

ARTICLE

Acknowledgement as a Precondition for Accommodation: Elite Intergroup Recognition in Belgium's Federal Parliament (1961–2023) and the Impact of Decentralisation and Regionalist Party Strength

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Abstract

This paper revisits the role of elite accommodation in consociational democracies by shifting analytical attention to intergroup acknowledgement. We argue that a minimal level of recognition between societal groups is a necessary precondition for accommodation: Without genuine acknowledgement across societal group boundaries, accommodation cannot take place. We conceptualise referring to other MPs/MGs in parliamentary speeches as a measurable indicator of such acknowledgement. Focusing on Belgium, which has long been regarded as a prime example of elite accommodation but where it now appears to be under threat, this paper quantitatively examines this crucial condition. Using a new dataset of 22,236 speeches from Belgium's federal parliament, covering investiture and State of the Union debates between 1961 and 2023, this paper shows that Belgian elites primarily refer to MPs/MGs of their own respective language groups. Furthermore, we show that the decentralisation of competences leads to less intergroup recognition and that, contrary to expectations, an increase in regionalist party strength in parliament leads to more intergroup recognition.

Keywords: Consociationalism, Spirit of accommodation, Belgium, Regionalist parties, Decentralisation

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Introduction

According to consociational theory, stability in deeply divided societies depends not only on institutionalised power-sharing arrangements but also on the willingness of elites to engage across societal cleavages (Andeweg, 2000; Lijphart, 1968, 1969). While institutional mechanisms of the consociational theory, such as grand coalitions, proportionality, mutual vetoes, and segmental autonomy have received extensive scholarly attention (for an overview, see Farag et al., 2023 and Bogaards et al., 2019), this cultural dimension of consociationalism, described by Lijphart (1968) as “the spirit of accommodation”, remains comparatively understudied (Bogaards et al., 2019; Farag et al., 2023; Steiner, 2009; Steiner & Jaramillo, 2019). One possible reason for this is that accommodation is later on viewed as a by-product of the four institutional features (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2020; Lijphart, 1977). However, the key challenge remains the operationalisation of accommodation. Steiner (2009, p. 200) claims that “no serious effort was ever made to measure this cultural variable in a reliable and valid way”. This is largely because the spirit of accommodation is an extremely vague and broad concept, making it difficult to measure quantitatively (Steiner & Jaramillo, 2019; Van Schendelen, 1984).

Therefore, we suggest focusing on measuring what we believe is a measurable precondition of accommodation: the acknowledgement of other societal groups. As Jürg Steiner (2009) argues in his article ‘In search of the consociational spirit of accommodation’, “reaching over to the other side is a crucial element to the success of consociationalism” (p. 196). This behaviour among political elites is particularly important in consociational democracies, where citizens belonging to different societal groups are expected to interact only rarely and largely remain politically passive (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2020; Huyse, 1970). However, elites cannot accommodate other societal groups if they do not first recognise them as full and legitimate political actors. By acknowledging other societal groups, political actors grant each other standing and treat each other as participating agents rather than as passive objects of discussion (Gamson, 2004). While we do not consider acknowledging other societal groups to be a substitute for accommodation, we argue that accommodation cannot exist without a minimal level of intergroup recognition.

We conceptualise recognition in parliamentary speeches as a measurable indicator of acknowledgement. More specifically, we see recognition as the extent to which Members of Parliament (MPs) and Members of Government (MGs) directly refer to one another in debates. By mentioning someone in parliament, one offers “standing” to them (Gamson, 2004). Parliamentary debates are particularly suitable for this purpose because elites from different societal groups formally interact in this arena, and these data provide consistent, longitudinal records of these exchanges. Accordingly, this paper seeks to map this crucial condition quantitatively. Do elites from different societal groups indeed acknowledge each other in parliament?

Furthermore, this paper explores potential explanations for the longitudinal evolution of intergroup recognition in consociational democracies, focusing in particular on two factors that may reduce such recognition: the decentralisation of competences and the electoral strength of regionalist parties.

Belgium, where societal groups are divided along linguistic lines, provides an interesting case for studying such dynamics, given its long tradition of consociational governance and its many rounds of state reforms in which power-sharing mechanisms have been institutionalised, and competences have been decentralised (Deschouwer, 2006), as well as the strong presence of regionalist parties (Deschouwer, 2011; Van Haute, 2016). Moreover, Lijphart once described Belgium as “one of the most thorough examples of consociational democracy” (1981, p. 1). However, even in Belgium, the spirit of accommodation seems to be under threat, as shown by the recent government formation crises (Reuchamps et al., 2017). This is striking given that accommodation should naturally emerge from the core features of consociationalism, all of which have been institutionalised in Belgium through the federalisation process (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2020).

Using a new dataset of speeches from Belgium’s federal parliament, covering investiture and State of the Union debates between 1961 and 2023, we measure the recognition of the other language group through a dictionary-based named entity recognition method. This period is the ideal time frame to measure the impact of decentralisation and regionalist party strength, as it includes all six state reforms and the shifting success of regionalist parties in Belgium. The dataset comprises 22,236 speeches and identifies 5,222 intergroup recognitions and 11,536 intragroup recognitions. Our findings reveal that elites in Belgium refer more to the elite of their own linguistic group, that the decentralisation of competences leads to fewer intergroup recognition and that, contrary to expectations, an increased regionalist party strength in parliament leads to more intergroup recognition.

Acknowledgement as a Precondition for the Spirit of Accommodation

Before setting expectations about the acknowledgement of the other societal group, we first need to explain what the spirit of accommodation entails and why recognising other societal groups constitutes a precondition for accommodation in consociational democracies.

The spirit of accommodation is the cultural dimension of the consociational democracy theory of Arend Lijphart (1968). In the consociational theory, he argued that countries like the Netherlands and Belgium remain stable democracies, despite having a deeply divided society. They are what he calls ‘consociational democracies’, which are stable because of four institutionalised characteristics: a grand coalition,

proportionality, a mutual veto and segmental autonomy (Lijphart, 1977). With this theory, Lijphart challenged other pluralist theorists (e.g. Almond, 1956), who argued that diverse societies are inherently unstable. Furthermore, Lijphart (1969, p. 212) noted that the deliberate efforts of the elites are crucial to counteract the destabilising effects of cultural fragmentation and serve as the “missing link between a plural society and political stability”. He refers to this as ‘the spirit of accommodation’: a willingness to cooperate, compromise, and bridge societal divisions. Consociational democracy, therefore, means “government by elite cartel designed to turn a democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy” (Lijphart, 1969, p. 216).

