independent but share values with and have informal connections to political parties (e.g. Miragliotta 2018; Pautz 2014).[4] However, PPTTs can still be considered think tanks because of the roles they fulfil in the political process. These include the analysis of societal problems, the development and promotion of policy solutions to these problems, the facilitation of (new) spaces to reflect on these problems and their solutions. Even when these roles are fulfilled to support political actors (in the case of PPTTs a specific political party), the organization that executes them can be thought of as a think tank (Mendizabal 2021).

Despite their shared characteristics, case descriptions and PPTT websites suggest that they operate differently between and within countries. While some PPTTs focus on stimulating public debate and producing research and publications, others play an important role in political education. And while some PPTTs are actively involved in writing election manifestos for the parties to which they are related, others are not involved in this process. Conceivably, these differences are the result of variations in the legal frameworks that define and regulate PPTTs, as well as different organizational structures and strategic ambitions within parties or party families.

To map these differences systematically, we develop a framework to study the role of PPTTs by examining two of their features: their functions (what they do) and their target audience (who they target with what they do). Building on existing research, we conceptualize these functions from a party politics perspective and from a think tank perspective. We hypothesize that whether PPTTs focus on party functions or think tank functions, and whether PPTTs focus on internal or external audiences varies from country to country and from PPTT to PPTT.

Political party functions

Three categories of party functions are traditionally mentioned in the literature: parties' programmatic function, their recruitment and selection function, and their representation and socialization function. We contend that PPTTs can either directly fulfil these functions for the party or support the party in fulfilling these functions.

The first function that political parties perform is the programmatic function (e.g. Kitschelt 1989; Meguid 2008). Programmatic functions help express the ideology of the party and include the preparation of programmatic offers. PPTTs can contribute to this function by developing the statement of principles for the party, by preparing party manifestos, by (co-)organizing party congresses, or by preparing party policy positions.

A second function that political parties perform is the recruitment and selection of political elites by the selection of candidates for office and government and of officials who run the machinery of parties (e.g. Cross 2008; Gallagher and Marsh 1988). PPTTs can contribute to this process, for example by organizing workshops and summer schools where young political talent can be detected and can be ideologically prepared to take up elected positions.

A third function that political parties perform concerns representation and socialization (Kitschelt 1989; Panebianco 1988). On the one hand, this includes the representation of interests by, for example, raising the concern of stakeholders and citizens in a parliamentary debate (Sartori 1976). On the other hand, parties fulfil functions of socialization, integration and mobilization. The socialization sub-function implies an educational role in the teaching of visions of societal problems and their solutions through political debates. When they succeed in this socialization, parties can create and safeguard a collective identity and we can speak of integration (Panebianco 1988). Once members are successfully integrated, they can be mobilized for concrete extra-parliamentary actions. PPTTs can contribute to the representation function by forming a bridge between civil society organizations and the party, and they can perform a socialization function by organizing events where they disseminate the ideology of the party to a wider audience.

Think tank functions

Think tanks perform a wide variety of functions (Kelstrup 2021; Mendizabal 2021) to fulfil the roles as described above. However, they have two principal functions: knowledge acquisition and dissemination by conducting and disseminating policy research and advice (e.g. Pautz 2020b; Stone and Denham 2004; Weaver and McGann 2006). Research can be either ideologically or practically oriented; think tanks can conduct their own research or collect, analyse and translate existing research, and their research can be oriented either on the medium-to-long-term or on short-term events (Kelstrup 2017). Providing policy advice happens at several stages in the policy-making process and through a number of channels: by organizing briefings and seminars, by publishing issue briefs on legislation, by participating in parliamentary hearings or by writing opinion pieces in newspapers (Kelstrup 2017; Pautz 2020b). These think tank functions differ from the party political programmatic function discussed above, because the research and policy output generated as part of the think tank function does not necessarily entail taking a party political position on an issue.

The target audience of PPTTs

The second dimension along which we categorize the role of PPTTs is that of their target audience. While regular think tanks target a variety of audiences, ranging from policymakers to the business community and the media (Kelstrup 2017),

they cannot afford to address their output to a specific political candidate or office-holder willing to listen to their advice (Ruser 2018).

PPTTs have to relate to constituencies that are exclusively linked to their mother party, such as the party in public office, the party in central office and the party on the ground (Katz and Mair 1993). However, for political parties, a wider audience exists as well. By contesting elections to seek government office, realizing policy aspirations or maximizing votes (Müller and Strøm 1999), political parties face outwards to the (potential) voters, prospective coalition partners, civil society organizations and political commentators to seek support. As party agents, PPTTs therefore have *external* audiences for their output. Hence, PPTTs can target both internal and external audiences.

In sum, we suggest that PPTTs can perform political party functions and think tank functions and target internal and/or external audiences (see Figure 1). On the basis of these distinctions, a 2 × 2 typology can be built that facilitates the study of PPTTs and enables us to classify them according to their dominant functions and target audience (see Table 1).

