Abstract: Over the last 15 years, the academic literature has analysed forms of political activism the online environment might provide or facilitate. Empirical evidence brought information about online activists as people very interested in politics and over-active. At the same time, parties themselves were described as professionalizing, particularly with their communication activities. Membership is declining and members would progressively turn to be “supporters”.

However, the relationship between net-activists and party organizations hasn’t been explored much: either surveys were conducted within parties, over-representing “traditional” party members and usually showing little difference between “offline” and “online” members; or they were conducted within the general population of voters, showing the limited impact of technologies over political engagement and political participation.

This paper offers another perspective, looking at online political activism at an intermediary level between the general population and the party members. It explores how the (limited number) of people who get involved into an online campaign perceive parties and how they consider and practice activism. It shows that strong differences between party members and non-members remain, which tends to show that party boundaries haven’t slackened yet, at least in France. However, qualitatively, distinctions appear between those who are mostly active online and those who are mostly active offline.

The paper is based on quantitative and qualitative data (group and individual interviews) gathered during the French presidential campaign 2012, in the France-Québec project webinpolitics.com.

1 The data presented in this paper come from a French-Quebec research project both financed by the French Agency for Research and the Quebec Research Fund – Society and Culture. This research, titled enpolitique.com (webinpolitics.com in English) is lead under the scientific responsibility of Fabienne Greffet (University of Lorraine, France) and Thierry Giasson (University Laval, Québec) from 2012 to 2014. Other colleagues involved are Gersende Blanchard (University Lille 3), Simon Gadras (University Lyon 2) and Stéphanie Wojcik (University Paris-Est Créteil) in France; Frédérick Bastien (University of Montreal) and Mireille Lalande (University Québec-Trois Rivières) in Québec.
Introduction

Over the last few years, research on political parties has emphasized the decline of traditional party activism as well as a slackening of the boundaries of political parties, as a result of the cartellization of parties (Katz and Mair, 1995) or of a growing use of digital technologies (Chadwick, 2007; Gibson, 2013). On the one hand, the literature on digital campaigning underlines the professionalization of communication (Howard, 2006) as well as the growing interactions between citizens and political actors. On the other hand, party membership is declining and parties have undertaken reforms to open their boundaries and give supporters a greater role, particularly in the field of online campaigning. Supporter or citizen networks might replace traditional party membership.

This paper examines the empirical evidence of this assumption, presenting data on online political engagement during the French Presidential campaign 2012, engagement being here defined in a very restricted sense of online active participation and political attitudes, different from other possible dimensions of engagement such as information consumption (Jensen, Jorba and Anduiza, 2013, p. 3). I argue, using both quantitative and qualitative data gathered in the project webinpolitics.com, that, contrary to general models developed in the US and the UK, political engagement in the online French Presidential campaign 2012, is very much sustained by party membership and many of the most active online are party members. They act as front-lines of bigger supporter networks.

In order to do so, I examine firstly the political attitudes of party members/non members active online, then their perceptions of online campaigning and some of their online/offline civic and political practices.

The transformation of parties and activism

Over the last decades, the academic literature on party politics has studied the transformation of organizations and activism, focusing on professionalization and the development of communication activities, particularly online; and on the decline of membership, that might be associated with more blurred differences between members and supporters, particularly in periods of campaign. These trends result in the hypothesis that traditional party membership might be given up and replaced by a status of “supporter”, whereas activism might redesigned in new forms of online political campaigning, managed by central organizations.
Party organizations and digital technologies

Political scientists have explored the transformation of parties by elaborating models such as the electoral-professional party (Panebianco, 1988), the cartel party (Katz and Mair, 1995, 2002, 2009) and the cyber party (Margetts, 2006). In these general and evolutionist schemes mainly elaborated with the examples of the US and Western Europe, the organization and activities of political parties are presented as having reached a growing level of professionalization, as well as a diversification of activities, in a context of use of digital technologies.