To capture the spirit of accommodation, Lijphart (1968, pp. 123–137) outlined seven informal rules of prudent leadership: politics should be treated as business as usual, tolerance is required, important issues should be handled at the highest level, proportionality should be used, political issues should be depoliticised, secrecy should govern negotiations, and only the government has the right to govern. However, these ‘rules of the game’ have been widely criticised for their vagueness and impressionistic foundation, making empirical application difficult if not impossible (Steiner, 2009; Van Schendelen, 1984). This lack of operational clarity explains why the cultural dimension of consociationalism has often been neglected in empirical studies (Steiner & Jaramillo, 2019).

We therefore propose focusing on a measurable precondition of accommodation: the acknowledgement of other societal groups. In deeply divided consociational democracies, where social and political cleavages reinforce one another and ordinary citizens from different societal groups interact only rarely and are expected to be politically passive (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2020; Huyse, 1970), elite behavior becomes crucial as they are expected to bridge and manage societal group divisions (Andeweg, 2000). However, before political elites can bridge these divisions, they must first recognise the other side as a legitimate and participating actor in the political system. Political actors representing one societal group must recognise the existence, legitimacy, and political relevance of the other societal group before they can engage in accommodative behavior. Or, as Jarrett (2016, p. 412) puts it: “It is through the way in which it recognises and accommodates different societal groups in political and other arrangements that consociational power-sharing can successfully manage conflict in deeply divided societies”.

By acknowledging other societal groups, political actors grant them standing and treat them as participating agents rather than passive objects of discussion. In this sense, acknowledgement transforms the other societal groups from something that is spoken about into an actor that is spoken with (Gamson, 2004). While we do not consider the acknowledgement of other societal groups to be a substitute for accommodation itself, we argue that accommodation cannot exist without a minimal level of intergroup recognition. In the case, data and method section, we explain how we capture this minimal level of intergroup recognition in Belgium.

Criticism of the Spirit of Accommodation

Based on the above theory of the spirit of accommodation, one would expect elites to equally acknowledge all societal groups in their parliamentary speeches. However, accommodation has been criticised by many scholars over the years (e.g. Andeweg, 2000; Bogaards, 1998; Daalder, 1974). It is often considered impractical and difficult to achieve among political elites, as successful power-sharing requires them to prioritise compromise over outright victory. Yet, this remains a challenge in a highly competitive electoral environment. Intergroup accommodation is not guaranteed, as elites must also respond to the demands of their own societal group (Horowitz, 2000). Van der Velden and Meijers (2023) empirically show this in Germany, where voters have less trust in parties that are willing to compromise during coalition negotiations. Therefore, when the elites fear backlash for being too accommodating and think that it will cost them electorally, they are more likely to adopt a competitive rather than cooperative stance (Deschouwer & Temmerman, 2012; Horowitz, 2000). Furthermore, parties also often face formal, informal and practical obstacles when they engage across the divide (Blanckaert, 2025), making it even more difficult for them to show accommodative behaviour.

Elites in divided societies also often adhere to their own societal group logic, which could hinder intergroup recognition. John (2025) speaks of a “consociational culture” in which the elite remain within the logic of their own societal group when approaching cross-segmental issues. Although it shows that cross-segmental issues are addressed, it also reveals that societal divisions remain cemented. Blanckaert and Caluwaerts (2023) show this for MPs of the Brussels parliament, who, although it is electorally interesting for them to reach out to the other language group, still mainly make representative claims on behalf of their co-ethnics. Stojanovic (2020) cautions that if there is no elite cooperation at the national level, consociational democracies result in ethnoicracies, where the power is shared by the main ethnic groups identified by the system and where there is no place for ‘Others’. The latter refers to citizens who do not identify with any of the societal groups (Agarin, McCulloch & Murtagh, 2018; Stojanovic, 2018).

Because elites must respond to the demands of their own societal group and risk electoral punishment if they fail to do so, and since they tend to operate within their group's own logic, we hypothesise that they are more likely to refer to elites from their own societal group.

H1: Elites will refer more to elites from their own societal group than to elites from other societal groups.

Furthermore, there are two reasons to believe that intergroup recognition has decreased over time in deeply divided societies. A first factor is decentralisation of competencies. While decentralisation, or segmental autonomy, is a core feature of the consociational theory (Lijphart, 1969), the debate about its effectiveness remains.

On the one hand, some argue that decentralisation has a pacifying effect and is an effective tool for ethno-territorial conflict management (Keil & Anderson, 2018; Vandenberghe, 2023a). On the other hand, some scholars highlight the “paradox of federalism” (Erk & Anderson, 2009), which posits that once societal groups get segmental autonomy, they will ask for more power (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015). As a result, societal groups may drift further apart, separatist sentiments may rise (Kymlicka, 2001), ethno-linguistic identities can be reinforced (Tierney, 2009), and political tensions may escalate (McGarry & O’Leary, 2009). The federal elites, then, are a sum of actors who think and debate from a regional perspective (Swenden, 2006), and it is therefore likely to assume that they are less inclined to acknowledge the other societal groups. Therefore, it is expected that the more autonomy societal subgroups get, the more regions grow apart, the more elite think from a regional perspective, and the less intergroup recognition between elites there will be. The second hypothesis, therefore, reads as follows:

H2: Decentralisation of competences is associated with a decline in elite intergroup recognition.

A second factor is the growing electoral strength of regionalist parties. These parties, which prioritise the protection of regional identities and interests, have increased their vote shares since the 1970s (Masseti & Schakel, 2020, p. 6). While party elites in consociational systems are expected to act cooperatively, regionalist parties draw support from clearly identifiable societal groups, appeal to voters in ethnic terms, and reflect existing ethnic divisions (Horowitz, 2000, p. 291). Furthermore, their nationalism is rooted in ethnic distinctiveness and territorial claims within established states (De Winter & Türsan, 1998). As a result, stronger regionalist parties are expected to reduce incentives for intergroup recognition. This effect may be amplified by mainstream parties that adopt the rhetoric or issue positions of rising niche actors such as regionalist parties (Meguid, 2005; van de Wardt, 2015). Building on this reasoning, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: The increased electoral strength of regionalist parties is associated with a decline in intergroup recognition.

Case, Data and Methods

Case

Belgium serves as an interesting case to measure intergroup recognitions because of its consociational tradition and the many state reforms transforming the country from a unitary country to a federal one. Through the federalisation process, autonomy is granted to the language groups and minorities are protected, causing the elite to overcome the ethno-linguistic conflicts between the North and the South of the

country (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2020). These consociational mechanisms within the Belgian system prevent a simple majority from imposing its will on the minority. This means that although Dutch-speaking political parties may have a clear majority in the federal parliament, they will always have to cooperate with French-speaking parties (Sinardet, 2010). However, even before the introduction of its federal system, Belgium was considered a consociational democracy (Huyse, 1970) – though it was only during periods of deep crises² that the role of the political elites became crucial in resolving these conflicts (Deschouwer, 2006).