Research design and data collection

To conceptualize the role of PPTTs, this article is based on an abductive approach combining theory and original empirical research. The abductive approach implies
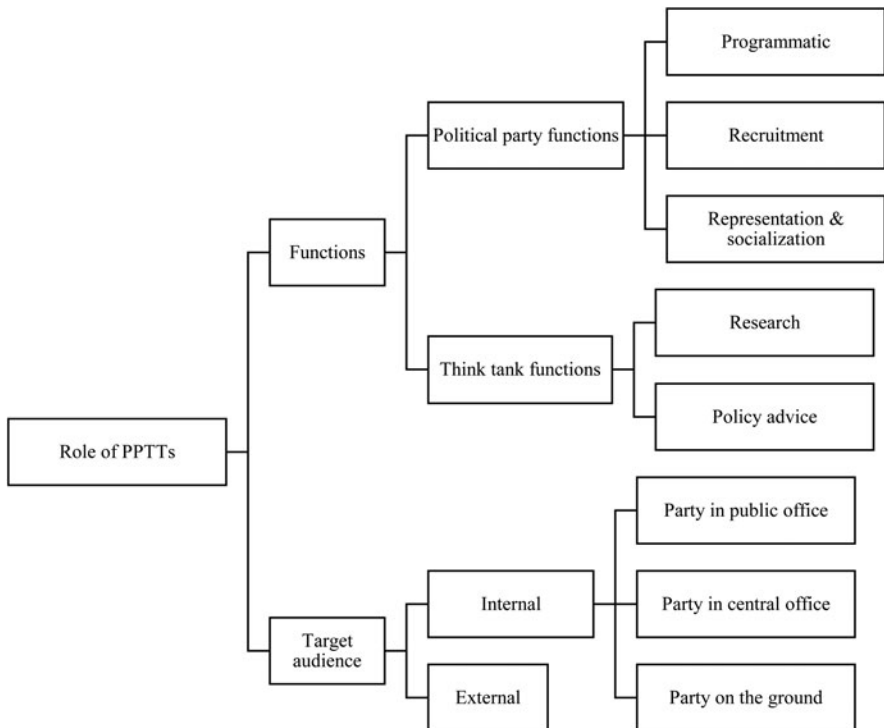

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework Overview

Table 1. 2 × 2 PPTT Functions and Audiences

	Political party functions	Think tank functions
Internal target audience		
External target audience		

that we 'move back and forth between data and theory iteratively' (Timmermans and Tavory 2012: 168). This process results in a typology that introduces a conceptual innovation (Collier et al. 2012) – which is a first step in theory development and serves as a tool to study the role of PPTTs.

Research design

For the empirical part of this research, we conducted a comparative case study in which we compare Dutch and Flemish PPTTs. The decision to focus on all PPTTs in the Netherlands and Flanders is justified by the fact that they have similar electoral and party systems. Both have highly proportional electoral systems and are examples of consociational democracies (Lijphart 1999). Moreover, the Netherlands and Flanders have similarly sized coalition governments (Andeweg and Irwin 2009; De Winter 2005) and experience similar trends in party politics. In both cases, mainstream social democratic, liberal and conservative parties have been in power for decades and are now challenged by parties of the radical left and/or right (Pellikaan et al. 2016).

While Flanders and the Netherlands share similar party and political systems, they differ notably when it comes to the legal framework and formal position of PPTTs. In Flanders, PPTTs are fully incorporated in the political party (Pattyn et al. 2017a, 2017b) and are recognized as a component of the party in Article 1 of the Law on the Limitation and Control of Electoral Expenditure, the Financing and the Open Accounting of Political Parties. They are considered as a department (much like a communication or HR department) within the political party. In addition, they are financially fully dependent on the host party because they do not receive government funding. In the Netherlands, by contrast, a legal framework – Articles 2 and 8 of the Law on Financing of Political Parties – stipulates that PPTTs receive direct government funding based on the number of parliamentary seats the party holds and are required to have a legal entity that is separate from the party (Timmermans et al. 2015).

In the Netherlands and Flanders, a total of 22 parties are currently represented in parliament and have associated PPTTs, with the PPTTs covering the entire political spectrum in terms of ideological leaning (see Table 1 in the Supplementary Material for a complete overview of the PPTTs and their affiliated parties and acronyms). In Flanders, the PPTTs of the seven parties that have representation in the Flemish and federal parliaments have an average of 10 full-time equivalent staff (FTE). The largest in terms of paid staff is the Study Centre Open Vld of the liberal party with 18 FTE, while the smallest is that of the far-left PVDA-PTB with 2.5 FTE. In the Netherlands, there are 15 PPTTs, which are generally smaller with an average of 2.9 FTE. The social-liberal centre-party D66 has the largest PPTT,

employing 8 FTE, while three recently founded PPTTs, of JA21, Volt and BIJ1, are currently run solely by volunteers.