Professionalization has different meanings in party politics (Panebianco, 1988, p. 221-22). Most politicians at a national level are dedicated full-time to politics, so they are political professionals in a weberian sense. But there is a second level of professionalization, which is the presence of what Panebianco defines as experts, i.e. people specialized in specific, mostly technical tasks. These professionals can work in different fields such as campaigning, public relations, or the analysis of public opinion; they can also work on specific policy topics to bring ideas to the parties, for instance through think tanks. Professionalization in that case occurs either by enrolling experts, or by contracting out certain tasks. This is particularly significant in the field of campaigning and political communication. In a rather technologically-deterministic view, D. Farell and P. Webb (2000) have elaborated three stages of the professionalization of campaigning, depending on the development of technologies, the resources and the main themes of campaigning (see also Norris, 2000). At the third stage, which is the one of digital technologies such as the internet, campaigning becomes “permanent” and messages as well as communication techniques are adapted to targeted audiences thanks to “narrowcasting” techniques. Therefore the communication becomes more direct and “consumer-oriented”, political messages being more and more adapted to the preferences of each category (Farrel and Webb, 2000). This requires a growing number of external campaign consultants and agencies, “the new elites of Anglo-American politics, the products of a media-saturated style of politics” (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999, p. 213).

The consequences of the professionalization of communication and digital campaigning over political organizations remain discussed. Some scholars such as Howard (2006) argue that citizens tend to be more and more “managed” by teams which have the ability to collect and treat big masses of data and to elaborate devices influencing voters’ behaviours. In the “hypermedia” environment, the political organization is more centralized and citizenship is oriented towards privatization: “political hypermedia are deliberately designed to privatize in multiple senses of the word: to move the logistics of citizenship from the public to the private sector, into the private world of home and work space, where individuals act more out of private discontent on select issues than out of public duty for collective welfare”. (Howard, 2006, p. 190). Working on the example of the Dean campaign 2004,
Kreiss also notices that citizen networks were progressively involved in a more institutionalized and centralized organization (Kreiss, 2009).

Other scholars insist on the potential of digital technologies to renew democracy practices and the relationships between parties and citizens, even though they are mediated by consultants and external agencies. This renewal of relationships with the citizens is one of the key features of the model of the cyber-party, technologies being perceived as a tool to expand the relationships previously limited to the party members to larger groups of citizens (Margetts, 2006). Focusing on recent campaigns, Gibson (2013) shows the emergence both in the US with the Obama campaign 2008 and in the UK with the general election 2010 of a new “citizen-initiated” model of campaigning, based on the transfer of tasks such as voter mobilization to the grassroots supporters, via digital tools. In the US, the Obama campaign 2008 was based on vast networks of citizens, with several millions of users that registered their profile on MyBOsite and mobilized for the campaign. In the UK, previously to the campaign 2010, some party officials in charge of digital technologies also underlined the importance of parties to become more fluid, open as organizations (Gibson et alii, 2013, p. 18). This appears essential to party officials in a situation where loose and informal groups of supporters organized over the web are able to get some media coverage and to play a significant role within the party, for instance in the nomination of election candidates.

In a broader perspective, Chadwick notices the capacity of web2.0 techniques to allow “small scale forms of political engagement” (Chadwick, 2009, p.23). He suggests that the internet encourages “organizational hybridity”, in particular through the adoption, within traditional political organizations, of digital network repertoires previously typical of social movements. For instance, the “do-it-yourself nature of campaigns” (Chadwick, 2007, p. 287) in anti-globalization movements has inspired online political actions and tools such as blogs, forums, content management or donation devices. Through kinds of mimicry processes, parties might organize internally as social movements, with more flexible and opened forms of engagement. The example of the Pirate party is significant of such closeness between (online) social movements and the “form party” (Miegel and Olsson, 2013).

Overall, what appears here is a kind of replacement of notions such as “membership” and “activism” by other notions such as “supporters”, “citizens” or “voters”. Because the boundaries of organizations appear to become looser, and digital networks are expanding, the meaning of party membership might be revised in online environments. However, this is not applicable to all organizations. As shown by Lilleker et alii (2010) with the case of the Liberal-Democrat party in the UK, political parties headquarters are not necessarily willing to encourage participatory or co-production of decision with supporters. They sometimes perceive themselves as promoting values;
they are also constrained by internal procedures and rules which can make the non-investment in internet communication rational (Cardenal, 2013).

**Party membership and party activism, online and offline**

These changes meet research questions that have developed in the field of party politics and party activism since the beginning of the 2000s (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000).

Evidence of the decline of party membership in Europe can be found in the official figures since the 1990’s. It is observed both relatively to the size of the electorate and in the absolute numbers of party members, which tends to show that parties not only fail to recruit party members, but also lose their actual members (van Biezen et alii, 2012). France is an exception to this general trend. Historically, the rate of party members among the electorate has never been high. In 2009, about 813,000 French citizens were party members (615,219 in 1999), which corresponds to 1.85% of the electorate. Compared with 1999, the percentage of party membership within the electorate has slightly increased (+0,3%, 1.57% in 1999). But France is still a country where parties remain weak; in 2009, France comes 23rd out of 27 European countries for its rate of party members in the electorate.