More recently, however, discussion has started in Belgium on whether the spirit of accommodation is under threat. The increased duration of government formation processes in Belgium can be seen as a prime example of this (De Winter & Dumont, 2021; Reuchamps et al., 2015). The discussion is rooted in the fact that, historically, Flanders is considered to be dominantly right-wing and Wallonia to be dominantly left-wing (Billiet, Abts & Swyngedouw, 2015). Furthermore, almost all parties (except PVDA-PTB)³ in Belgium have been regionally organised since 1978, which means that today the federal elites are only accountable to voters within the same community (Deschouwer, 2006). Flanders and Wallonia also have their own news media and sets of preferences (Billiet, Maddens & Frogner, 2006, pp. 913–914). Deschouwer (2006), therefore, says that in Belgium, “Society, parties and institutions are neatly split along the linguistic borderline” (p. 908). This may be particularly true on the elite level, who, unlike the mass population, identify themselves more strongly with their own region than with the country as a whole (De Winter, 2007; Devillers, Baudewyns, De Winter & Reuchamps, 2018).

Measuring Acknowledgement

In this paper, we focus on what we believe is a necessary precondition for accommodation in consociational democracies: the acknowledgement of other societal groups. We define intergroup recognition in parliamentary speeches as a measurable indicator for this. We recognise that much of the accommodation in Belgium takes place primarily among party leaders, but we do not have access to closed-door negotiations. We therefore focus on parliamentary debates, because political elites from all societal segments here formally interact, and no other setting offers the same longitudinal traceability and systematic record of elite interaction as parliamentary debates.

More specifically, we define intergroup recognitions as instances in which a Member of Parliament (MP) or a Member of Government (MG) explicitly refers to the name of

2 Kings Question in 1950 and The School War (1954–1958).

3 There are some exceptions. (1) In the Brussels-Capital Region (and six surrounding municipalities with so-called ‘language facilities’), Dutch- and French-speaking parties compete for the votes of both Dutch- and French-speaking voters. (2) The Marxist PVDA/PTB is the only statewide party. (3) Sometimes some parties (eg. UF, VB and N-VA) present lists in other language areas (Vandenbergh, 2023b, p. 43).

a colleague from the other language group during a given legislative term. In contrast, intragroup recognitions occur when MPs or MGs refer to colleagues from their own language group. We argue that such intergroup references do reflect a minimal level of group recognition. In the Belgian context, where MPs are institutionally and electorally organised along linguistic lines, with representatives elected within largely unilingual constituencies (except Brussels), referring to a member of the other language group entails explicitly acknowledging an out-group actor. In that sense, we believe our measure captures a meaningful, albeit limited, form of intergroup recognition.

The analysis focuses exclusively on name-based references to individual MPs (and MGs). This approach captures the most direct and personalised form of intergroup engagement within parliamentary discourse. Party labels are excluded because parties in Belgium were historically unitary organisations, making it unclear which language group is being referred to when a party is named. Indirect references are excluded because they are ambiguous and do not reliably indicate direct, personalised engagement between specific MPs. We acknowledge that focusing exclusively on name references is somewhat restrictive, as indirect references to the other language group are also common. However, these are difficult to measure on a large scale, since they cannot be reliably incorporated into a dictionary-based approach.

For each year of debates, we measure the number of intergroup and intragroup recognitions using a dictionary-based named entity recognition approach. These dictionaries are aligned with the specific legislative term and are a comprehensive dataset built upon the work of de Vet (2023), including information on all MPs who have held a seat in parliament since 1961 and all MGs since 1961. To operationalise this approach, we developed a pipeline consisting of multiple Python scripts. This pipeline cleaned and standardised the raw data, performed lookups in the named entity dictionary, and extracted the descriptive information contained within it. Additionally, it identified all references to other MPs within each speech. To validate the results, we manually measured the references in the first debates of 1961. These are the oldest debates and, therefore, in theory, the most difficult to recognise the names of the MPs/MGs, as parts of the scanned PDFs are not always readable. Nevertheless, we obtained an F1 score of 91.1%, indicating that the data are sufficiently reliable for our analysis.⁴ The final dataset comprises 5,222 intergroup and 11,536 intragroup recognitions.⁵ Of the 22,236 speeches analyzed, 9,208 included an intergroup and/or intragroup recognition.

4 Precision: 87.9%; Recall: 94.5%; F1: 91.1%

5 See Appendix 1 for a detailed overview of the amount of intergroup and intragroup recognitions per debate.

Data

In this paper, we constructed a new dataset in which we focus on the State of the Union and Investiture debates in the Belgian Federal Chamber of Representatives. We do not focus on speeches in the Senate, as the legislative power of the Senate has been reduced since the last State Reform in 2011 (Dandoy, Dodeigne, Reuchamps & Vandeleene, 2015), and its very existence is now even questioned. Since 1995, the Chamber of Representatives has had 150 members, with currently 90 Dutch-speaking representatives and 60 French-speaking MPs.⁶ Before the State Reform of 1993, the federal parliament was composed of 212 elected representatives. From 1995 on, Members of Government (MGs) could not be part of the parliament anymore and had to be replaced by another MP once they became part of the government. However, they can still participate in legislative debates (Witte et al., 2003).

The big advantage of using the State of the Union and Investiture debates as data is that it allows us to measure the interaction behaviour of the political elites in Belgium. These debates are among the most significant in Belgian politics, attracting the participation of each party's most prominent figures (such as party group leaders and ministers), but also because speaking opportunities are limited. Consequently, parties must make strategic decisions about which members of parliament will participate in it, typically selecting their most important MPs. Moreover, members of the government frequently contribute to these debates, further underscoring their importance as a tool for evaluating elite political behaviour.

The speeches that are analyzed cover the period from 1961 to 2023. The former is the ideal starting point because, since 1962, party fraction groups existed in parliament (Verleden, 2014), regulations came about regarding speaking time, and the language border that divides Belgium into a Dutch-speaking, a French-speaking, a German-speaking and a Brussels bilingual-speaking part became legally definitive. Moreover, it is a particularly important starting point as it allows us to measure the impact of decentralisation on recognition, as it covers a period in which Belgium transferred from a unitary to a federal state through six constitutional reforms. Furthermore, during this period, regionalist parties in Belgium experienced success in the 1960s and 1970s, subsequently struggled (Deschouwer, 2011), and later saw renewed success (Van Haute, 2016), making this also an informative period for assessing the impact of regionalist party strength on intergroup recognitions.