Data collection

By conducting semi-structured elite interviews with leading representatives of the 22 PPTTs represented in the Netherlands and Flanders, we collected rich narrative data. Elite interviews are a useful tool to explore PPTTs, which are under-researched and otherwise difficult to examine (Beamer 2002; Ellinas 2023). The flexibility of the semi-structured approach gave the interviews an explorative character, while guaranteeing that all relevant topics were covered (Damhuis and de Jonge 2022; Galletta 2013).[5] We conducted the 22 interviews with current representatives of PPTTs between June 2021 and September 2022. The majority of interviews took place in person in the office of the PPTT to help form a more complete image of the organizations and to observe non-verbal information (such as the way in which they organize their offices and the availability of publications) (Damhuis and de Jonge 2022).[6] Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to obtain rich qualitative data (Harvey 2011; Richards 1996), with transcripts reaching over 200,000 words. The interview material was triangulated with a review of PPTT and party websites, statutes and social media channels.

Following Jessica DeCuir-Gunby et al. (2011) and Johnny Saldaña (2013), the transcripts of the interviews were coded on the basis of the (sub)categories of PPTT functions and target audiences presented in Figure 1. Based on the coding, the 22 PPTTs were located in the 2 × 2 typology presented in Table 1. More specifically, to be located in the first cell of the 2 × 2 table, the dominant functions performed by a PPTT had to be coded as 'party functions' and the dominant target audience was mentioned as 'internal'. For example, when the transcript contained mention of 'preparing the party positions', 'writing the election manifesto', 'thematically preparing a party congress', the subcode 'programmatic' and the code 'political party functions' was allocated. When the transcript contained references to 'the members of parliament', 'the party president', 'the party members', the subcodes 'party in public office', 'party in central office' and 'party on the ground' and the code 'internal party audience' were allocated.[7] The same procedure was applied to locate PPTTs in the three other cells of the 2 × 2 table. The identification of functions' and target audiences' dominance is contingent upon the value placed by interviewees on these functions and audiences – for example in terms of time allocated to them, and priority given to them.[8]

On the basis of the characteristics of the PPTTs located in the four cells of the 2 × 2 table, labels were created to accurately describe the four types of PPTTs identified. The names of the labels are based on the primary roles that the PPTTs in these four quadrants perform. For each of the four labels, a paradigmatic case – that is, a PPTT that most clearly exhibits all the characteristics of the type – was identified on the basis of the interview transcripts.

In the next section, we first discuss the results of the general analysis of the interview transcripts and the placement of the 22 PPTTs in the 2 × 2 table, and subsequently present the in-depth analysis of the four PPTT types that can be distinguished, and the four PPTTs that are most representative of these types.

Analysis: Towards a typology

Table 2 presents the 22 PPTTs active in the Netherlands and Flanders and places them in the 2 × 2 table presented in the theory section. The table shows that nine PPTTs mainly perform party functions, while 13 primarily perform think tank functions. Hence, it can be concluded that there is notable variety in the tasks PPTTs execute, with some resembling other types of think tanks more than others. However, PPTTs differ from other types of think tanks in that the vast majority of them are focused on an audience within the mother party, including party leaders and members (18 out of 22). Only one out of the 22 PPTTs truly resembles a relatively independent think tank, executing think tank functions for an external audience, while three PPTTs perform party functions aimed at an external audience, which usually consists of (prospective) voters. Given the types of function they perform and the audiences they target, we label the first group of PPTTs 'Party Assistants', the second 'Party Supporters', the third 'Party Promoters' and the fourth 'Party Intellectuals' (see Table 3).

It is noteworthy that most Flemish PPTTs can be classified as Party Assistants, while most Dutch PPTTs are Party Supporters. The position of most Flemish PPTTs as Party Assistants can be explained by the fact that they are legally incorporated in the party and have no formal autonomy towards the party. The party therefore determines which functions the PPTT should take up. Given that the party in central office is particularly powerful in Flanders (De Winter and

Table 2. Positioning of the 22 PPTTs in the 2 × 2 Table

	Political party functions	Think tank functions
Internal target audience	• **Study Centre Open Vld** – *BE* • Knowledge Centre Vlaams Belang – *BE* • Study Centre CD&V – *BE* • Study Centre Groen – *BE* • Study Centre PVDA/PTB – *BE* • Study Centre Vooruit – *BE*	• **Scientific Bureau GroenLinks** – *NL* • Clemencia Redmond Foundation (BIJ1) – *NL* • Guido de Brès Foundation (SGP) – *NL* • Mr. Hans van Mierlo Foundation (D66) – *NL* • Scientific Bureau of the SP – *NL* • Scientific Institute ChristenUnie – *NL* • Scientific Institute for CDA – *NL* • Scientific Institute Volt – *NL* • Scientific Institute 50PLUS – *NL* • Study Centre N-VA – *BE* • Statera (Denk) – *NL* • Wiardi Beckman Foundation (PvdA) – *NL*
External target audience	• **Renaissance Institute (FvD)** – *NL* • Nicolaas G. Pierson Foundation (PvdD) – *NL* • Scientific Institute JA21 – *NL*	• **TeldersFoundation (VVD)** – *NL*

Note: The paradigmatic cases are in bold. 'BE' indicates a PPTT based in Flanders (Belgium) and 'NL' indicates the Netherlands. If the party name is not included in the PPTT name, the party acronym is enclosed in brackets (see Table 1 in the Supplementary Material for a complete overview of the PPTTs and their affiliated parties and acronyms).