Facing their own decline, some political parties have undertaken reforms, mainly by renewing forms of political participation within the organizations. Since the 1990s, some parties have given members a greater direct role in selecting party candidates, party leaders, and even party policies (Cross and Katz, 2013; for France, see Faucher and Treille, 2003). The power of local branches and congress delegates has been devoted to party members “on the ground” (Katz and Mair, 2002) but also to party supporters. This is observable in France. For instance, before the Presidential election 2012 in France, the Green party EELV organized an internal election to select its candidate. Even though other parties such as the main Conservative party the UMP or the left-wing coalition Front de gauche haven’t adopted such strict rules, the candidate at the Presidential election has to be approved by party members thanks to an internal consultation. In some cases, the rules of membership can even be relaxed, when allowing supporters to participate in some of the main party activities. The main left-wing French party, the PS, set up “open primaries” in 2011, which allowed any left-wing voter to participate in the selection of the Socialist candidate at the presidential election 2012. The role of supporters seems therefore reinforced whereas local branches, delegates and even members might have lost some power. This is congruent both with the cyber-party and with the cartel party model, which describes a “self-referential, professional, and technocratic” party where “the distinction between party members and non-members becomes blurred”: (...) “through primaries, electronic polling, and so on, the parties invite all of their supporters, members or not, to participate in party
organizational activities and candidate selection. Indeed, it is through participation in activities such as primaries that citizens become defined as supporters” (Katz and Mair, 2009, p. 755).

Sociologically too, a smaller social distance between party members and the general population seems to appear. Comparing surveys in the 1990s and in the 2000s, Scarrow and Gezgor (2010, p. 831) conclude that “as a group, party members look a lot more like everyone else on a host of basic indicators traditionally associated with higher levels of political participation”. The difference is more between those who participate – always highly socially selected - and those who don’t participate or participate less.

Finally, the growing use of the internet itself has contributed to transform both intra-party organizations and participation in campaigning. A few surveys within parties have led to different conclusions. In the case of Danish and Norwegian parties, the use of the internet appears as a way for very active traditional members to increase their activism and involvement in the party (Pedersen and Saglie, 2005). In the case of the Lib-Dem party in the UK, online members seem to participate a bit less than offline members (Lusoli and Ward 2004).

Since these surveys, opportunities of interacting with parties and candidates have considerably increased online, notably on social networks and during campaigns. In the case of France, a “social-networkisation” of online party communication is observable since 2009 (Greffet, 2013), most parties trying to build online communities of supporters either on the web on or social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter. However, the evidence of the increasing of participation or interaction opportunities is often gathered at the party or candidate level, by studying the content of websites or other communication platforms (Verger and Sams, 2013; Williams and Gulati, 2013). Even though these studies are useful to monitor to what extent digital technologies are appropriated and used by the central offices and communication agencies working for the parties and candidates, they are limited to the “supply side” and can’t provide a better knowledge of the way digital campaigning is used and perceived by net activists.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, studies of the general public either show the limited penetration of online information and participation within the general population (for France, Greffet and Vedel, 2011; Koch-Michalska and Vedel, 2009). Or, more rarely, research undertaken within parties interrogates party members but misses supporters, i.e those who are actively involved without being members.

Taking another perspective, the research project webinpolitics.com studies people who actively participated in the campaign in France in 2012 whether members or non-members of parties. This is an opportunity to investigate what people actually do online when involved in a campaign and if they actually use the participation opportunities offered by candidates and parties.
Here, I will consider the hypothesis of the distinction among net-activists, whether party members or not, in terms both of perception and action in the campaign. I will argue that the two categories party members/non party members tend to behave differently in the online campaigns. Party membership remains a strong support to online political engagement and invite to a balanced vision of “models” of parties and campaigning.