Parliamentary speeches from the State of the Union and the Investiture Debate were collected from the Chamber of Representatives website (www.dekamer.be),

6 MPs elected in the Brussels bilingual area (15 MPs) can choose which language group they belong to at the start of the legislature and this choice remains for the entire term. The German-speaking representatives are included in the French-speaking language group.

with all non-essential content manually removed. This included speeches unrelated to this paper, such as personal announcements, name votes and motions of confidence. Furthermore, the speeches of the president of the parliament have also been removed from the data as they are not of our interest. After cleaning the raw text, we divided the parliamentary debates into individual speeches, using each complete speech by an MP/MG (ending when another MP/MG begins speaking or interrupts) as the level of analysis. Speeches were excluded from the dataset if the speaker's identity could not be determined due to illegibility. In cases where two MPs in the same legislative session shared the same name, we manually disambiguated them. This process resulted in a final dataset of 22,236 speeches from 1961 to 2023.⁷

Method

For the first hypothesis, which examines whether elites primarily refer to their own societal group or to other groups, we use the relative amounts of intergroup and intragroup recognitions in the descriptive data. Specifically, we calculate the proportions of intergroup and intragroup recognitions relative to the total number of recognitions within each legislature. Since legislatures vary in duration and in the number of speeches delivered, employing relative measures of intergroup recognition ensures comparability across legislative terms.

For the second and third hypotheses, in which we want to measure whether the increased decentralisation of competences in Belgium and the electoral strength of regionalist parties have an impact on the decrease of intergroup recognitions, we estimate two types of regression models. In the first models, we use logistic regressions on the full set of speeches to assess the likelihood that an intergroup recognition occurs in a speech. The dependent variable here is a dummy variable where '1' indicates one or more intergroup recognitions and '0' indicates no intergroup recognitions. In the second model, we focus on a subset of speeches that contain at least one recognition (intergroup and/or intragroup). Here, the dependent variable is the amount of intergroup recognitions within a speech. Accordingly, we use negative binomial regressions, which account for overdispersion in count data, to assess what influences the number of intergroup recognitions within speeches.

To measure the degree of decentralisation in Belgium, we included the Regional Authority Index (RAI) of Marks, Hooghe and Schakel (2008) in our data as an independent variable. This dataset includes longitudinal data of ninety-five countries (1950–2018) about their yearly self-rule and shared rule scores, which are measured by an evaluation of 10 dimensions. Five dimensions measure the self-rule (institutional depth, policy scope, fiscal autonomy, borrowing autonomy, and representation), and

7 See Appendix 1 for a detailed overview of the number of speeches per debate.

five dimensions measure the shared rule (law making, executive control, fiscal control, borrowing control, and constitutional reform). As we focus on the effect of decentralisation on intergroup recognitions, we only included the self-rule scores in our analyses. More specifically, each speech in our dataset has been given the self-rule RAI-score for Belgium of its respective year.⁸ Because the RAI data only covers up to 2018, the 55th legislature (2019–2024) is excluded. To capture the electoral strength of regionalist parties,⁹ we look at the percentage of parliamentary seats held by all regionalist parties in the federal parliament for each legislative term.¹⁰

Furthermore, in our analyses testing hypotheses 2 and 3, we also included some control variables based on the speakers' demographics and the party they belong to, as these could also be potential predictors of having intergroup recognitions in a speech. Furthermore, we include the word count of speeches as a control variable, as larger speeches may contain more intergroup and intragroup recognitions. Also, the legislative term is included as a control variable, which serves as a proxy for time and because shifts in the political context could change the intergroup recognition dynamic. For the speaker's demographic characteristics, we include gender, language group, whether the speaker was elected in the bilingual Brussels constituency, and whether the speaker serves as a regular Member of Parliament or as a Member of the Government (prime minister, minister, or state secretary). Gender is included based on the expectation that women may adopt a more accommodating communication style, as Krauss and Kroeber (2021) show that women have a more consensual leadership style. Being elected in Brussels is included, as it is the only bilingual electoral district, and we therefore expect them to engage more frequently with the other language group. Finally, holding a governmental role is included, as we expect them to act in a more accommodating manner due to their governing responsibilities.

For their party affiliation, we include whether they are part of a regionalist party, a populist party or a traditional party, whether they are part of a national party (unitary party) and whether they are a member of an opposition or a government party. Regionalist parties may be less inclined to accommodate the other language group due to stronger linguistic or regional identities, whereas traditional and unitary parties may adopt a more accommodating approach. Additionally, parties

8 In Appendix 2, an overview is given of the mean self-rule RAI-score per legislature.

9 The following parties were considered regionalist parties: Volksunie, Volksunie-ID, Vlaams Blok, Vlaams Belang and N-VA., Front Wallon, Front Wallon des travail, Rassemblement Wallon, FDF, FDF-RW, FDF-PLDP and Défi. The cartels of PRL-FDF and CD&V-NVA are not considered regionalist parties because the 'first' party in each cartel is not regionalist.

10 In Appendix 3, an overview is given of the combined vote share of regionalist parties across legislative terms.

in government may communicate more accommodatingly than opposition parties because they must govern across linguistic groups and maintain broader political cooperation.

These control variables are operationalised as binary indicators: gender (0 = male, 1 = female), language group (0 = French-speaking, 1 = Dutch-speaking), regular Member of Parliament or Member of the Government (0 = regular MP, 1 = MG), Brussels affiliation (0 = not Brussels-based, 1 = Brussels-based), regionalist party (0 = non-regionalist, 1 = regionalist), traditional party (0 = non-traditional, 1 = traditional right), populist party (0 = non-populist, 1 = populist), government party (0 = opposition, 1 = government), and national party (0 = not national, 1 = national).

Results

Descriptive results

Of all recognitions (N = 16,758) measured in our data, only 31.16% (N = 5,222) are intergroup recognitions. This already indicates that MPs (and MGs) mainly refer to their own language group. In Figure 1, we see the relative amount of intergroup and intragroup recognitions for each legislative term. Here, too, we see that in each legislative term, the amount of intragroup recognitions is larger than the amount of intergroup recognitions. This supports hypothesis 1 that elites mainly refer to elites from their own societal group in parliament. French-speaking elites thus usually refer to other French-speaking elites and vice versa for Dutch elites.