Table 3. Typology of PPTT Roles

	Political party functions	Think tank functions
Internal target audience	Party Assistants	Party Supporters
External target audience	Party Promoters	Party Intellectuals

Dumont 2006), it frequently chooses to strengthen its position by using the PPTT as an extension of its own office. In addition, Flemish parties use their PPTTs to assist the party in public office by 'pooling'[9] their parliamentary staff in their study centre. Unlike the Flemish PPTTs, the Dutch PPTTs have a degree of formal autonomy towards their mother party and are therefore not as closely linked to their party as in Flanders. This gives them the opportunity to perform think tank functions. Because of the direct government funding of Dutch PPTTs, they have a budget to disseminate their research by publishing it in book form, on their website, in their journal and by organizing their own events. This stands in stark contrast with the Flemish PPTTs that perform party functions.

There is no clear and consistent pattern when it comes to party ideology, with PPTTs with similar ideological backgrounds often leaning towards different PPTT types. The liberal PPTTs Study Centre Open Vld and the TeldersFoundation, for example, can be found at opposite ends of the 2×2 table, the former being a Party Assistant and the latter a Party Intellectual. The only exception to this rule is formed by the PPTTs affiliated with far-right parties, such as the Renaissance Institute of the Dutch Forum voor Democratie, and Wetenschappelijk Instituut JA21 (the Scientific Institute JA21), which belong to the Party Promoters, and Kenniscentrum Vlaams Belang (the Knowledge Centre Vlaams Belang) that currently belongs to the Party Assistants but clearly indicates its increasing intention to target a wider external audience (and might therefore move to the Party Promoters). This observation can be explained by the importance that far-right parties attach to the maximalization of votes (Akkerman et al. 2016). By spreading the party ideas to a wide target audience, the PPTT seeks to maximize the votes for the mother party (Müller and Strøm 1999).

In the interviews that have been conducted, a number of other relevant factors that could conceivably explain why PPTTs take on specific roles have been identified. These factors include the experience and the profile of the PPTT director, the way in which the autonomy of the PPTT is guaranteed in the PPTT statutes and how these statutes require the presence of party executives on the board of the PPTT, the financial means of the mother party, and the mother party's history. Further research is needed to distil the relative importance of these factors for PPTTs' functioning.

To illustrate how parties were classified and give more details about how the four types of PPTTs operate, we present the results from the interview analysis below, making use of all 22 interviews. Moreover, we describe four paradigmatic cases in greater detail: the Study Centre Open Vld as an example of a Party Assistant, the Scientific Bureau GroenLinks as a Party Supporter, the Renaissance Institute as a Party Promoter, and the TeldersFoundation as a Party Intellectual.

Party Assistants

The first category of the typology are PPTTs that perform political party functions and focus on an internal target audience within the party. They mainly focus on programmatic functions such as developing party positions on day-to-day issues or drafting party manifestos. They assist the party in public office (especially Members of Parliament) and the party in central office (especially the party president). In sum, their main role is to assist the party in its daily operations and main functions. Therefore, this category of PPTTs is labelled 'Party Assistants' (see Table 3).

A typical Party Assistant is the Study Centre of Open Vld, the Flemish liberal party (Int2).[10] The Study Centre Open Vld has 17 advisers and a director, and its offices are based in the Flemish and federal parliaments. The employees are specialized in one or more policy domains such as education, healthcare or fiscal matters. It pools its scientific parliamentary staff in the study centre.[11] The Study Centre Open Vld has an internal target audience – specifically, it focuses on Members of Parliament (the so-called party in public office) and the party president (the so-called party in central office).

It serves the party president and the Members of Parliament by performing programmatic, representative and recruiting party functions. The programmatic functions that they perform include preparing the party's positions. 'We translate [our party positions] to the work of the members of parliament and the party. … This means concretely that when the party president for example asks about our party position on completed life then we are going to show our party position or going to propose a possible party position' (Int2). This is done in the preparation of political debates or in reaction to news items. Moreover, it makes a large contribution to the preparation of party congresses, party manifestos and government agreements. 'I can directly show the sentences in the government agreement that we wrote' (Int2). It coordinates working groups where long-term party positions are prepared, and policy proposals are developed. Moreover, it directly supports Members of Parliament with the design of policy proposals. Besides programmatic functions, the PPTT performs an indirect representative function by being the point of contact for civil society organizations whose positions are taken into account in the work of the PPTT. Moreover, the PPTT is indirectly responsible for the recruitment and selection of political elites because the Study Centre is often considered to be a springboard to other political functions, such as ministerial adviser or Member of Parliament.

Other examples of Party Assistants that have a similar role to the Study Centre Open Vld are the PPTTs of the Flemish green party Groen and the Flemish Christian democratic CD&V (Int19; 3). Studiedienst Groen (the Study Centre Groen) was the 'back office of the party negotiators during the government negotiations' (Int19), its main task being contributing to the development of party positions. Inhoud @ CD&V (the Study Centre CD&V) is also focused on assisting the party president and Members of Parliament by performing programmatic functions. In addition, it focuses on the recruitment and selection of political staff by involving new young talent in its network structure and organizing, among other things, a 'Summer University'. The Studiedienst PVDA-PTB (the Study Centre

PVDA-PTB) and Knowledge Centre Vlaams Belang can also be classified as Party Assistants. The Study Centre PVDA-PTB caters to an internal party audience and performs programmatic functions (such as preparing party positions and contributing to the party manifesto) and representative party functions. While its main target audience is the party members and the party officials, it takes into account the demands of broader society (e.g. civil society organizations, factory workers, people in the field etc.) (Int20). The Knowledge Centre Vlaams Belang focuses on an internal target audience, but increasingly targets an external audience by disseminating its work to the wider public (Int21).[12]

Party Supporters

The second category of PPTTs consists of those that perform think tank functions and have an internal target audience. Their main goal is to deliver research and policy advice to support the party in public office in the mid-to-long term. Unlike Party Assistants, they are not occupied with day-to-day politics. In sum, they perform think tank work that is oriented towards supporting the party. Therefore, this category of PPTTs is labelled 'Party Supporters' (see Table 3).

A typical case of a Party Supporter is the Scientific Bureau GroenLinks. Its office, based in the party headquarters of GroenLinks, the Green Left Party, in Utrecht, is integrated into the party office in an open space that is accessible to other departments of the party. Its staff consists of one director, two project leaders and several fellows and volunteers. According to the interviewee, the Scientific Bureau GroenLinks is part of 'the party ecosystem' (Int23), which means that it tries to impact the party by behaving as a reliable and supportive partner. Consequently, it is in constant dialogue with the party to be up to date on the needs of GroenLinks. The work of the Scientific Bureau GroenLinks is focused on the political representatives of the party. In order of priority, it focuses on the Members of Parliament in the House of Representatives, local politicians, Members of the European Parliament, senators and potentially on GroenLinks ministers in the future. In other words, it focuses on the party in public office. To some extent, the PPTT also focus on the party members, sympathizers and the media, but this is not a priority.

The Scientific Bureau GroenLinks supports the party by performing think tank functions and more specifically acquiring knowledge by research and disseminating political and policy advice. It acquires knowledge by considering itself to be 'a bridge between the outside world (e.g. scientists, labour unions, green NGOs, business world) and the political inner world. […] We want to connect with all relevant ideas and translate them so the political representatives can work with that' (Int23). However, the Scientific Bureau GroenLinks does not conduct long-term research itself. It is rather a 'breeding ground, a place, an open house, where ideas are imported from outside and politically translated so they become relevant for GroenLinks' (Int23). Examples of research projects are 'Green Industry Politics' and 'A New Society and Economy on Post-Capitalist Grounds'. The goal of this second project is to develop new ideas for the party. Moreover, the Scientific Bureau GroenLinks wants to support the party in achieving its government aspirations. It does this by rethinking party strategy – for example by analysing best

practices from sister parties in other European countries and by conducting case studies in Dutch municipalities where GroenLinks has good electoral results. The Scientific Bureau GroenLinks disseminates knowledge by producing a range of outputs: a journal *De Helling*, a podcast 'Groene Gasten' (green guests) and publicly available reports. Furthermore, it organizes events and debate evenings and participates in events that are organized by the party.

Eleven of the 15 Dutch PPTTs have characteristics of Party Supporters: the Wiardi Beckman Foundation (Int13); Wetenschappelijk Instituut voor het CDA (the Scientific Institute for CDA) (Int17); Mr. Hans van Mierlo Stichting (the Mr. Hans van Mierlo Foundation) (Int15); Statera (Int16); Wetenschappelijk Bureau van de SP (the Scientific Bureau of the SP) (Int27); Wetenschappelijk Instituut ChristenUnie (the Scientific Institute ChristenUnie) (Int31); Clemencia-Redsmond Stichting (the Clemencia-Redmond Foundation) (Int25); Wetenschappelijk Instituut Volt (the Scientific Institute Volt) (Int29); Wetenschappelijk Instituut 50PLUS (the Scientific Institute 50PLUS) (Int14); and Guido de Brès Stichting (the Guido de Brès Foundation) (Int24).

In Flanders, Studiedienst N-VA (the Study Centre N-VA) is an exception in the PPTT landscape, being the only Flemish PPTT that is categorized as a Party Supporter. Unlike other Flemish PPTTs, it focuses on think tank functions while supporting an internal target audience. Its main goal is to support the party and safeguard and substantiate the long-term party ideas by acquiring and disseminating research and knowledge. It does not perform research itself, but it collects information from published scientific research and research from civil society organizations (Int22).[13]

While all Party Supporters cater to internal party audiences, there are differences between these PPTTs when it comes to the prioritization of the three party faces that they target. For example, the Scientific Bureau of the SP prioritizes the focus on the party on the ground (Int27), while the Guido de Brès Foundation prioritizes the party in central office (Int24) and the Scientific Institute ChristenUnie prioritizes the party in public office (Int31). Moreover, Party Supporters differ in the way they perform these think tank functions. Some Party Supporters conduct research themselves (such as the Wiardi Beckman Foundation (Int 13)), while the majority of Party Supporters collect existing research and translate it for the party (such as the Scientific Institute ChristenUnie (Int 31) and the Study Centre N-VA (Int22)).

Party Promoters

In the third category are PPTTs that perform party functions and have an external target audience. Their main role is to disseminate the party ideas to a wider audience. Even though the party is not their main target audience, they serve the party through their socialization and mobilization function, which potentially expands the number of party supporters. Therefore, this category of PPTTs is labelled 'Party Promoters' (see Table 3).

The Renaissance Institute of the Dutch far-right Forum voor Democratie is a paradigmatic case of a Party Promoter. The Renaissance Institute is situated in the basement of the party headquarters in Amsterdam and has around six part-time employees alongside a network of volunteers and interns. The staff are mainly

young and male. Some of the staff members combine a job at the Renaissance Institute with university study or have recently graduated. Staff members cooperate in organizing the main activities of the Renaissance Institute but do not specialize thematically. The Renaissance Institute was set up to contribute to the party's three main aims: political agenda setting, influencing public opinion and developing local activity. Although it aims to contribute to the party's success, it does this by targeting a wider audience.

The main role of the Renaissance Institute is to 'express [the party's] opinions and influence people as much as possible' (Int26). This corresponds to the socialization and integration party functions. Although the Renaissance Institute focuses primarily on socialization and integration, it has a secondary function in helping the party with editing of the party manifesto for federal and local elections. Contrary to most other Dutch PPTTs, the Renaissance Institute does not perform research. However, the PPTT occasionally outsources a study to a commercial polling or research company.

The Renaissance Institute aims to achieve its primary goal by performing six different activities. The first is organizing weekly *borrellezingen* (lectures followed by drinks) in the office and yearly Renaissance lectures (for about 150 people). The second is the organization of summer and winter schools where a selected group of 20 to 40 young participants undergo intensive training over three to four days. The focus of these schools is on educating the participants in the philosophical foundations of the party (such as theories of Marcuse and Tocqueville) and on various policy issues. A third activity is the publication of books written by elected members of the party on, for example, Tocqueville's philosophy through its own publisher, Amsterdam Books. A fourth activity is the dissemination of party ideas on social media. Fifth, the PPTT institute runs its own elementary schools, Renaissance Schools. In creating these schools, the president of the Renaissance Institute takes the lead, but the mother party is involved as well. Lastly, the PPTT institute set up a Renaissance Council – a group of 15 influential Dutch people – to broaden and strengthen its network of influence and contribute to the goal of influencing (young) people with its party ideas.

Other examples of Party Promoters are the Nicolaas G. Pierson Foundation (NGPF) linked to the Dutch animal rights party, Partij voor de Dieren, and the Scientific Institute of the Dutch far-right party JA21. The NGPF makes documentaries, animation films or accessible books in which it presents the party ideas. Often these documentaries are based on existing research that is translated in a comprehensive way (Int30). The Scientific Institute JA21 is relatively young and therefore still in development. Its focus to date was on organizing a conference that was open to the public, 'to let people get in touch with JA21' (Int28) and target a broader audience.

Party Intellectuals

The final category consists of PPTTs that perform think tank functions and have an external target audience. These PPTTs are not closely connected to the work of the party even though they are formally connected. They are mainly focused on conducting and publishing ideologically driven research. Unlike the other categories

of PPTTs, the broader ideology takes precedence over the party perspective. In sum, they perform ideologically driven intellectual work that is focused on a broader public. Therefore, this category of PPTTs is labelled 'Party Intellectuals' (see Table 3).

A paradigmatic case of Party Intellectuals is the TeldersFoundation, which is linked to the Dutch liberal party VVD. The TeldersFoundation is based on a separate floor in the party building in The Hague and has four researchers. The director has been leading the PPTT for over 20 years and is known to have an independent and sometimes critical position towards the party. 'We are not here to neatly write down what the party thinks […] I never check with the party […] I'm not under the command of the party. If this was the case, I think we can pack up here' (Int18). The TeldersFoundation does not target the party, rather it is focused on society as a whole and therefore has an external target audience.

The TeldersFoundation is focused on think tank functions and more specifically on knowledge acquisition by conducting research. The main role of the PPTT is to conduct research from a liberal perspective that is not necessarily the perspective of the VVD. 'We are a platform to bring new ideas based on liberal principles into society' (Int18). The researchers of the TeldersFoundation coordinate working groups consisting of a network of academics, experts and members. These working groups write reports on topics such as the history and theory of liberalism, enlightenment and democracy, and on political topics such as inequality, higher education and climate change. The starting point of every report is the liberal principles, and the end points are policy recommendations. Its functions correspond with the classical think tank functions: conducting research and preparing policy advice. It disseminates its research by publishing it in the form of books or in its journal, *Liberale Reflecties*. Additionally, the TeldersFoundation disseminates its research by giving guest lectures and organizing training, summer schools/weekends, symposia and debates. This PPTT bases the publication of research on two criteria: the scientific quality and the connection with liberal ideology. A liberal vision does not have to resonate with the vision of the director, or the party.

The position of the TeldersFoundation as a Party Intellectual is exceptional in the Netherlands and Flanders. Even though the Wiardi Beckman Foundation (Int13) used to have a similar position, in recent years it has moved towards a role akin to that of a Party Supporter.

It should be noted that a number of PPTTs have changed their conception of their role over time due to electoral changes that affected the party. Examples of such cases include the Study Centre CD&V and the Wiardi Beckman Foundation. The Study Centre CD&V fundamentally changed in recent years. The Flemish Christian Democratic CD&V – once the biggest party in Flanders – has been confronted with recurring electoral losses and consequently the party and its PPTT were reformed. While it was originally focused on long-term ideological research, currently the PPTT focuses on day-to-day politics (Int3). The Wiardi Beckman Foundation was once a renowned entity in the Netherlands. It was – like its mother party – large and impactful. Due to extreme electoral losses of the mother party, the Wiardi Beckman Foundation was forced to reform and rethink its role. Consequently, it moved from a Party Intellectual to a Party Supporter. Similarly, PPTTs of other traditional parties that have been confronted

with electoral losses are rethinking their role. For example, Studiedienst Vooruit (the Study Centre Vooruit) (which is still a Party Assistant) organizes participation sessions for non-party members (Int1), so it might shift towards a Party Promoter in the near future. Moreover, the Knowledge Centre Vlaams Belang focuses on an internal audience, but increasingly targets an external audience by disseminating its work to the wider public (Int21).

Conclusion

While there is extensive literature on the role of political parties in our democracies, their affiliated PPTTs have largely escaped academic attention. Since little is known about the functions they perform and the audiences they target, we adopted an abductive approach that combined a review of the literature on political parties and think tanks with the empirical analysis of contemporary PPTTs in the Netherlands and Flanders. To collect rich information on the functioning of PPTTs, we conducted elite interviews with leading representatives of all 22 PPTTs in the Netherlands and Flanders.

On the basis of this approach, we presented a typology based on two dimensions of the role of PPTTs: one that captures whether a PPTT performs party functions or think tank functions, and one that documents whether the principal target audience of a PPTT is internal (party oriented) or external (society oriented). Combining these two dimensions with the empirical analysis and classification of the 22 PPTTs in the Netherlands and Flanders led to a typology of four types of PPTTs: Party Assistants, Party Supporters, Party Promoters and Party Intellectuals. The four types were illustrated through an in-depth analysis of four paradigmatic cases: the Study Centre Open Vld of the Flemish liberal party as a Party Assistant, the Scientific Bureau GroenLinks of the Dutch greens as a Party Supporter, the Renaissance Institute of the Dutch far-right Forum voor Democratie as Party Promoter, and the TeldersFoundation of the Dutch liberal VVD as Party Intellectual.

Our study highlights the differences between (non-)partisan think tanks and PPTTs. By showing that 18 of the 22 PPTTs focus explicitly on audiences within their mother party when performing their tasks, it becomes clear that having formal links to a specific party affects the daily functioning of PPTTs and gives them a narrower target audience than (non-)partisan think tanks. Our study also demonstrates that 9 of the 22 PPTTs predominantly perform political party functions rather than think tank functions. This finding could cast some doubt on whether these PPTTs should indeed be labelled as think tanks, especially when a functional approach is taken (Mendizabal 2021). This especially goes for the PPTTs of far-right parties, like Forum voor Democratie and JA21, which act as Party Promoters or – in the case of Vlaams Belang's PPTT – intend to become Party Promoters. They behave as departments of the party, seeking to maximize votes by performing party functions oriented towards an external target audience, such as campaign activities, which historically have been key tasks of the party itself. Hence, although the concept of the PPTT has been widely adopted in the literature to describe the diverse population of research institutes and foundations that are active in the party political landscape (e.g. Miragliotta 2018, 2021; Pattyn et al.

2017a, 2017b; Weaver and McGann 2006), our research suggests a different label might perhaps be more appropriate to identify some of them.

The purpose of this article was to understand the role of PPTTs by developing a typology that can be applied across Europe. Although we developed this typology on the basis of empirical research in the Netherlands and Flanders, we are confident that it could travel to other European countries. First of all, the typology was developed on the basis of the study of PPTTs from a wide range of party families with different kinds of organizational structures (e.g. degree of centralization within the party) that commonly exist across Europe. Secondly, by selecting systems that have opposite outlooks on the regulation of PPTTs, with the Netherlands attempting to guarantee their independence and Flanders considering them as departments of the political party itself, we have attempted to cover the breadth of regulatory approach adopted in Europe towards PPTTs.

Our study demonstrates that these differences in the regulation of PPTTs have a direct relationship with their conceptions of their role. In Flanders, PPTTs are financially and legally fully incorporated in the party, they mostly perform political party functions and serve the party president and Members of Parliament. As a result, almost all of them are classified as Party Assistants. In the Netherlands, however, PPTTs receive state funding and have their own legal entities, leading to a much wider variety of conceptions of their roles. Most Dutch PPTTs have the characteristics of Party Supporters, but Party Promoters and Party Intellectuals are also prevalent. These findings highlight the need to study the legislation that governs the functioning of PPTTs on a larger comparative scale. Mapping such legislation across Europe might lead to predictions about the types of PPTTs that are likely to be most common in different parts of Europe.

More importantly, our typology can be used as a basis for large-N studies of PPTTs. By classifying larger numbers of PPTTs, it will be possible to investigate systematically whether factors such as the national legal framework, party organizational strength, party ideology or government/opposition status impact the way PPTTs operate. The typology can also be used to study changes in PPTTs' conceptions of their role over time. As this study indicates, PPTTs' roles are not fixed, and under certain circumstances, such as electoral losses by the mother party, they can adopt a different role.

Studying the ways in which PPTTs change is important given the contemporary challenges that political parties face. Party politics has, for example, become more issue-based, and mainstream parties have faced new electoral competition from green and far-right parties (e.g. De Vries and Hobolt 2020). Moreover, party membership has declined (e.g. van Biezen and Poguntke 2014) and electoral volatility has increased (e.g. Mainwaring et al. 2017). These changes make political parties target short-term electoral gains and forget about their long-term objectives. Under these circumstances PPTTs could experience pressure to focus more on *external* audiences and perform political party functions – for example by assisting with campaigning. This could hamper long-term thinking in politics, affecting both parties' capacity to govern responsibly and their ability to adapt to the changing political and social context they are confronting (Caramani 2017). Ultimately, this could further weaken the position of parties in our democracies. Hence, more research, and especially more comparative and longitudinal research into

the functioning of PPTTs, is very welcome. After all, PPTTs are *the* organizations that help political parties navigate through the challenges ahead.

Notes

1 Authors' own calculations on the basis of membership of PPTTs of the European Political Foundations.
2 E.g. Mohr (2010), Pautz (2010, 2020a) and Weilemann (2006) on Germany; Pattyn et al. (2014, 2017b) on Belgium; Timmermans et al. (2015) and Voerman (2018) on the Netherlands; and Miragliotta (2021) on Australia.
3 Flanders is the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, a country with two party systems.
4 In practice, the distinction between non-partisan and partisan think tanks is not always easy to make. Think tanks can state political neutrality even though they have clear ideological standpoints (Ladi 2000). They are always trying to find a balance between gaining legitimacy (being independent from political actors) and exerting influence (being dependent on political actors) (Jezierska and Sörbom 2021).
5 We undertook a pilot study of nine interviews with previous leading representatives of PPTTs of Flemish pillar parties (social democrats, liberals and Christian democrats) to explore the role of PPTTs and fine-tune the interview guide (see Table 2 in the Supplementary Material for an overview of interviews).
6 Seventeen interviews were conducted in person and five interviews online.
7 Concrete examples of coding decisions are presented in Table 3 in the Supplementary Material.
8 The allocation of cases to specified cells based on the dominant functions and audiences implies that this categorization does not include hybrid cases.
9 Pooling is a way to optimize the use of personnel by merging staff from the PPTT and the parliamentary group. This means that the Members of Parliament do not have individual scientific support but that it is collectively organized by the party while PPTT employees are on the payroll of parliament.
10 Int2 refers to Interview number 2 as listed in Table 2 in the Supplementary Material.
11 Similarly to Open Vld, Vooruit also pools its scientific parliamentary staff in its study centre. The other parties in Flanders (CD&V, Groen, N-VA, PVDA-PTB and Vlaams Belang) only partially pool their scientific parliamentary staff in their study centre and maintain a separate scientific parliamentary staff to support the parliamentary group alongside the study centre (Int3; 19; 20; 21; 22).
12 Knowledge Centre Vlaams Belang is increasingly acting as a Party Promoter. For example, this PPTT has assisted in the development of an education policy proposal and subsequently disseminated a brochure with these proposals to all educational institutions in Flanders. Moreover, the interviewee emphasized that the promotion of party ideas to an external audience is something that the PPTT wants to invest in (Int21).
13 The research expertise of Study Centre N-VA is used by the party to prepare its positions. Unlike in other Flemish PPTTs, its staff gathers the necessary information so the party itself can formulate its positions. Therefore, the PPTT engages in programmatic functions to a limited extent and it predominantly performs think tank functions (Int22).

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