**The French 2012 context**

The internet has now become a mass media in France, with 80% of the households connected in 2012 (76% average rate in the EU 27, source: Eurostat). Initial uses of the internet for political campaigning were observed at the beginning of the 2000s, particularly with the first “internet campaign” for the presidential election of 2002. Big developments took also place after the campaign for the European Constitutional Treaty in May 2005. The campaign of the “no” groups was extremely active over the web and despise a consensus of the mainstream media in favour of the yes, the “no” won at the referendum. At that time, political actors realized the mobilization potential of the internet. The next Presidential election of 2007 was much more internet-oriented, with particularly an “online participative campaign” by the Socialist candidate Ségolène Royal, whereas the campaign of her main competitor Nicolas Sarkozy was also very active but much more top-down and based on videos (Vaccari, 2008; Greffet, 2013). Since 2009, initiatives have been numerous in the parties to reinforce their cyber-presence, by creating supporter networks and then by campaigning on social media such as Facebook and Twitter. This was particularly significant in 2012, the cyber-presence of the main candidates for the Presidential election being extremely developed (table 1). Given the personalization and the deterritorialization of the French Presidential competition, it is a moment when parties and candidate teams campaign very much online.

The Presidential election is also the main election in France, with a high level of voting. In 2012, 79,5% of (registered) citizens cast their votes, for 83,7% in 2007 and 71,6% in 2002 which was the election with the biggest turnout rate for a Presidential election since 1965. This is not comparable with the rate of people voting for the parliamentary elections (55,4% of vote, first round, June 2012) or the local elections (61,0%, first round March 2008). However, the number of people involved on social networks - for instance about 1,042000 people having “liked” one of the main candidate pages on Facebook, the biggest number of “likes” being the 651,517 people on N.Sarkozy’s Facebook page in May - remains limited², especially in comparison with the more than 37 millions of people who cast their vote (Gadras and Greffet, 2013).

² They are even more limited for parties, with a total of 193881 “likes”, with a maximum of 72,718 “likes” for the National Front page on May 8th, 2012.
Table 1: Cyber-presence of the 6 main candidates in the French Presidential election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Sites/blogs of the candidate, the campaign, the party</th>
<th>Facebook pages</th>
<th>Twitter accounts</th>
<th>YouTube &amp; Dailymotion accounts</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>François Hollande  PS</td>
<td>6 including 1 candidate website 2 campaign websites 3 party websites</td>
<td>4 including 1 candidate page 2 campaign and group pages 1 party page</td>
<td>4 including 1 candidate account 1 campaign account 2 party accounts</td>
<td>5 including 1 candidate account 1 campaign account 3 party accounts</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicolas Sarkozy UMP</td>
<td>3 including 1 candidate website 1 campaign website 1 party website</td>
<td>3 including 2 candidate pages 1 party page</td>
<td>2 including 1 candidate account 1 party account</td>
<td>4 including 2 candidate accounts 2 party accounts</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marine Le Pen FN</td>
<td>7 including 1 candidate website 3 campaign websites 3 party website</td>
<td>3 including 1 candidate page 1 campaign page 1 party page</td>
<td>4 including 1 candidate account 2 campaign accounts 1 party account</td>
<td>3 including 1 candidate account 1 campaign account 1 party account</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean-Luc Mélenchon FDG</td>
<td>13 including 1 candidate personal blog 3 sites campaign websites 9 party websites</td>
<td>5 including : 1 candidate page 4 party pages</td>
<td>6 including 1 candidate account 1 campaign account 4 party accounts</td>
<td>9 1 candidate account 2 campaign accounts 6 party accounts</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>François Bayrou Modem</td>
<td>3 including 1 candidate website 2 party websites</td>
<td>2 including 1 candidate page 1 party page</td>
<td>2 including 1 candidate account 1 party account</td>
<td>4 including 2 candidate accounts 2 party accounts</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva Joly EELV</td>
<td>4 including 1 candidate website 1 campaign website 2 party websites</td>
<td>3 including 1 candidate page 1 campaign page 1 party page</td>
<td>3 including 1 candidate account 1 campaign account 1 party account</td>
<td>5 including 2 candidate accounts 1 campaign account 2 party accounts</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Methodology

Two types of date are used in this paper, both from the project webinpolitics.com which is a multi-method and comparative France-Québec project.