Figure 1 also shows a general decline in intergroup recognitions starting around 1979, indicating that elites referred to the other language group less frequently over time. One possible explanation for this is that in 1978, the last traditional Belgian party split into regional parties. This split party system is one of the main indicators of the gap between the Dutch and French-speaking parts of Belgium (Deschouwer et al., 2017), and may therefore have caused the elite to remain more within their own language group, as they are only in competition with parties of the same language group. Since 2007, however, we see in Figure 1 that this pattern has reversed, with intergroup recognition rising again. Deschouwer et al. (2017) show that since 2007, party families do not always govern together anymore, meaning that parties from the same party family but different language groups are not always jointly positioned in government or opposition. As a result, when the Dutch liberal party is in government, but the French liberal party is in opposition (for example), they might feel the need to refer to and respond to each other more.

The black vertical lines in Figure 1 mark the major Belgian state reforms (1970, 1980, 1988, 1993, 2001, 2011), each of which gradually decentralised competences to the regional level. Yet, no consistent pattern emerges linking these decentralisation

reforms to changes in the relative amount of intergroup recognitions. The three red vertical lines, furthermore, indicate key dates for regionalist parties (1971, 2004, 2019). The first date, 1971, was chosen because in the 1970s, regionalist parties had great success in Belgium. However, as more competences were transferred to the regional level within Belgium's federal system, regionalist parties gradually lost part of their *raison d'être* and, as a result, experienced declining electoral support (Bouteca & Peeters, 2023). In addition, the socio-economic cleavage gained importance, and many regionalist parties shifted into governing roles, which caused them to lose their protest image. By 2004, this evolution meant that no truly “independent” regionalist party competed in the elections (Van Haute & Pilet, 2006). In Flanders, however, regionalist parties began to regain strength from 2010 onward, reaching a new electoral high point in 2019. In Figure 1, the relative amount of intergroup recognitions is higher in periods when regionalist parties are strong (e.g. 1970 and 2019) than when they are at their weakest (2004). This pattern may suggest that, contrary to our expectations, stronger regionalist parties coincide with more, rather than fewer, intergroup recognitions.

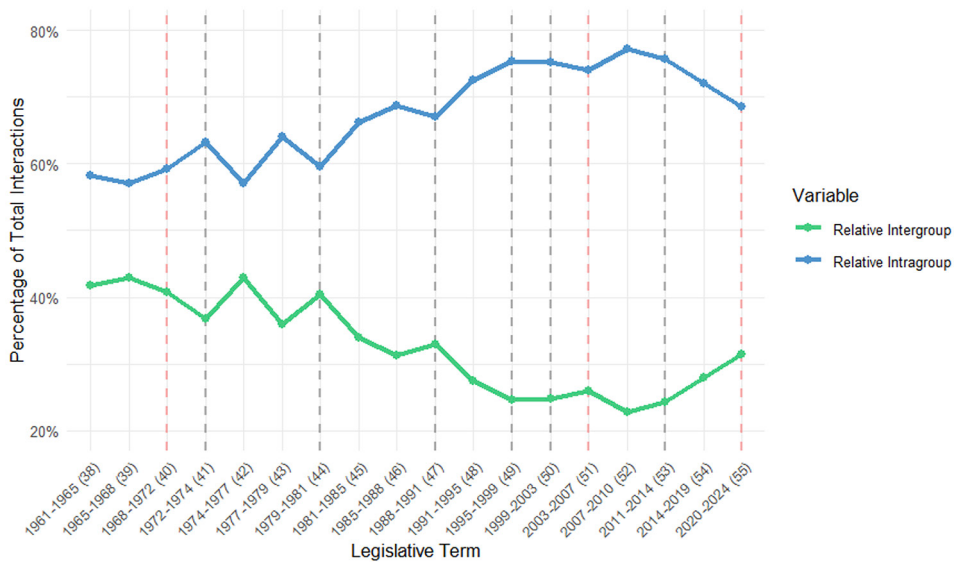


Figure 1. Relative Number of Intergroup and Intragroup Recognitions for Each Legislative Term (Black Dashed Lines are State Reforms; Red Dashed Lines are Important Dates for Regionalist Parties)

Regressions

However, Figure 1 does not yet reveal what drives variation in intergroup recognitions in speeches. To address this, we run logistic regressions in which the dependent variable indicates whether a speech contains at least one intergroup recognition. We present the results in Table 1, where Models 1 and 2 report the findings for decentralisation and Models 3 and 4 those for regionalist party strength.¹¹

In Model 1, which includes only decentralisation, a higher RAI score (indicating more decentralisation) has a small but significant positive effect ($\exp(B) = 1.011$, $p = 0.018$) on the likelihood that a speech contains an intergroup recognition, contrary to our expectations. However, the model explains almost none of the variance in the outcome ($R^2 = 0.001$). Furthermore, once all control variables are added in Model 2, the effect of decentralisation reverses. A higher RAI then shows a significant negative effect on the presence of intergroup recognitions ($\exp(B) = 0.934$, $p = 0.000$). Finally, Model 2 explains 18.2% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.182$). In Model 3, which includes only regionalist party strength, we find that greater regionalist party strength has a positive and significant effect ($\exp(B) = 1.025$, $p = 0.000$) on the likelihood that a speech contains an intergroup recognition, contrary to our expectations. This positive effect remains robust ($\exp(B) = 1.021$, $p = 0.000$), in contrast with decentralisation, when all control variables are added in Model 4. The control variables in Model 4 show the same patterns as those observed in Model 2. The overall explanatory power of Model 4 ($R^2 = 0.178$) is slightly lower than Model 2 ($R^2 = 0.182$). Model 2 also has a better fit (AIC = 15509) compared to Model 4 (AIC = 17696).

However, in Table 1, we relied on logistic regressions, which only assess whether a speech contains at least one intergroup recognition. This approach does not account for the number of recognitions within a speech. For this reason, our main focus lies on Table 2, where we examine the quantity of intergroup recognitions in speeches. Because many speeches contained no recognition at all, and because our interest centers on the dynamics of recognition, we restricted the analysis in Table 2 to the 9,208 speeches that included at least one recognition (intergroup and/or intragroup). Furthermore, many speeches consist of procedural remarks or very brief responses (e.g. “Yes” or “No”). By limiting our analysis to speeches that contain recognitions, we ensure a more meaningful and substantive assessment of recognition patterns.

11 We have performed regressions with lagged independent variables (RAI_t-1 and RPS_t-1), but there are no differences in the results.