A post-electoral survey was conducted after the second round of the French Presidential election, from May 6th to May 27, 2013. This survey is different from many other surveys in a sense that it is not built over a representative sample; it is based on online contacts made with people who have

1 The project webinpolitics.com focuses on an in-depth study of the on-line campaigns of 6 candidates and 7 parties; these 6 candidates: François Hollande (PS-Socialist, 28,6%), Nicolas Sarkozy (UMP-Conservative, 27,2%), Marine Le Pen (FN, Radical right, 17,9%), Jean-Luc Mélenchon (FDG-Left, 11,1%), François Bayrou (Centre, 9,1%), Eva Joly (Green, 2,3%) got a total of 96,2% the votes on the first round of the Presidential election 2012.
been active online during the campaign, and have been contacted through different blogs, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, with a snow-ball technique (Blanchard, Gadras and Wojcik, 2013). When collecting the data, party membership wasn’t taken into account as a criteria, but when filling in the online questionnaire, 38,8% of the 827 respondents declared they had joined a party or renewed their membership over the last 12 months. Of course, campaigns are usually moments when supporters become members, the turn-over of members being high in political organizations. But this rate, compared with the 1,85% of voters belonging to a party organization in the general population shows that online campaigning is mainly a “party networks” issue (Sawicki, 1997).

Sociologically, the group of respondents also corresponds to the criteria of people most participative in politics: 61,9% are men, 57,4% have a postgraduate degree. Most of them (75,8%) declare they are “very interested” in politics (Blanchard and Wojcik, 2013).

In terms of political identification, there is a diversity of the group of on-line activists but the group of respondents over-represents the Greens and other ecologists and under-represents deeply the voters for the National Front as well as the Conservative and right-wing parties. This might also correspond to the profile of politically-active people online. Other data shows for instance that the online presence in favour of the Green candidate Eva Joly was superior to the one of Nicolas Sarkozy during the campaign (Gadras and Greffet, 2013); in several countries, it also has been shown that green supporters tended to be more active online (Ward, 2008). The under-representation of the National Front respondents might be the result of a mistrust in surveys by supporters of this party, who are more difficult to approach.

Table 2: Party identification of the respondents (n=827)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party Identification</th>
<th>% Respondents</th>
<th>% of Votes of the Candidates, First Round, April 2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Radical left</td>
<td>1,2</td>
<td>1,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left (Front de gauche and allies)</td>
<td>14,5</td>
<td>11,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialists and allies</td>
<td>28,7</td>
<td>28,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greens and other ecology parties</td>
<td>11,1</td>
<td>2,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre parties</td>
<td>12,5</td>
<td>9,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative and right-wing parties</td>
<td>19,0</td>
<td>29,0*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Front and other radical right forces</td>
<td>5,6</td>
<td>17,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other or no reply</td>
<td>7,4</td>
<td>0,3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The results of two right-wing candidates (N.Sarkozy : 27,2% and N.Dupont-Aignan : 1,8%) are added to each other.
Conversely, the group of party members over-represent the right-wing, whereas the left-wing, particularly the radical left is under-represented (table 3). Even if it’s not possible with the data to check, we suggest that party members might be more active on-line on the right wing, whereas those participating actively in the campaign on the left-wing are not necessarily party members.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3: Party identification and party membership of the respondents</th>
<th>% of respondents (N=827)</th>
<th>% of party members (N=321)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Radical left</td>
<td>1,2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left (Front de gauche and allies)</td>
<td>14,5</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialists and allies</td>
<td>28,7</td>
<td>34,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greens and other ecology parties</td>
<td>11,1</td>
<td>43,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre parties</td>
<td>12,5</td>
<td>49,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative and right-wing parties</td>
<td>19,0</td>
<td>61,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Front and other radical right forces</td>
<td>5,6</td>
<td>34,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other or no reply</td>
<td>7,4</td>
<td>8,1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To know better the online campaign activities and the perceptions of the online campaigns, we have offered respondents to the questionnaire to meet us after the campaign. Four focus groups were organized, as well as 20 individual interviews. The focus groups lasted about two hours each, and each interview between one and three hours. The interview framework was identical whether the interviews were individual or collective. Collective and individual interviews were undertaken from June 2012 to November 2012 in different French cities (Paris, Lille, Nancy, Lyon, Grenoble). The interview framework was divided into two parts: a classic, face-to-face interaction with an interviewer (and other participants in the case of focus groups) to talk about the campaign both offline and online; and an experimentation based on the reactions of participants to the visualization of material which had circulated during the campaign. Two videos were shown to the participants, as well as slides of a political game that was developed by the centre party Modem to encourage online activism.
First results\(^5\)

Political attitudes

There is a clear difference in terms of political attitudes (table 3). Net-activists who also are party members, whether joining online or offline, generally have a more positive perception of institutions. When controlling these attitudes with political identification, to take into account the over-representation of the right-wing among party members, there is still a strong difference between party members and non-members on most items, whatever the political force is. For instance, 64,2\% of the Socialists declaring they are party members trust the parties (59\% of the online members and 65,8\% of the offline members), 39,9\% of the non-members. Among the Conservatives, the rates are 69,1\% (70,6\% of online members and 66,7\% of offline members) for 43,1\% among non-members.

81,5\% of the party members on the Socialist side trust the National Assembly (82,1\% of online members and 78,9\% of offline members), for 73,7\% of the non-members. This is also observable on the Conservative side, 72,2\% of the members (72,1\% of online members and 70,8\% of offline members) trust the National Assembly, for 65,5\% of the non-members. 85,2\% of party members (84,6\% among online party members; 84,2\% among offline party members) close to the Socialists trust the administration, 77,6\% of non-members. However, on the Conservative side, if there is a difference between party members (49,5\% of party members trust the administration) and non-members (48,3\% trust the administration), the rate of online members trusting the administration (47,1\%) is smaller than the one of offline members (58,3\%) and of non-members (48,3\%). On the Socialist side, the exception to this trend is the trust in the army, that is higher among Socialists non-members (82,9\%) than among members (74,7\%), the online members being closer in that respect (86,8\% trust the army) to non-members that offline members (67,6\%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Trust in political parties</th>
<th>Trust in the national assembly</th>
<th>Trust in the army</th>
<th>Trust in the administration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Online party members</strong></td>
<td>52,2</td>
<td>66,3</td>
<td>83,3</td>
<td>63,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Offline party members</strong></td>
<td>50</td>
<td>64,7</td>
<td>73,5</td>
<td>71,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non members</strong></td>
<td>26,7</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>76,2</td>
<td>64,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td>36,5%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>77,2%</td>
<td>63,5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^5\) The sociological features of online party members, offline party members and non-members are not presented in this paper since there is no major sociological difference among the three categories. The rate of women is between 37 and 46,2\% (maximum rate among offline party members), the rate of people 18-24 year-old is between 18,2\% and 25,2\% (maximum rate among offline party members), and the rate of respondents who hold a post-graduate degree is between 53,6\% and 59,8\% (the non-members being the most educated).
One could argue that these generally higher levels of trust in the institutions are obvious for party members, who have closer relationships to institutional politics and to political parties. But it also clear when coming to online campaigning and involvement in online campaigning; those who declare they are party members, particularly having joined online, are much more inclined to actively participate.

The importance of online mobilization
When rating the importance of online campaign from 1(not important at all) to 5 (very important), 79.9% of online party members consider it very important, 78.1% of offline party members and a rate of 69.2% for non-members. Party members are also much more attached to all forms of engagement online, here defined in a broader sense of information, interaction/discussion and activism.

Table 4: To what extent do you consider important that candidates and party use the internet to... (scored from 1 to 5, average below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All group</th>
<th>Online party members (N=184)</th>
<th>Offline party members (N=119)</th>
<th>Non members (N=506)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Become a party member online</td>
<td>3,3</td>
<td>4,1</td>
<td>3,5</td>
<td>2,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be able to download some campaign material</td>
<td>3,1</td>
<td>3,9</td>
<td>3,7</td>
<td>2,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donate money</td>
<td>3,0</td>
<td>3,7</td>
<td>3,4</td>
<td>2,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know better the personality of the candidate</td>
<td>2,55</td>
<td>2,9</td>
<td>2,8</td>
<td>2,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chat with you</td>
<td>2,8</td>
<td>3,0</td>
<td>2,9</td>
<td>2,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create a space for free discussion</td>
<td>3,5</td>
<td>3,8</td>
<td>3,8</td>
<td>3,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform about the events of the campaign</td>
<td>4,0</td>
<td>4,4</td>
<td>4,3</td>
<td>3,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform about political issues discussed in the campaign</td>
<td>4,3</td>
<td>4,6</td>
<td>4,5</td>
<td>4,2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The difference between party members and non-members remains on the whole political spectrum. For instance, members close to the Socialist party judge on average the importance of being able to become a member online with 4.0 point out of five (4.1 for online party members, 3.9 for offline party members), for 3.1 for non-members. This is also clear in other parties such as the National Front, where the averages are respectively 3.6 (3.4 for online party members, 3.9 for offline party members) and 2.8. Be able to download campaign material online is considered as more important for party members close to the different political parties, with for examples averages of 4.2 (4.1 among online and 4.2 among offline members) and 3.0 (non-members) in the left FDG, or a difference between 3.9 (3.8 for online members, 4 for offline members) and 3.1 (non-members) within the Conservative right-wing. Other items show different ratings as well, with more importance
given by members of the party to all items, except a quasi-equality (3,3 on average) for the importance of a space for free discussion among centre-online activists. The differences between members having joined online/offline are less significant, but it is noticeable that on several items, offline members rate higher than online members the importance of online devices.