Table 1. Logistic Regression of Regional Authority Index (RAI) and the Regionalist Party Strength (RPS) on Intergroup Recognitions in All Speeches

	Model 1 (RAI)				Model 2 (RAI)				Model 3 (RPS)				Model 4 (RPS)			
	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>Sign.</i>	<i>St. Error</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>Sign.</i>	<i>St. Error</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>Sign.</i>	<i>St. Error</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>Sign.</i>	<i>St. Error</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>
Intercept	-1.852	***	0.084	0.157	-4.403	***	0.449	0.012	-2.019	***	0.048	0.133	-3.104	***	0.272	0.045
Regional Authority index (RAI)	0.011	*	0.004	1.011	-0.068	***	0.017	0.934								
Regionalist party strength (RPS)									0.025	***	0.003	1.025	0.021	***	0.003	1.021
Word count speech					0.001	***	0.000	1.001					0.001	***	0.000	1.001
Legislative term					0.085	***	0.015	1.088					0.025	***	0.006	1.025
Demographic variables speaker																
Gender (Ref = male)					-0.149	*	0.062	0.861					-0.175	**	0.063	0.839
Language (Ref = French-speaking)					-0.374	***	0.044	0.688					-0.375	***	0.041	0.687
Governing role (Ref = regular member of parliament)					0.257	***	0.067	1.293					0.201	**	0.062	1.223
Brussels residence (Ref = not elected in Brussels)					0.081		0.053	1.085					0.087		0.051	1.091
Variables political party speaker																
Regionalist party (Ref = no)					-0.019		0.086	0.981					-0.068		0.077	0.935
Traditional party (Ref = no)					-0.364	***	0.077	0.695					-0.389	***	0.070	0.678
Populist party (Ref = no)					-0.300	**	0.107	0.741					-0.275	**	0.089	0.760
Gouvernement party (Ref = no)					-0.275	***	0.055	0.760					-0.224	***	0.051	0.799
National party (Ref = no)					0.453	***	0.079	1.573					0.477	***	0.074	1.611
Model statistics																
Nagelkerke R²		0.001				0.182				0.007				0.178		
AIC		17758				15509				20067				17696		
N		20201				20201				22236				22236		

Therefore, in Table 2, we conducted Negative Binomial models to find out whether the decentralisation of competences and the regionalist party strength in Belgium led to fewer intergroup recognitions.¹² As the dependent variable is the count of intergroup recognitions in each speech, we first conducted Poisson regressions. However, there seemed to be overdispersion ($\text{dispersion} > 1$), presumably due to the many '0' scores on our dependent variable. Consequently, we estimated Negative Binomial regression models. The Negative Binomial models had a significantly better fit (lower AIC) than the Poisson models.¹³

Models 5 and 6 account for the effect of decentralisation on intergroup recognitions. In Model 5, a higher RAI score is associated with fewer intergroup recognitions in elite speeches ($\text{exp}(B) = 0.955$, $p = 0.000$). This means that the increased decentralisation of competencies in Belgium leads to a decline in the frequency of intergroup recognitions in speeches, although it is only a small effect. When we include all control variables in Model 6, this small but significant negative effect holds steady ($\text{exp}(B) = 0.967$, $p = 0.009$). While Model 5 has very limited explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.009$), Model 6 explains 7.9% of the variation ($R^2 = 0.079$). Overall, when we look at all Models measuring the effect of the RAI on intergroup recognitions, Models 2, 5 and 6 all yield a significantly negative effect. Although the effects are small, this suggests that hypothesis 2, which argues that the decentralisation of competences is associated with a decline in elite intergroup recognition, can be supported. Only Model 1 has a significantly positive effect, but it is very small, does not include any control variables, and has very little explanatory power, making it less substantive.

In Models 7 and 8, where we measure the effect of the regionalist party strength (RPS) in Belgium on intergroup recognitions, the effect does not hold. While it was initially significantly negative in the bivariate Model 7 ($\text{exp}(B) = 0.991$, $p = 0.000$), the effect is significantly positive when all control variables are included ($\text{exp}(B) = 1.011$, $p = 0.000$). Model 7 has a very limited explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.001$), while Model 8 explains 7.7% of the variation ($R^2 = 0.077$). When we look at all models measuring the effect of RPS on intergroup recognition, we see that Models 3, 4 and 8 all have a significant positive effect. Model 7, on the other hand, yields a significant negative effect. However, here too this effect remains substantively weak, as it is small in magnitude, does not account for control variables, and exhibits very limited explanatory power. In contrast, Models 4 and 8, which incorporate the full set of controls, reveal a statistically significant positive relationship. On this basis, Hypothesis 3,

12 We have performed regression models with lagged independent variables (RAI_t-1 and RPS_t-1), but there are no differences in the results.

13 We also estimated Zero-Inflated Negative Binomial models to account for the excess number of zeros in the dependent variable. However, the AIC indicated that these models did not provide a better fit compared to the standard Negative Binomial models.

positing that increased electoral strength of regionalist parties is associated with a decline in intergroup recognition, must be rejected. Instead, the findings indicate the opposite pattern: An increase in regionalist party strength is associated with an increase in intergroup recognitions.

Furthermore, Models 2, 4, 6 and 8 yield some interesting results regarding the control variables. In all models, the results clearly indicate that speech length is associated with more intergroup recognitions. This effect is small but significant, which is to be expected given that the variable is measured at the level of individual words. These long speeches, usually delivered by parliamentary party group leaders or the prime minister, thus tend to contain a higher number of intergroup recognitions. The legislative term, on the other hand, has no clear effect. In Models 2 and 4, where the dependent variable is a binary indicator of whether a speech contains at least one intergroup recognition, the effect is positive and statistically significant. However, in Models 6 and 8, where the dependent variable captures the count of intergroup recognitions within speeches, this pattern changes, and in Model 6, the effect is no longer statistically significant.

Regarding the demographic variables of the speakers, the strongest effect is for the government members. In all models, it seems to be that government members (prime minister, ministers and state secretaries) have more intergroup recognitions than regular members of parliament. This result is in line with the theory of the spirit of accommodation, as accommodation should be most visible among the government members themselves. Furthermore, all models show that the Dutch-speaking elite has significantly fewer intergroup recognitions than the French-speaking elite. However, this could be because there are just more Dutch-speaking MPs than French-speaking MPs, giving the French-speaking MPs more opportunities to cross the language border. Gender, on the other hand, has no distinct effect, just like being Brussels-affiliated. The latter is surprising, given that one would expect elites from the bilingual Brussels area to have more connections with the other language group and thus have more intergroup recognitions.

For the control variables regarding the party the speaker belongs to, the strongest effect is for being part of a unitary party. The results clearly show that when you belong to a national party, you have more intergroup recognitions in your speech. This result is not surprising, as these parties include both Dutch- and French-speaking members, making them likely to have more direct connections to the other language group. This result was also visible in Figure 1, where we see that the relative amount of intergroup recognitions decreased once the last traditional party (the socialist party in 1978) split into regional ones. By contrast, membership in governing parties and traditional parties is associated with significantly fewer intergroup recognitions in speeches. This finding is somewhat unexpected, as one might expect these actors to exhibit greater levels of accommodation. Furthermore, affiliation with populist or regionalist parties does not yield a statistically distinct effect.