**Political activism online and offline: quantitative data**

To go further in the understanding of online activism, indexes of online/offline activism have been created. The index of online/offline civic activism if composed of three items: to have signed an online/offline petition over the last 12 months; to have purchased products online/offline for political, ethical or environmental reasons; to have volunteered online/offline for an NGO or a charity. The index of offline political activism is composed of three items of declared activism during the campaign: to have participated in a public meeting of a candidate; to have stuck up a political poster or handed out leaflets; to have participate in another political action (that a public meeting) in one’s region. A fourth item, have donated to a party offline over the past twelve months, is added to these items. The index of online political activism is composed of three items of declared activism during the campaign: to have watched the video of a public meeting with a candidate; to have sent an e-mail to a candidate; to have downloaded some campaign material. A fourth item, to have donate some money online over the last twelve months, is added to these items.

The table 5 presents the rate of party members among those who are most active online and offline.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Active ++ Civic action online (2 or 3 items)</th>
<th>Active ++ Civic action offline (2 or 3 items)</th>
<th>Active ++ Political action online (3 or 4 items)</th>
<th>Active ++ Political action offline (3 or 4 items)</th>
<th>Average rate, total respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% online party members</td>
<td>42,9</td>
<td>21,7</td>
<td>45,7</td>
<td>39,1</td>
<td>22,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% offline party members</td>
<td>39,5</td>
<td>41,4</td>
<td>19,3</td>
<td>49,6</td>
<td>14,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% non members</td>
<td>20,6</td>
<td>21,7</td>
<td>9,5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>63,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average rate, total</td>
<td>28,9%</td>
<td>25,8%</td>
<td>20,1%</td>
<td>20,0%</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Rate of party members among those who are the most active, either online or offline (3 or 4 items).

Here again, there is a clear distinction between non-party members, who are always over-represented among those who are mostly active online and offline. Only 4% of the non-members belong to the politically most active offline, and 9,5% to the most active online. Conversely, the rate
of online party members is high among those who are politically active online (45.7%), as well as those who are civically active (42.9%). And offline party members are more numerous in terms of offline action rather than online action. The ideological dimension doesn’t modify this general observation.

What appears here is that the boundaries of party organizations are far from having disappeared; there is still some very strong differences between party and non-party members not only for political activism, but also for civic activism. However, among party members, there seem to appear different types of activism around two trends; one trend oriented towards online action and internet supporter mobilization, either civic or political; the other one oriented towards offline action, even though each type of activism can meet the other. The qualitative data gathered in the project webinpolitics.com contributes to a better understanding of the ways these types of activism are both differentiated and intertwined.

**Political activism online and offline: qualitative data**

As a matter of fact, some interviewees reported they became party members once they had been active online; in that case, the internet usage appears to have been a way of joining a political community that is much wider and more diverse than the one they were usually in contact with:

“The mobilization of net-users... It’s really extraordinary. I find that it’s the first campaign with such a mobilization, because I’m in politics, beforehand I couldn’t because I was in the army and I had no right to do so. Now that I am retired, I follow this very seriously, I was so amazed to see how people are interested, whatever their age or education... (...) The internet, it was amazing. It’s true that political parties have prepared the campaign very well. There were lots of broadcasting, we were extremely associated to everything which was going on...(...) This way of empowering people continues et political parties are really seeking... people like us. It’s funny because they realize that without us, they will not manage to transmit some of their ideas” (R., retired woman, age 66, ex-army officer, member of the UMP since May 2012).

In this community of online supporters, those who get involved feel they are useful to the campaign, even if they do not necessarily become party members, i.e part of the offline community as well. And the role of supporters is recognized, even though the difference between party members and non-members remains:

“there were people playing the role, at least of transmitting information... who were sharing pages, etc., retwitting. That was important too because... it was about attracting a maximum of people, on the largest possible scale. So these people have contributed I think. Without necessarily... become a member, because membership is something else, another step”. (O., man, student, 20, UMP member)
However, some of the young activists think online activism cannot be sufficient even though supporters have started with it, like A. (woman, 22, student, Socialist member):

“I find it quite unwholesome people who only do that, only online things, because I think that people, at least on Twitter, are already very much convinced... Finally, it’s a bit preaching to the converted\(^6\). I think that what reaches people more is to go and see them, in the streets, and talk to them”.