Table 2. Negative Binomial Regression Analysis of the Effect of RAI and RPS on Intergroup Recognitions in Speeches Containing Only Recognitions

	Model 5 (RAI)				Model 6 (RAI)				Model 7 (RPS)				Model 8 (RPS)			
	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>Sign.</i>	<i>St. Error</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>Sign.</i>	<i>St. Error</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>Sign.</i>	<i>St. Error</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>Sign.</i>	<i>St. Error</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>
Intercept	0.309	***	0.071	1.362	0.031		0.338	1.032	-0.411	***	0.040	0.663	0.526	*	0.205	1.692
Regional Authority index (RAI)	-0.046	***	0.004	0.955	-0.033	**	0.013	0.967								
Regionalist party strength (RPS)									-0.009	***	0.002	0.991	0.011	***	0.003	1.011
Word count speech					0.000	***	0.000	1.001					0.000	***	0.000	1.001
Legislative term					0.001		0.011	1.001					-0.026	***	0.004	0.975
Demographic variables																
Gender (Ref = male)					-0.029		0.055	0.971					-0.040		0.047	0.961
Language (Ref = French-speaking)					-0.315	***	0.033	0.730					-0.331	***	0.031	0.719
Governing role (Ref = regular member of parliament)					0.336	***	0.052	1.399					0.310	***	0.048	1.363
Brussels residence (Ref = not elected in Brussels)					0.048		0.040	1.049					0.060		0.038	1.062
Variables political party																
Regionalist party (Ref = no)					-0.097		0.061	0.908					-0.111	*	0.055	0.895
Traditional party (Ref = no)					-0.118	*	0.055	0.889					-0.149	**	0.050	0.862
Populist party (Ref = no)					-0.096		0.073	0.909					-0.115		0.062	0.892
Gouvernement party (Ref = no)					-0.361	***	0.043	0.697					-0.334	***	0.040	0.716
National party (Ref = no)					0.195	**	0.061	1.215					0.257	***	0.056	1.293
Model statistics																
McFadden R²		0.009				0.079				0.001				0.077		
AIC		16071				14960				18726				17321		
N		7911				7911				9208				9208		

The latter is particularly noteworthy, given that greater overall regionalist party strength clearly increases intergroup recognitions. This suggests that the stronger regionalist parties become, the more other parties and not regionalist parties feel compelled to cross the language divide and engage with the other language group.

Conclusion

The spirit of accommodation, the cultural and crucial part of the consociational theory, is an extremely vague and broad concept (Steiner & Jaramillo, 2019; Van Schendelen, 1984), making it difficult to measure quantitatively. Therefore, in this paper, we focus on what we believe is a precondition of accommodation: intergroup recognition among elites of different societal groups. The goal of this paper was therefore twofold. First, we showed that accommodation cannot exist without a minimal level of intergroup recognition. Secondly, we mapped this condition quantitatively by measuring references towards the other societal groups in parliamentary speeches and investigated how the decentralisation of competences and regionalist party strength changed this evolution throughout time. For this, we created a new dataset of 22,236 speeches in Belgium from 1961 to 2023, in which 5,222 intergroup recognitions and 11,536 intragroup recognitions were measured through a dictionary-based named entity recognition approach. We hypothesised that elites would mainly refer to their own societal group, and that higher decentralisation and regionalist party strength are associated with having fewer intergroup recognitions.

Our findings reveal that in Belgium, elites indeed refer significantly more frequently to elites from their own language group than to elites from the other language group. These results are compatible with the critique that it is often difficult to exhibit accommodative behaviour, as parties must respond to the interests of their own societal group (Horowitz, 2000), and elites often remain primarily oriented toward their own segment when addressing cross-community issues (John, 2025). Moreover, these findings are consistent with a growing body of literature demonstrating that political elites in Belgium orient their behaviour toward their own linguistic community. For instance, Frateur et al. (2023) show that, at the federal level, MPs tend to represent their respective constituent units rather than the population as a whole. Similarly, Blanckaert and Caluwaerts (2023) find that, in the bilingual Brussels context, co-linguistic claims-making occurs far more frequently than cross-linguistic claims-making.

Moreover, the results indicate a decline in the relative frequency of intergroup recognitions since 1979, although this pattern has reversed since 2007. This paper shows that this decline can be partly explained by the greater decentralisation of competences, which is associated with fewer intergroup recognitions. Although the effect is small, it reinforces concerns that decentralisation and federalism may allow

societal groups to drift further apart (Erk & Anderson, 2009; Kymlicka, 2001) and increase the likelihood of deadlock at the federal level (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015). Next, contrary to our expectations, an increased regionalist party strength does not lead to fewer intergroup recognitions. Instead, it is associated with an increase in such recognitions, even though regionalist parties themselves do not engage more frequently with the other language group in their speeches. These findings suggest that once regionalist parties secure a substantial number of parliamentary seats, other parties become more active in referring to the opposite language group.

Belgium represents a particularly distinctive consociational case. It is deeply linguistically divided and combines this with an electoral and media system that is organised along these linguistic group divisions (Deschouwer, 2006). Therefore, it is likely to assume that Belgium serves as a least-likely case to find accommodation. The segmented electoral and media systems limit regular interaction and mutual exposure between linguistic groups, potentially making it more difficult for elites of different language groups to engage with one another. However, this expectation remains tentative, as we lack systematic comparative evidence on how such recognitions manifest in other consociational contexts.

Accordingly, further research is needed to assess whether the patterns observed in Belgium hold across different cases. In particular, comparative work should distinguish between corporate and liberal forms of consociationalism. Belgium is typically classified as a corporate consociational democracy, in which the distribution of power among language groups is institutionally predetermined. This stands in contrast to liberal consociational democracies, where the composition of power-sharing arrangements is determined more openly in the post-electoral phase (McCulloch, 2014). From this perspective, one might expect intergroup recognition to be particularly important in corporate consociational systems to sustain stability. At the same time, it remains unclear whether such intergroup recognition is more likely in liberal variants. As Bogaards (2026) has argued, the presumed openness of liberal consociationalism does not necessarily guarantee more peace. He therefore argues that all claims in literature about the positive effects of liberal consociations should be empirically tested. Therefore, we emphasise the need for further comparative research to assess how different consociational designs shape patterns of intergroup recognition.

Finally, we acknowledge that intergroup recognition in parliamentary speeches constitutes only a precondition for accommodation and does not capture the nature or tone of these recognitions. Although one could argue that even adversarial exchanges may signal a willingness among elites to deliberate and engage with opposing viewpoints, thereby constituting a limited form of accommodation, it is useful for future research to examine whether these recognitions are predominantly

adversarial or cooperative. Similarly, future research should explore how patterns of intergroup recognition, and their tone, vary across different policy domains and issue areas, as these are likely to differ in contexts where societal groups hold directly opposing views. Furthermore, much of the accommodation takes place behind the scenes. Future research could therefore add value by examining these processes more qualitatively, for example, through interviews. Nevertheless, by examining its precondition, this study takes a first step toward measuring the neglected cultural dimension of consociational theory. We provided a quantitative operationalisation of accommodation's precondition through patterns of intergroup recognition in parliamentary speeches, which suggests that the spirit of accommodation may indeed be under threat in Belgium, as we showed that Belgian elites primarily refer to their own language group, and intergroup recognition is generally declining.

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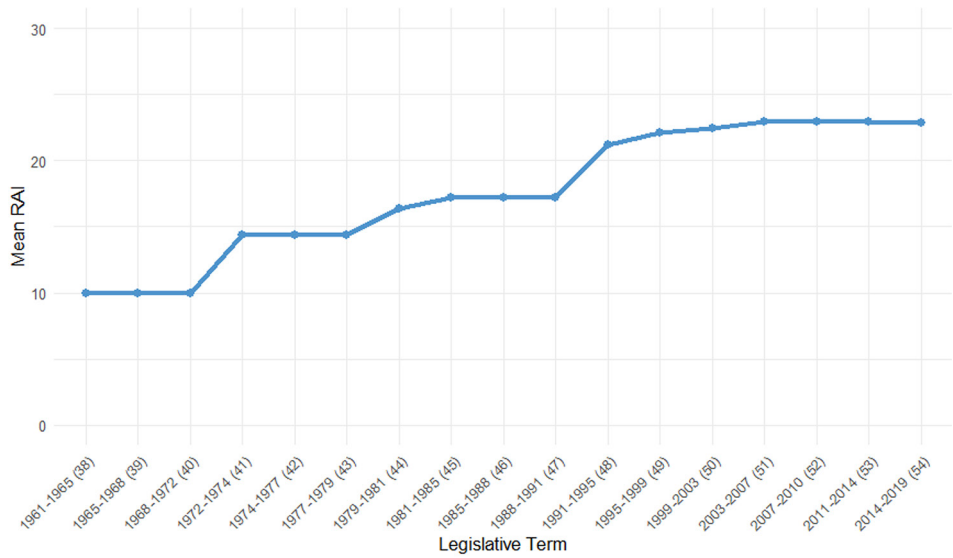
Appendices

Appendix 1: Descriptive data speeches

Year	Legislative term	Government	Number of speeches	NL_NL	NL_FR	FR_NL	FR_FR	Intra	Inter
1961	38	Léfièvre	556	67	51	56	82	149	107
1965	39	Harmel	272	24	39	56	92	116	95
1966	39	Vanden Boeynants-I	600	37	52	82	151	188	134
1968	40	Eyskens-IV	754	77	68	89	151	228	157
1972	41	Eyskens-V	657	132	63	66	86	218	129
1973	41	Leburton	839	119	56	98	149	268	154
1974-1	42	Tindemans-I	853	158	100	86	77	235	186
1974-2	42	Tindemans-II	637	167	120	53	74	241	173
1977	43	Tindemans-III	228	77	36	31	40	117	67
1978	43	Vanden Boeynants-II	175	32	7	28	20	52	35
1979	44	Martens-I	496	115	89	47	73	188	136
1980-1	44	Martens-II	335	53	35	52	60	113	87
1980-2	44	Martens-III	714	121	51	74	88	209	125
1980-3	44	Martens-IV	337	87	37	46	46	133	83
1981-1	44	Eyskens Jr.	321	79	19	65	38	117	84
1981-2	45	Martens-V	944	232	90	80	100	332	170
1985	46	Martens-VI	1683	378	120	135	195	573	255
1987	46	Martens-VII	188	34	22	20	43	77	42
1988	47	Martens-VIII	1031	272	68	191	256	528	259
1991	48	Martens-IX	250	125	30	36	35	160	66
1992	48	Dehaene-I	211	120	27	31	36	156	58
1993	48	Dehaene-I	125	76	13	9	5	81	22
1994	48	Dehaene-I	59	37	11	15	20	57	26
1995	49	Dehaene-II	166	110	5	24	22	132	29
1996	49	Dehaene-II	206	123	45	26	32	155	71
1997	49	Dehaene-II	296	142	29	33	56	198	62
1998	49	Dehaene-II	298	152	33	29	51	203	62
1999	50	Verhofstadt-I	125	120	31	7	32	152	38
2000	50	Verhofstadt-I	350	224	64	30	61	285	94
2001	50	Verhofstadt-I	446	210	99	39	71	281	138

Year	Legislative term	Government	Number of speeches	NL_NL	NL_FR	FR_NL	FR_FR	Intra	Inter
2002	50	Verhofstadt-I	597	334	56	41	57	391	97
2003	51	Verhofstadt-II	268	104	28	29	78	182	57
2004	51	Verhofstadt-II	326	185	54	38	44	229	92
2005	51	Verhofstadt-II	410	169	36	37	69	238	73
2006	51	Verhofstadt-II	370	111	35	22	34	145	57
2007	52	Verhofstadt-III	45	69	30	12	24	93	42
2008-1	52	Leterme-I	446	238	49	24	93	331	73
2008-2	52	Van Rompuy	76	129	22	10	10	139	32
2009-1	52	Leterme-II	393	171	57	33	59	230	90
2009-2	52	Leterme-II	49	71	7	12	2	73	19
2011	53	Di-Rupo	148	116	34	7	15	131	41
2012	53	Di-Rupo	209	121	37	20	48	169	57
2013	53	Di-Rupo	288	174	46	20	39	213	66
2014	54	Michel-I	979	340	120	117	224	564	237
2015	54	Michel-I	359	199	51	46	98	297	97
2016	54	Michel-I	490	154	49	75	133	287	124
2017	54	Michel-I	266	138	34	36	54	192	70
2018	54	Michel-I	315	99	41	29	102	201	70
2020-1	55	De Croo	20	4	6	2	4	8	8
2020-2	55	De Croo	370	244	90	37	65	309	127
2021	55	De Croo	605	355	140	109	75	430	249
2022	55	De Croo	582	392	85	77	80	472	162
2023	55	De Croo	459	202	89	49	68	270	138
Total			22.236	7819	2706	2516	3717	11536	5222

Appendix 2: Mean self-rule RAI-score of Belgium over time



Appendix 3: Regionalist parties' vote share in the federal parliament over time