[later in the interview]
I am very attached to offline campaigning so... fine that the supporters get involved in the online campaign but... if they really like the online campaign, they should want to do it offline too, because I find it important. The number of people as to be big, non only party members obviously, but also supporters...”

For these interviewees, online activism is the channel to get involved in party politics, and to meet supporters outside the party. If it’s important in campaign period, it doesn’t mean the same thing as full membership. For other interviewees who have been firstly active offline, the online activism is an extra dimension of their offline activism they can appear more reserved about. Online activism is perceived in different ways, as a tool to socialize within the party; or sometimes, it is more of an obstacle or a substitute to offline action.

For a young activist as F. (24, student, member of the French Communist Party since 2011), being active on the internet is a way of socializing within the party, to complete his action offline; but contrarily to those who have been active online first, he thinks social networks are too sociologically similar and excluding other activists.

“On the e-mail list of the local branch, it’s there where we talk much with the elders in the party, they really bring something different, a different vision from us, the young. On Facebook, we only have young people, for instance, even people who comment are mostly young people. And there, it’s very different. (...). We don’t have the same vision, not at all (...). They have all the history of the party behind them, they know how it was, they teach us a lot of things”.

The example of P (51, teacher, Modem member since 2007 but was member of the centre-parties that preceded the Modem) is revealing of the difficulty of converting to online campaigning for elderly activists. Offline activism is preferred and online activism is perceived as time-consuming:

“Usually I read the subject title [of the e-mail] sent, for instance by the Modem. Well, I sort out, yes. The title attracts me and I click, I have a look at the article or at the video which is online. But... I have no time. I have no time, because I am an activist, because I work, 45-50 hours a week, if I still want to go to the cinema, if I want to do other things than politics, if I want to be active in the campaigns... hand out leaflets, stick up posters, bah... (later in the interview). I am an elder party member, I remember that in the time of the UDF, we were receiving a paper-newsletter... it was concentrating the information (...). Maybe I belong to a

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\(^6\) See also Norris, 2003.
former generation, but having the paper newsletter, I was taking more time to read it... whereas the internet... The paper newsletter, I was receiving it, opening it, I was reading it or not but it was there. Whereas the Internet, one closes the computer but physically, the information is not there... So I have more difficulties to think about it.”

Finally, to G., 60, ex-Communist Party member who left the party, online activism appears as a substitute because he can’t or doesn’t want to be active offline.

“I have started my blog because... I didn’t like the way the campaign was starting, I had things to say. (...). I think finally that I have started it because I was a bit frustrated not to have as many political activities as in 2002”.

In sum, the internet and social networks are perceived to create new channels for supporters to be active and to join the organizations, and for party members to meet these communities. However, party membership is “another step” as O. puts it, that the internet, even in a context of the expansion of digital networks, doesn’t necessarily make easier. Also, combining online and offline activism, as well as restricting one’s activities to online activism, is not obvious for many activists. They seem to be seeking a balance of their political activities online and offline and to be constrained to some extent to make choices between them, given the growing number of participation opportunities.

**Conclusion**

This paper shows that despite the claims about the progressive weakening of party boundaries linked with the decline of membership, the internal reforms and the introduction of digital campaigning, there is still a major gap between party members and non-members in terms both of offline and online activism in France in 2012. Even among people who have been particularly active online during the French presidential campaign, this gap remains. Party members tend to have a much more positive perception of institutions, and to be more sensitive to the opportunities of being online in the campaign, even though they are offline members. They also are more involved in online and offline campaigning as well as in civic action. Party membership depends on other conditions than the capacity of people to be supportive of their candidate or party online. However, qualitative data shows that online campaigning creates new channels for supporters to actively participate. Some activists might become party members in some cases, and party members are able to wider the communities they are in contact with. It also reveals the complexity of the relationship between online and offline activism, depending on individual experiences and the importance of offline/online activism for each person. Further research will investigate to what extent the combination of online/offline activism is linked with the opportunities offered by the political organizations and candidates themselves, i.e the supply side of political communication.
References:


