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Is Euroscepticism Contagious?

How Mainstream Parties React to Eurosceptic Challengers in Belgian Parliaments

Jordy Weyns & Peter Bursens*

Abstract

> *Euroscepticism has long been absent among Belgian political parties. However, since the start of the century, some Eurosceptic challengers have risen. This article examines the effect of Eurosceptic competition on the salience other parties give to the EU and on the positions these parties take in parliament. Using a sample of plenary debates in the federal and regional parliaments, we track each party's evolution from 2000 until 2019. Our findings both contradict and qualify existing theories and findings on Eurosceptic competition. When facing Eurosceptic challengers, all parties raise salience fairly equally, but government and peripheral parties adopted (soft) Euroscepticism more often than other parties.*

Keywords: Euroscepticism, parliaments, party competition, Belgium, federalism.

1 Euroscepticism in the Split Belgian Party System

In Belgium, pro-EU sentiments have long been dominant across most of the party landscape (Franck, Leclercq & Vandevievere, 2003; Randour & Bursens, 2019). One recent example is the 2020 federal coalition agreement, signed by social democrats, liberals, greens and Flemish Christian democrats, which expresses explicit support for deeper European integration (Bodson, 2020). However, in recent years, Euroscepticism has made an entry into some pockets of the political spectrum, especially on the fringes of the landscape such as the far left and far right (Pittoors, Wolfs, Van Hecke & Bursens, 2016). This raises the question whether this awakening Euroscepticism has triggered a response of the other parties and to what extent. Did mainstream parties start to devote more attention to the EU over the first two decades of the 21st century (from 2000 until 2019), and to what extent have their pro-integration positions endured? This article discusses the effects of Eurosceptic challengers on other parties' EU salience and

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EU positions. Given that Belgium's party landscape is split along linguistic lines, we address this question in a comparative design. On the basis of the assumption that parliaments provide parties with both an arena for party competition and a forum for communication (Auel & Raunio, 2014), we use data on contributions of members of parliament (MPs) in the plenary debates of the Belgian federal and regional parliaments.

We start with a presentation of the relevant literature on Euroscepticism, followed by a presentation of the Belgian party system. After a methodological section, we present our main findings. We find that when facing Eurosceptics, other parties raise salience of the EU fairly equally, while government parties and parties further from the political centre were found to adopt (soft) Euroscepticism more often than other parties. In the conclusion we revisit the literature in the light of our findings, discuss the article's limitations and present some suggestions for future research.

2 Euroscepticism: Scope, Salience and Positions

2.1 The Scope of Euroscepticism
Academic literature is rife with definitions of Euroscepticism. It is most often used as a "generic, catch-all term encapsulating a disparate bundle of attitudes opposed to European integration in general and opposition to the EU in particular" (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008: 239). Definitions differ significantly, but usually make a distinction between principled opposition to the idea of European integration, on the one hand, and opposition to the policies and practices of the EU, on the other. Such a framework was first advanced and later refined by Taggart and Szczerbiak (2002; Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008), who dubbed these positions 'hard' and 'soft' Euroscepticism respectively. A prominent criticism of this approach is that it ignores the rich variety of opinions (Bijsmans, 2017; Kopecký & Mudde, 2002). Multiple authors have proposed more specific classifications. Kopecký and Mudde (2002) identify four categories based on a distinction between diffuse and specific support or opposition, and De Wilde, Michailidou and Trenz (2014) consider even more positions based on support for or opposition against the principal question of integration, the specific institutional arrangement and the goals of further integration. Indeed, Euroscepticism can be based on varying grounds, such as national sovereignty, communitarianism, identitarianism, populism or opposition to neoliberal policy, leading to either diffuse or specific opposition (Carlotti & Gianfreda, 2020; De Vries & Edwards, 2009; Pirone, 2020; Vezzani, 2020).

While more detailed classifications are suitable for the analysis of positions based on sufficiently detailed sources, they are not necessarily useful for the classification and analysis of mediated debates or isolated statements in parliaments (Bijsmans, 2017). This challenge is expressed in empirical research on Euroscepticism, which despite the many efforts at theoretical sophistication, often sticks to more basic classifications. For example, although Statham and Trenz (2013) provide clear illustrations of more specific types of Euroscepticism, they

must rely on a simpler classification for their main empirical contributions: a distinction between Eurocritical, Eurosupportive and neutral claims.

Out of many classifications, each study must equip one fit for its purposes. The difficulty associated with more sophisticated classifications is even more pressing for the sometimes rather short contributions made by MPs; these do not necessarily reveal the complete and detailed perspective on European integration, which is necessary for classification in more sophisticated models. For this reason, we do not use more specific categories than hard and soft Euroscepticism, despite the wide variety these terms hold. We concede that the loss in variety is a drawback, but since this article aims to uncover the spread of Euroscepticism and not to analyse its character, this drawback is less problematic than the alternative.

Although there are exceptions, Euroscepticism has long been seen as a phenomenon limited to peripheral or extreme parties on either side of the political spectrum, which use it as a strategy to differentiate themselves from usually pro-EU mainstream parties (Hooghe, Marks & Wilson, 2002; König, Marbach & Osnabrügge, 2017; Taggart, 1998). In recent years, however, a growing set of parties across Europe have voiced Eurosceptic arguments. Some authors even see a new axis of party competition around the EU issue (Giannetti, Pedrazzani & Pinto, 2017; Karlsson & Persson, 2020), introduced by parties that feel they are losing battles on other fronts (Hobolt & De Vries, 2015) in an environment where issue competition is increasingly important (Green-Pedersen, 2007).

Party positions related to the EU and the salience of EU positions are influenced by political constellations, in general (Giannetti et al., 2017; Taggart, 1998), and by Eurosceptic challengers, in particular (Meijers, 2017; Meijers & Williams, 2020; Treib, 2020; Van de Wardt, 2015). Such peripheral Eurosceptic challengers can be fairly mainstream in terms of socio-economic cleavages, but by positioning themselves on the extreme end of the EU dimension, they become the main drivers of opposition to the EU (Karlsson & Persson, 2020), triggering response from other parties.

This article investigates the effect of Eurosceptic challengers on mainstream parties' positions towards the EU. We look at both hard and soft Euroscepticism in the multilevel Belgian political party system. We first discuss how much attention parties devote to the EU dimension (salience) and then turn to the type of arguments they present (position).

2.2 Salience of the EU

In many countries, EU salience is traditionally low, for example because of a high level of consensual support for the EU or because other (often domestic) issues grab attention (Bursens, 2002; Wolfs & Van Hecke, 2020). At the same time, increasing European integration is assumed to lead to a growing Europeanisation of national policy debates as well as of EU-related party competition, especially as a reaction to crises (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Serricchio, Tsakatika & Quaglia, 2013). National political parties respond in multiple ways, such as by adapting their electoral platforms and actively engaging in competition with other parties, with respect to both EU policies and the EU itself (Ladrech, 2002). One can thus expect the salience of the EU to grow as European integration deepens.

The theory of issue ownership argues that mainstream parties would simply choose to avoid addressing the EU altogether, even in a context of growing Euroscepticism, because they feel they would be fighting a losing battle on enemy turf (Petrocik, 1996). However, some studies indicate that mainstream parties do react by devoting more attention to the EU (Giannetti et al., 2017; Meijers, 2017) but that this effect might be contingent on the salience Eurosceptic challengers give to the EU. Hence, our first expectation:

> E1: When competing electorally with surging Eurosceptics, other parties will give increasing salience to the EU dimension, even more so if Eurosceptics give increasing attention to the EU dimension themselves.

At the same time, mainstream parties may show varying degrees of salience to the EU. For example, Dardanelli (2012) points to an interaction between positions on the EU and on regionalisation: pro-EU regionalist parties may grant salience to the EU dimension as they favour a 'Europe of the Regions'. Moreover, Meijers (2017) argues that since parties do not always compete for the same voters, EU salience will increase most if parties are in direct and intense electoral competition with Eurosceptics. In addition, parties may refrain from taking explicit positions on the EU if they fear dividing their electoral base on the issue. Furthermore, Meijers argues that centre-left parties are more often triggered to take up the EU issue than centre-right parties as the former compete with both the far right and the far left (on cultural and economic issues, respectively), whereas centre-right parties only compete with the far right. In other words, if Euroscepticism comes from the left, only centre-left parties will show increased EU salience; if Euroscepticism comes from the right, both centre-left and centre-right parties have incentives to increase the salience of the EU dimension. Hence, we expect the following:

> E2: The salience given to the EU dimension will increase most for pro-EU regionalist parties and parties in intense electoral competition with a Eurosceptic party.

2.3 Positions Toward the EU

Meijers (2017) finds that Eurosceptic rhetoric increases among parties that must compete with Eurosceptics. However, if support for the EU remains rather high among most parties, they could respond not by voicing hard Eurosceptic arguments, but by increasingly making arguments in favour of a specific kind of European project, including calls for a more democratic/social/efficient EU, tailored to their own party platforms (Franck et al., 2003; Treib, 2020). Importantly, Meijers (2017) argued that the effect of Eurosceptic parties is strongly qualified by the degree of their EU salience. This leads to the third expectation:

> E3: When facing increasing Eurosceptic competition, mainstream parties adopt (soft/hard) Euroscepticism, even more so if Eurosceptics' EU salience is high.

In addition, Van de Wardt (2015) found that opposition parties and extreme parties are most likely to co-opt Euroscepticism as they are less risk averse and will thus more easily take the risk of changing position on the EU. On the other hand, Hobolt and De Vries (2015) find that taking up new issues is not primarily a function of opposition, but of being on the losing side of the dominant dimension of contestation. We expect the following:

> E4: Opposition parties are more likely to take Eurosceptic positions than government parties and are even more likely to do so when they are located further from the political centre.

Finally, Meijers (2017) found that Eurosceptic challengers have, above all, differential effects on mainstream parties. Since centre-left parties are in competition with both the far right and the far left (on the cultural and economic fronts, respectively), they are more likely to adopt Euroscepticism than centre-right mainstream parties, which only compete with the far right. This is in line with recent findings that Euroscepticism across the political spectrum comes in different shapes and sizes, based in communitarianism, identitarianism, populism or opposition to neoliberal policy (Carlotti & Gianfreda, 2020; De Vries & Edwards, 2009; Pirone, 2020; Vezzani, 2020). Hence our final expectation:

> E5: With Eurosceptics in parliament, centre-left parties are more likely to adopt Eurosceptic argumentation in parliament than centre-right parties.

3 Methodology

3.1 Case Selection and Data

This article makes a comparative evaluation of the effect of Eurosceptic challengers on two dimensions of Euroscepticism (salience and positions) among other parties, using parties' parliamentary groups in several Belgian parliaments as units of analysis. These groups fulfil a communicative role as they are expected to voice opinions on the EU in the plenary with the goal of reaching the public (Auel & Raunio, 2014). In addition, parliaments are a prime locus of strategic party competition, which is a key mechanism in the proliferation of Eurosceptic initiators' effects as well as a key locus of opposition to the EU (Karlsson & Persson, 2020). Data was compiled by coding parliamentary statements by MPs during plenary sessions of the various parliaments.

Belgium is an excellent case to examine the effect of Eurosceptic parties on party competition. First, the long-standing pro-EU consensus has recently been challenged by parties at the far ends of the political spectrum (Wolfs & Van Hecke, 2020). Secondly, the federal structure of Belgium enables a comparative approach discussing several party systems and related parliaments. Reflecting the centrifugal dynamic of Belgian federalism, the Belgian electoral system is split into two separate party systems. Previously unitary parties split along linguistic lines (although some still cooperate intensively with their sister parties across the

language border, the Flemish and French-speaking Green parties being the main example here). With the exception of the Brussels Capital Region and the German community, political parties operate mostly within their respective language communities, even when they compete in federal parliament elections (Meier & Bursens, 2020). Flemish parties do not compete for the support of Walloon voters and vice versa. As a result, even sister parties can develop divergent strategies and platforms depending on the dynamics of party competition within their respective constituencies.

This setting allows us to compare the regional party systems and, because the federal parliament is elected within two separate party systems, we have an additional assembly to assess whether the electoral or the parliamentary context matters most. In short, the Belgian setting enables us to assess whether Eurosceptic parties affect other parties through electoral competition or simply through their mere presence in parliament without competing for the same electorate. Tables 1 and 2 in Appendix A list Francophone- and Dutch-speaking parties, respectively. Only parties that managed to win a seat at some point between 2000 and 2019 are listed and considered in the analysis. Independent MPs were scarce and are not included either. From these parties, only Parti du Travail de Belgique/Partij van de Arbeid van België (PTB/PVDA) maintains a national structure.

Additionally, most Belgian parties have traditionally been very pro-EU (Dardanelli, 2012; Franck et al., 2003). EU discussions have long been rare: Belgian politics was Europeanised only to a surprisingly low degree (Bursens, 2002). Recently, however, Eurosceptic arguments have gained some momentum, starting with fringe parties (Randour & Bursens, 2019), while all parties have increasingly included EU positions in one way or another on their party platforms (Pittoors et al., 2016; Randour & Bursens, 2019). Vlaams Belang (VB) is the biggest Belgian party to openly call itself Eurosceptic (Vlaams Belang, 2018). However, we are not as much interested in which parties may or may not be fundamentally Eurosceptic as in the introduction of hard Euroscepticism in the political debate, regardless of the parties' official ideology. Also, while arguments to change the EU (soft Euroscepticism) are more common and can even be a sign of pro-European sentiment, hard Euroscepticism, evoking a principled opposition to European integration, is more unequivocal.

To investigate how mainstream parties react to such Euroscepticism, we identified the parties that were the first to introduce this in each of the parliaments under scrutiny. Our data, presented graphically below and in tables in Appendix B, show that multiple Belgian parties fit this profile. In the federal parliament, there are two distinct sparks of Eurosceptic positioning and therefore of potential Eurosceptic proliferation, once in 2008 by VB and Lijst Dedecker (LDD) and a second time in 2015 by the Parti Populaire (PP) and the unitary PTB/PVDA. In the Flemish parliament, VB introduced Euroscepticism in 2002, and its position has oscillated since. In the French-speaking and Walloon parliaments, the only introduction of Euroscepticism, by PTB/PVDA in 2015, was very short-lived. The Belgian data confirm König et al's (2017) finding that Eurosceptic initiators are extreme parties at both ends of the political spectrum and are in line with analyses of parties' platforms (Wolfs & Van Hecke, 2020).

Since support for Eurosceptic initiators is higher in Flanders than in Wallonia (Randour & Bursens, 2019), we can assess the effect on other parties by comparing the behaviour in the respective regional parliaments. Flemish mainstream parties are more often confronted with intense electoral competition from Eurosceptic challengers. Walloon parties, however, also face the Flemish Eurosceptic parties in the federal parliament, even though they do not compete with each other for federal seats (except in the Brussels Capital constituency). This institutional setting allows us to assess whether effects of Eurosceptic initiators spread through electoral competition or additionally through parliamentary interaction.

To ensure comparability with the Flemish parliament, the scores for the parliaments of the French Community and the Walloon Region are combined. Finally, Belgium is an example of centrifugal federalism, in which communitarian tensions occurred simultaneously with the deepening of European integration (Beyers & Bursens, 2013). This allows for an assessment of the competing hypotheses of Europeanisation and federalism. Our design does not control for other variables that may affect whether and in which direction mainstream parties develop positions towards European integration, and, therefore, we only posit plausibility claims. Our empirical focus includes the Belgian federal parliament, the Flemish parliament, the parliament of the French Community, and the Walloon parliament. A selection of plenary meetings from 2000 until 2019 was analysed.

Plenary documents were collected through each parliament's websites (De Kamer van volksvertegenwoordigers, 2020; Parlement de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, 2020; Parlement de Wallonie, 2020; Vlaams Parlement, 2020). We took two months, April and November, in each year between 2000 and 2019, avoiding election campaigns and parliamentary recesses. Selecting the same months each year keeps our data stable over the years. The selection includes variation on the share of Eurosceptic initiators over time and between parliaments. Relevant mediating variables such as the party type (mainstream vs. peripheral, government vs. opposition, left vs. right, degree of regionalism) are automatically included at the party level. Each time MPs took the floor, their intervention was counted as one intervention by their party. Based on the content of the intervention, interventions were coded as arguments 'pro-EU', 'change-EU', 'anti-EU' or 'no-EU' (when the EU was not discussed). The result is an estimation of the salience each party gives to the EU and its EU position, for every year in each parliament. To facilitate comparison, we combined scores for the Walloon parliament and the parliament of the French-speaking region, since on the Flemish side community and region are merged in a single assembly.

3.2 Measuring Euroscepticism

Party Euroscepticism was operationalised as a continuous variable, by measuring the share of party interventions in parliaments that include Eurosceptic arguments. This allows us to see an increase or decrease in parties' EU salience and positions. We do not establish whether parties are fundamentally Eurosceptic, or whether parties adopt Eurosceptic rhetoric because of ideological or strategic imperatives. This is not relevant for our purpose as in either case Euroscepticism is communicated in an arena of political competition. We operationalise the distinction between

hard and soft Euroscepticism as arguments 'anti-EU' and 'change-EU', respectively. We also measure arguments made in favour of the EU, categorised as 'pro-EU' arguments. For the independent variable, we include two types of behaviour from challenger parties in the variable 'increase of Euroscepticism': either a shift towards Euroscepticism in terms of content or an increase of EU salience by challenger parties are expected to trigger a response from mainstream parties.

4   Results

We first discuss the evolution of salience and positions in each of the parliaments based on two types of graphs. The first graph on salience shows parties' proportion of plenary contributions that include arguments about the EU (rounded to the nearest whole number). The second type of graph shows the positions of each party, outlining the share of each party's contributions that argued pro-EU, change-EU or anti-EU. Null scores are omitted everywhere, and years when a party had no seats in the given parliament are shaded.

   The vertical lines in the graphs indicate a rise of Euroscepticism, which can mean either a position shift towards more Euroscepticism or an increase in EU salience from Eurosceptic challengers. The lines are dotted if the Eurosceptic challenger in question competes in another regional electoral district. We find that a mere positional shift towards Euroscepticism affects only some other parties, while a subsequent rise in EU salience has a more widespread effect. As vertical axes differ across parliaments, we refer to Appendix B with parties' scores for comparisons between parliaments.

4.1 Federal Parliament

Figure 1   EU salience among Flemish parties in the federal parliament.
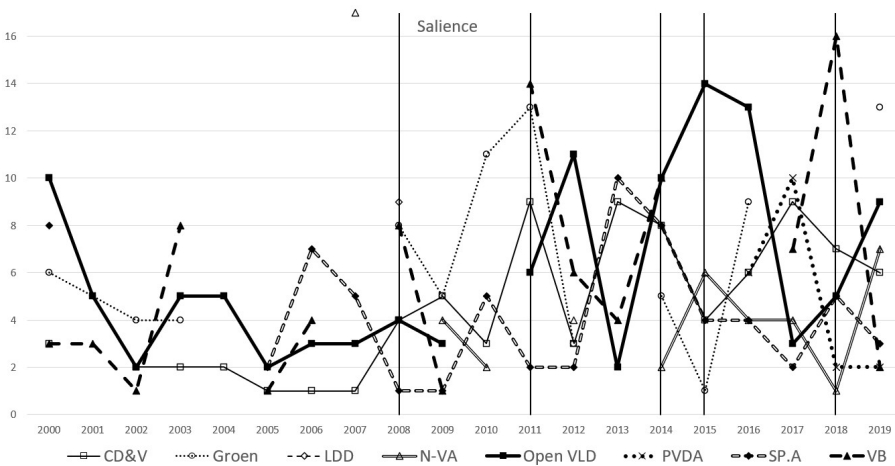
Figure 2   *EU salience among Walloon parties in the federal parliament. For better legibility, one high score was omitted: Défi's 2000 pro-EU score of 50.*
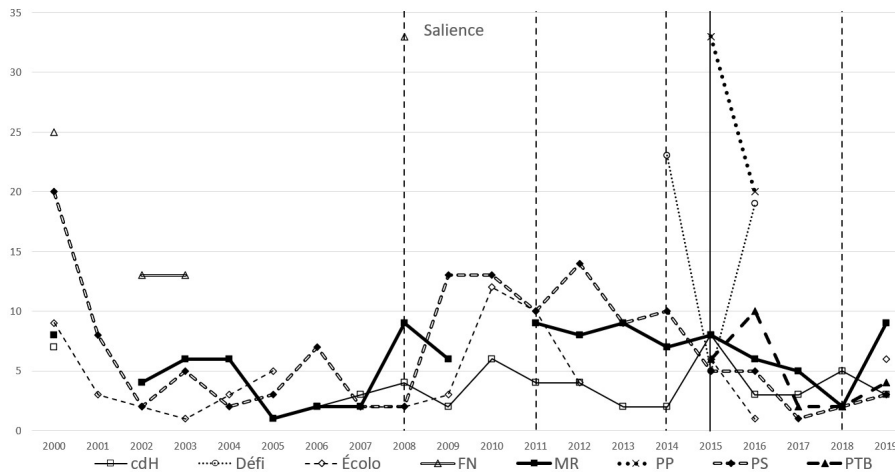

In the federal parliament, an increase in Eurosceptic positioning occurs in 2008 and 2015-2016. In 2008 both challenging parties were Flemish (VB and LDD). While Groen and the Walloon social democrats were the first to raise attention for the EU after this initial introduction of Euroscepticism, it was only after the initiators also raised EU salience (in 2011, 2014 and 2018) that other parties eventually started devoting more attention to the EU. In 2011, the responding parties were all Flemish traditional parties together with the Walloon liberals, and in 2014, when VB's EU salience was very high, these were joined by the Flemish regionalists. Similarly, when VB increased EU salience shortly after 2018 again to a high level, we see a rise in EU salience across all mainstream parties except the Flemish Christian democrats, who were already at very high levels of EU salience (Figures 1 and 2).

In terms of positions, the Flemish greens show substantial changes in their position in 2008 as they start to argue more in favour of changing the EU. Both social democrat parties adopt some change-EU rhetoric but quickly return to their previously established, fairly consistently pro-EU courses. The Walloon liberals briefly introduced a small number of 'change-EU' arguments after 2008. After the 2011 increase in Eurosceptic EU salience, argumentation to change the EU increased for the Flemish liberals, both Christian democrat parties, the Walloon greens, and, eventually, also the Flemish regionalists. In 2018, when VB increased EU salience once again, the Flemish regionalists even introduced anti-EU argumentation, while no other parties reacted.

In 2015-2016, the Eurosceptic initiator was PTB/PVDA, which competes in the entire country but has most success in the Walloon/francophone part, and the one-seat PP. Both parties' Euroscepticism was paired with high EU salience, but PTB/PVDA soon softened its position, voicing only pro-EU arguments by 2018,

and PP only argued about the EU in 2015-2016. Only the greens and Walloon Christian democrats increase EU salience in reaction to the PTB/PVDA and PP challenge. Also in terms of positions, there were few effects. The Flemish greens included 'change-EU' rhetoric in 2015 and 2016. After PTB/PVDA softened its position, the greens made no more 'change-EU' arguments. Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) adopted more change-EU arguments, but they were not electorally threatened by either initiator, and their shift outlasted the Eurosceptic challenge, which had disappeared by 2018. In that year, N-VA even voiced anti-EU arguments for the first time (Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3   EU positions among Flemish parties in federal parliament.
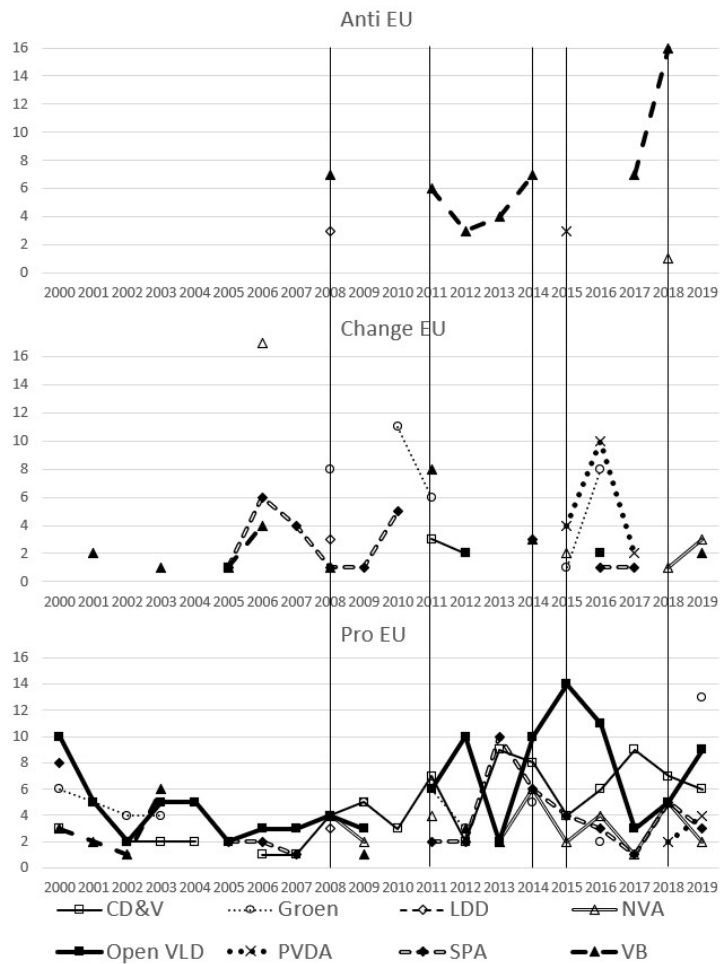
Figure 4   EU positions among Walloon parties in federal parliament. For better legibility, one high score was omitted: Défi's 2000 pro-EU score of 50.
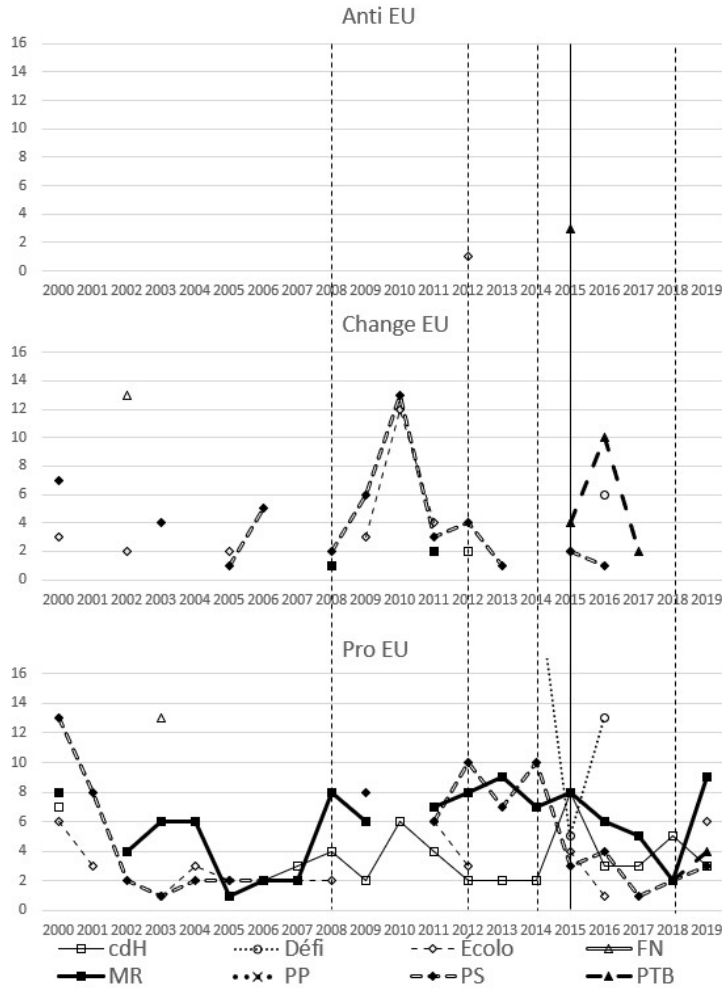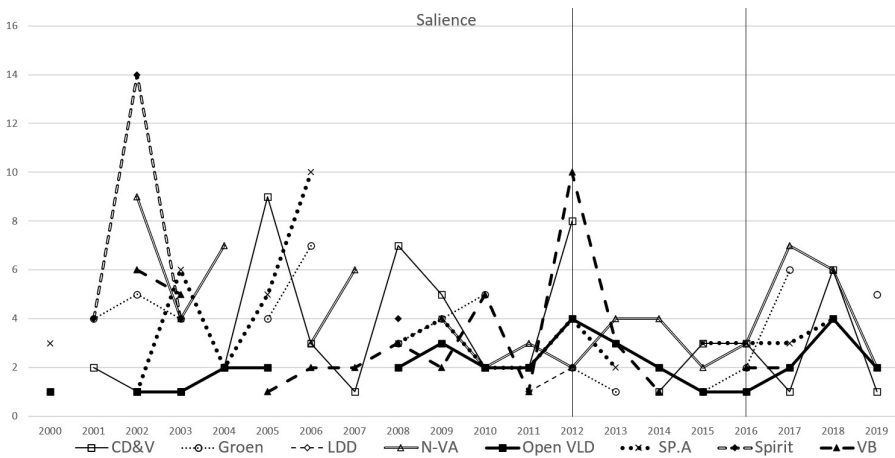

4.2 Flemish Parliament

In the Flemish parliament, VB initiated Eurosceptic rhetoric in 2002, while between 2006 and 2012 it argued both in favour and against the EU. In 2012, VB voiced more unequivocal and salient Euroscepticism, and since 2016 it has run an exclusively anti-EU course. Ramping up Euroscepticism position-wise mostly correlates with an increase in EU salience (Figure 5).

Although most of them had seen periods of increased EU salience before, the liberals, greens and Flemish regionalists showed a modest increase of EU salience in or shortly after both 2012 and 2016. The social democrats increased EU salience

in 2012, but not in 2016, while the Christian democrats did not in 2012 but did in 2016.

In and shortly after 2012, the Christian democrats, the Flemish regionalists, the liberals, the social democrats and the greens adapted their rhetoric to include change-EU arguments (although for the greens and social democrats such rhetoric had already been voiced a couple times before). In and shortly after 2016, when Eurosceptics became exclusively anti-EU but with a low salience, the liberals and Christian democrats remained pro-EU. The greens, Flemish regionalists, and social democrats, all shifted towards Eurocriticism, with the latter two even including anti-EU arguments (Figure 6).
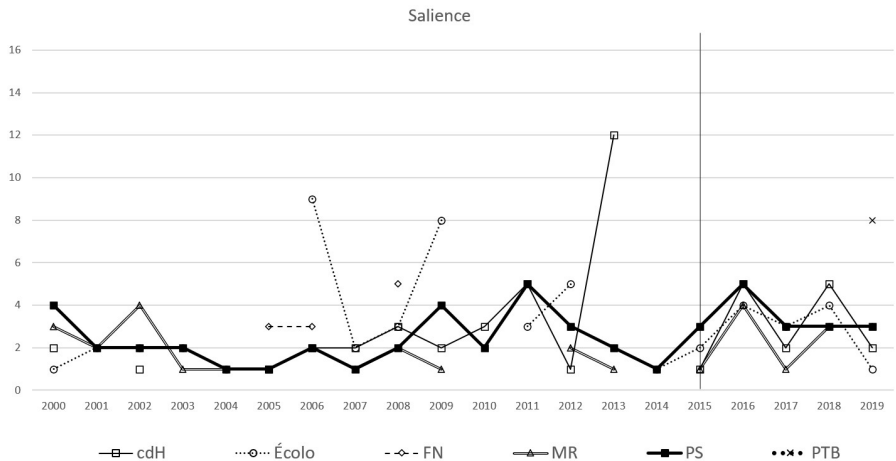
Figure 5   *Parties' EU salience in Flemish parliament.*

Figure 6   *Parties' EU positions in Flemish parliament.*
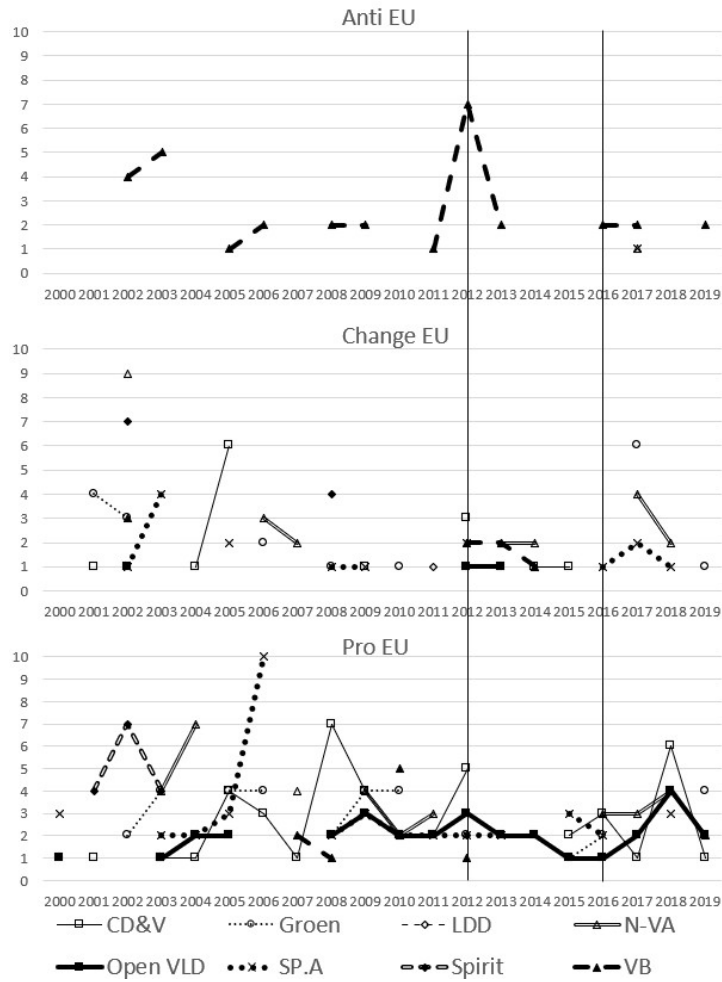
4.3 Walloon and Francophone Parliaments

Figure 7   ***Parties' EU salience in the Walloon and Francophone parliaments.***
One high score is omitted for legibility: PTB had an EU salience score
of 25 in 2015.

In the Walloon and francophone parliaments, PTB briefly introduced a Eurosceptic challenge in 2015, combined with a very high EU salience. However, its anti-EU stance disappeared quickly: in the subsequent years PTB made no arguments about the EU, except in 2019, when it argued to merely change the EU. All parties in the Walloon and francophone parliaments increased attention to the EU in 2015 and again in 2016, but for most parties this is simply a return to previous levels after particularly low levels in 2014. In 2016, the Walloon parliament blocked the ratification of CETA (Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement), but the crisis peaked in October (a month not selected for analysis) and can therefore not explain the increasing EU salience already in 2015. In terms of positions, parties mostly maintained their pre-established courses; changes were very limited. Parti Socialiste (PS) briefly shifted to more change-EU argumentation, while the other parties, if anything, became more pro-EU (Figures 7 and 8).

Figure 8   *Parties' EU positions in the Walloon and French-speaking parliaments.*
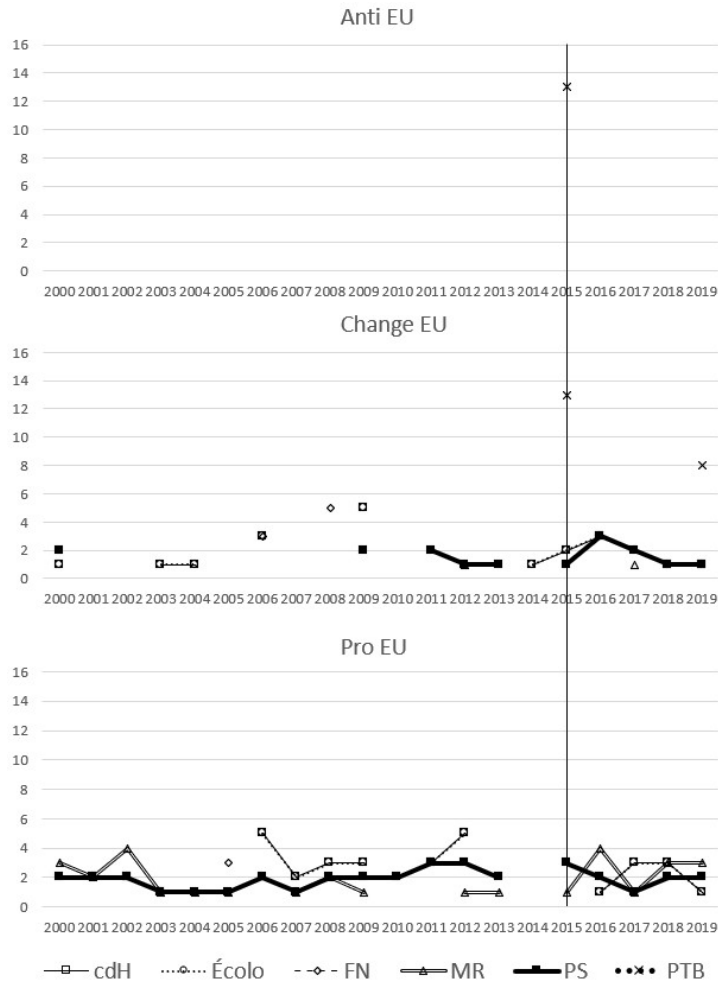
5   Discussion

5.1 *Salience: The Eurosceptic Effect Across the Board*

In almost all assemblies, parties devoted more attention to the EU after 2009 than they did before 2009. The only exception is the Flemish parliament, where salience remained mostly constant. At the same time, Flemish parties did raise salience in the federal parliament, indicating that the EU is increasingly on the radar across the linguistic border. Despite the ongoing and even increasing communitarian tensions, which were seen as impeding EU salience in the past (Bursens, 2002), more recent years do not show any decrease of EU salience. Moreover, the federal parliament, the prime locus of communitarian disputes, shows a bigger increase in

salience than the regional parliaments. Although all Belgian government levels are affected by EU policies, the federal level seems to be the most popular place to discuss EU matters. In sum, as European integration deepened, Belgian domestic politics has become more Europeanised, confirming Ladrech's expectations (2002) and in line with scholars who point to the subsequent financial and refugee crises as explanation for the increased salience (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Serricchio et al., 2013).

In addition, our data suggests an effect of the more manifest Euroscepticism from peripheral political parties. While Groen and the Walloon social democrats were the first to raise attention for the EU after an initial introduction of Euroscepticism (in 2008), it is only after the Eurosceptics raise EU salience (first in 2011 and with a spike in 2014), that all parties eventually end up devoting more attention to the EU. Similarly, when VB increased Eurosceptic salience in 2018, all mainstream parties increased EU salience, except for Christen-Democratisch and Vlaams (CD&V), which was already at a high level. However, Eurosceptic competition might not always have been the cause, as some had already shown oscillations in EU salience before (cdH and Écolo). The very brief Eurosceptic episode of PTB/PVDA in the federal parliament had only a limited effect, as just cdH and Écolo, which had been showing oscillating levels of EU salience before, increased their EU salience.

At the Flemish level, the response to Eurosceptic competition is characterised by an increase in EU salience for three out of five parties (N-VA, CD&V, Groen), while Open VLD and sp.a seem unaffected in terms of salience. In the Walloon and French-speaking regional parliaments, all parties increased EU salience in 2015-2016 after PTB/PVDA had a short episode of Eurosceptic competition. This finding seems to support the idea that the limited impact of PTB/PVDA Euroscepticism might be explained by the fact that VB had already made parties adapt to Eurosceptic competition. At the French-speaking/Walloon regional level, where VB had not yet forced parties to react to Eurosceptic competition, PTB/PVDA does affect the other parties.

In short, our first expectation seems to be supported, in line with Meijers (2017) and Giannetti et al. (2017). Although we must be cautious as our design does not control for alternative explanations, it does provide an impetus to reject the theoretical alternative, namely that mainstream parties do not raise attention for the EU when facing an increase in Eurosceptic competition, either in terms of salience or in terms of positions.

Our second expectation aimed to examine Dardanelli's (2012) argument with respect to pro-EU regionalist parties and Meijers' (2017) argument with respect to the centre left. Neither is confirmed. When VB first introduced Eurosceptic competition at the federal level in 2008, its closest competitors were N-VA (the then new, generally pro-EU regionalist party that reintroduced an alternative for voters focused on Flemish-communitarian issues), and Open VLD (the other main right-wing party that in the previous election of 2004 had lost many voters while VB had gained many). However, N-VA was the very last to increase EU salience. Open VLD only noticeably increased EU salience when Eurosceptics made the EU more salient. However, so did other parties involved in less intense competition

with VB, such as Groen and CD&V. Similarly, at the Flemish level, Open VLD and N-VA did not increase their attention for the EU more than other parties when confronted with VB's Euroscepticism.

As for the French-speaking assemblies, the parties in most intense electoral competition with PTB/PVDA are PS and Écolo. At the federal level, Écolo did indeed increase the salience it gives to the EU in reaction to PTB/PVDA, but so did cdH and Défi. Moreover, PS even decreases the salience it gives to the EU at the federal level. At the regional level, all parties react similarly to PTB/PVDA Euroscepticism in terms of EU salience.

In short, our analysis does not confirm the expectations of Dardanelli (2012) and Meijers (2017). At least during periods without campaigns, parties in closer electoral competition with Eurosceptics give no more attention to the EU than other parties. Instead, EU salience increased across the board, albeit in varying degrees, not more so for parties in intense competition with Eurosceptics. In other words, when EU salience is raised by Eurosceptics, it affects all other parties' salience. The Flemish-regionalist response, contrary to Dardanelli's hypothesis that they would raise salience especially quickly, could be interpreted in light of the cosmopolitan-communitarian divide, as the Flemish-communitarian regionalists have incentives to oppose the more cosmopolitan EU.

5.2 Positions: The Condition of Salience, Government and Distance From the Centre

At the federal level, expectation 3 predicts that parties start criticising the EU more from 2008 onwards, after VB became vocally anti-EU. In the federal parliament, the introduction of Eurosceptic competition introduced a shift in one party as Groen started arguing to change the EU. However, it is only when the Eurosceptic challengers also increase EU salience that other parties also start changing their positions and formulating arguments to change the EU. They adapted even more when VB had become unambiguously Eurosceptic. This condition of salience was theorised by Meijers (2017) for all parties. At times we find social democratic parties showing behaviour that does not follow the trend: while in the Flemish parliament, social democrats did shift their position to even include anti-EU argumentation when VB became unambiguously anti-EU, in all other cases, the position shifts of social democratic parties are extremely limited, short-lived or even non-existent. Our findings for the Flemish parliament are similar: only the liberal party clearly does not react to the VB Euroscepticism (while the social democrats, who showed no reaction at the federal level, do react at the Flemish level). PTB/PVDA's brief period of Euroscepticism had almost no effect as changes in position by other parties were very limited. Finally, in the Walloon and French-speaking parliament, PS barely and only briefly shifts to change-EU arguments after PTB had briefly introduced Eurosceptic opinions. The other parties even became more vocally pro-EU. In short, our findings are a qualified confirmation of the work of Franck et al. (2003), Meijers (2017) and Treib (2020): some, but not all mainstream parties, follow Eurosceptic challengers in their negative evaluation of the EU. Moreover, at least in Belgium, Euroscepticism might have a limited shelf-life as a political tool of competition: while early on, most parties shifted their

positions on the EU, the last time VB increased EU salience, only its closest competitor changed its position.

The fourth expectation, which focuses on opposition parties and parties furthest from the centre, is only partially confirmed. At the federal level, Groen, an opposition party at the left end of the continuum, was the first to react to Euroscepticism, before other parties, which changed positions only after Eurosceptic salience increased. However, it seems Groen's position further from the centre, rather than its opposition status, explains this, as the other parties that changed their EU position were most often government parties. Most parties whose EU argumentation was unaffected were opposition parties: the Flemish nationalists and social democrats were in the federal opposition at the time, and neither changed their EU position. N-VA became more Eurosceptic only after spikes of Eurosceptic salience in 2014, and when VB had become unambiguously Eurosceptic in 2017. At this point, N-VA was no longer in the opposition. At the Flemish level, a similar dynamic was found: the liberals, the only party that was unaffected by the introduction of Eurosceptic competition, was in the opposition. The greens were also in the opposition. Although the extent to which Groen's change in EU argumentation was caused by Eurosceptic competition is unclear (since it already showed oscillations before), it seems to be rather connected to their position further from the centre than to their oppositional status.

In sum, in line with Van de Wardt (2015), we found that being further away from the centre makes parties more likely to react to Eurosceptic competition by including arguments to change the EU. With respect to opposition versus government status, however, we found an evolution contrary to Van de Wardt (2015) who theorised that opposition status increases the likelihood of adopting Eurosceptic arguments, as well as to Meijers, (2017) who hypothesised that oppositional status is unimportant. Our analysis shows that opposition parties are less likely than government parties to criticise the EU when faced with Eurosceptic competition. Our result may be explained by Hobolt and De Vries' (2015) finding that it is not oppositional status, but rather being on the losing side of the dominant dimension of contestation that affects Euroscepticism. Alternatively, it may also be an effect of two-level game dynamics (Putnam, 1988), whereby government parties can use the EU as a scapegoat for unpopular policies and portray it as a constraining actor for domestic governance. Both situations would imply a critical position towards the EU. Opposition parties, on the other hand, can use the EU to criticise the governing coalition (e.g. by citing critical EU reports or government shortcomings in complying with European requirements), which requires more leniency in criticising the EU. Statham and Trenz (2013) and Brack and Startin (2015) show how criticism of the EU was also a substantive part of the French socialists during Hollande's term as president.

Our final expectation, regarding centre-left parties following Meijers (2017), is not confirmed. At the federal level, only one of the four centre-right parties did not change its EU argumentation, while none of the centre-left parties did so significantly. At the Flemish level, the only centre-left party adapted its argumentation, but so did two out of three centre-right parties. In the French-speaking and Walloon parliaments, PS briefly increased argumentation to

change the EU, but this change is limited. The other francophone parties (one left, one centre left and one centre-right) increased their pro-EU argumentation. The limited effect in these parliaments is possibly due to the negligible amount of Eurosceptic competition. In short, two scenarios seem plausible: either centre-right parties are more likely to change their position on the EU or centre-right and centre-left parties are equally likely to do so. Meijers' (2017) logic underpinning this hypothesis is only partly supported by our findings: parties that are in competition with Eurosceptics might be more likely to shift argumentation, but at least in this case, these are not more often centre-left parties that supposedly compete with both the far right and the far left. When Euroscepticism came from the right, centre-left parties did not react as centre-right parties did. This hints at the possibility that Euroscepticism was not connected to competition between the far right and the centre left. A content analysis and classification of types of Eurosceptic frames might serve to clarify whether this is due to the specific type of Eurosceptic frames of far-right Eurosceptics, since Euroscepticism varies (Carlotti & Gianfreda, 2020; De Vries & Edwards, 2009; Pirone, 2020; Vezzani, 2020).

5.3 North and South

While we did not present specific expectations with respect to the comparison between the Flemish parliament and the Walloon/French-speaking parliaments, some takeaways can nevertheless be formulated. As expected, Eurosceptic initiations were more common among the Flemish parties (Randour & Bursens, 2019). This stands out especially when comparing the regional parliaments. Hard Eurosceptic initiations were somewhat common in the Flemish parliament, mostly coming from VB and LDD. In the Walloon and French-speaking parliaments, there was one year in which the small PTB voiced hard Euroscepticism, but the party very quickly switched to a pro-EU stance. This translated into very modest reactions from other parties.

Remarkably, in the federal parliament, parties show fewer substantial reactions to PTB's short term of Euroscepticism than was the case for earlier Eurosceptic initiators. This might be explained by PTB's small size at the time but could also suggest decreasing marginal returns of Euroscepticism. The latter could also explain why PTB/PVDA did not continue to pursue a Eurosceptic strategy: as mainstream parties had already adapted, Euroscepticism was no longer an effective strategy for a fringe party trying to break into the electorate of bigger parties (Hobolt & De Vries, 2015). Euroscepticism was already a part of the field of contention, owing to the Flemish Eurosceptics, and the other parties had already reacted to this. At the regional level, parties increased EU salience, but this was largely in an act of resistance against Euroscepticism as their positions remained mostly as pro-EU as before. In any case, this could not have been enough to incentivise PTB to maintain its Euroscepticism as the only party they affected was not a main competitor. Moreover, it might even have provided an additional incentive to abort Euroscepticism as a strategy: they would not want to combat PS in the same way as a centrist party (which maintained soft Euroscepticism).

On the other hand, the French-speaking parties did change in the federal parliament when reacting to Flemish Eurosceptics. We see two explanations for

this. First, the division of competences has put the federal level in charge of areas that are more prone to Euroscepticism (migration, monetary policy) compared with the competences of the regions and communities. In addition, the mere presence of Flemish Eurosceptics in the federal parliament might be enough to trigger Walloon parties' response, despite the absence of an electoral threat.

6   Conclusion

Euroscepticism has become an increasingly salient issue in Belgian parliaments, despite a traditionally Europhile political landscape and increasing communitarian tensions. We found that mainstream parties raise EU salience when facing Euroscepticism, especially when considering that Euroscepticism is salient itself. Moreover, the salience effect was not more pronounced for parties in intense competition with Eurosceptics. Neither was it for regionalists. Our findings indicate that hard Euroscepticism from peripheral parties, especially when salient, increased soft Euroscepticism among the other parties. We did not find evidence to support the hypotheses that regionalist parties, centre-left parties or opposition parties would become especially Eurosceptic. In contrast, the increase in soft Euroscepticism was especially pronounced for parties in government and parties on the further ends of the political spectrum. However, we argue that hard Eurosceptic challengers face diminishing returns in their attempt to politicise the EU. While they affect mainstream parties a lot at first, subsequent increases in Euroscepticism might be less effective: once parties have adapted to hard Eurosceptic challengers, they are less affected by later increases in Euroscepticism. Lastly, we note that parties' EU-related behaviour evolved differently in parliaments at different levels and that at times parties reacted to Eurosceptic initiators from the other language group, i.e. outside their electoral arena. This might be ascribed to the division of competences, to the mere fact that parties interact in the federal parliament or to outside events.

Our study has many limitations. Firstly, we did not control for variables external to the parliamentary setting that might trigger variation in parties' EU salience and position. For instance, the signing of the Treaty of Lisbon or the consecutive crises (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Serricchio et al., 2013) may help to explain the effects of the 2008 rise in Euroscepticism in the federal arena, despite the absence of direct electoral competition. Secondly, future research may ascertain whether other sources such as party platforms or media statements confirm our findings on the basis of parliamentary documents.

While we reached clear results for the Belgian case, the findings do not seem to be universally supported. For example, Turnbull-Dugarte (2020) shows that German mainstream parties reacted to a Eurosceptic challenge by becoming more vocally pro-EU, arguing that this was due to Europhilia among the supporters of those mainstream parties. Indeed, Europhilia among Belgian voters seems to be decreasing (Brack & Hoon, 2017) and could thereby explain the difference between the behaviour of Belgian and German parties. The direction of causality between parties is difficult to determine. Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2017) argue that

parties might feel too constrained by their previous positions to shift strategies to gain votes. However, this explanation seems insufficient as the traditionally Europhile Belgian parties have shifted their positions, and we see the same in the Netherlands and France (Bijsmans, 2017; Brack & Startin, 2015; Statham & Trenz, 2013). Another possibility is a difference in the depiction of the EU in media. For example, Startin (2015) shows how in the British case lopsided coverage of the EU has led to a mainstreaming of Euroscepticism. This mainstreaming of Euroscepticism in UK media is also noted by Bijsmans (2017), who additionally shows that criticism of the EU is increasingly also a part of debates in Dutch media. Both countries have substantial Eurosceptic parties. In any case, there seems to be a country-level variable that determines what strategy mainstream parties will adopt in the case of Eurosceptic competition.

Finally, it should be noted that the spread of (soft) Euroscepticism to other parties is not the only type of Eurosceptic influence, and it is not the same as policy influence. For example, Biard (2019) illustrates different stages at which such parties can affect policy. Similarly, Carvalho (2014) shows how especially in terms of the influence of challenging parties, there can be a considerable gap between statements made by politicians and effectively implemented policy.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, our contribution is clear: when facing Eurosceptic challengers, mainstream parties in Belgian parliaments raise salience fairly equally, with government and peripheral parties adopting (soft) Euroscepticism more often than other parties.

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Opening an Absolute Majority A Typology of Motivations for Opening and Selecting Coalition Partners*

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Abstract

Following the municipal elections in the Walloon Region (Belgium) on 14 October 2018, 189 political groups won an absolute majority. Twenty-two of these decided not to exercise power alone, but favoured the formation of an oversized coalition by integrating a minority partner. The aim of this article is to identify the motivations behind the formation of a local coalition when one of the partners has an absolute majority. Semi-structured interviews with mayors and leaders of political groups in these municipalities make it possible to identify the motivations for, first, the choice to open and, second, the choice of a minority partner. By distinguishing between necessary and supporting motivations, this article shows that the search for greater representation is a necessary motivation for the choice to open, whereas personal affinities and memories of the past are necessary motivations for choosing minority partners. By prioritising motivations, this article shows that.

The negotiation of a 'majority pact',[1] a document marking the starting point of a new municipal coalition in the Walloon Region (Belgium), is not an insignificant act in local political life as it binds the majority partners for six years. It is the result of negotiations between the representatives of various electoral lists. However, not all Walloon municipalities (262 in total) are concerned by the negotiation of a political majority. Indeed, following the municipal elections of 14 October 2018, 189 political groups won an absolute majority. Of these 189 political groups, 167 decided to exercise power alone. Sixty-four percent of Walloon communes are therefore governed by a single formation that won more than half of the seats in the communal council.

Twenty-two of the 189 political groups that won an absolute majority decided not to govern alone but rather to form a coalition by opening to an additional partner.[2] At first sight, this opening may seem surprising as the political groups

have the majority of seats in the local council. This opening therefore implies a sharing of local power that is not a priori necessary. The choice to open an absolute majority is a very important one, as it conditions the course of the term of office as well as the adoption and content of municipal public policies.

Through an exhaustive analysis, studying the 22 cases concerned by opening an absolute majority, we identify the motivations that impel political representatives to open an absolute political majority in terms of seats to other partners and to choose one partner over another. The research question underlying this article is therefore formulated as follows: why do political groups that hold an absolute majority of seats in the municipal council following the elections of 14 October 2018 open their majority to a minority party, and why do they choose this party?

To answer this question, we first combine our analysis with previous studies of local coalitions and identify the specificity of our research. Second, we detail the characteristics of the 22 communes that were the subject of this study and explain our qualitative methodological choices. Third, we propose an analytical typology of motivations for opening an absolute majority and choice of partner to propose a model of motivations for negotiating oversized coalitions at the local level when the main partner has an absolute majority of seats in the communal council.

1   The Formation of a Coalition

Since the merger of Belgian municipalities in 1977, the number of local coalitions has increased (Dandoy, 2018, p. 513). How are coalition negotiations at the local level envisaged? They have been the subject of a vast array of scientific literature since the 1960s, which include studies on other levels of power. We present, first, the results relating to the negotiation of political majorities, generally, followed by the results specific to the negotiation of local political majorities, taking into account the Walloon context.

> Generally speaking, negotiations aim at the establishment of a notorious – i.e. public and publicised by its protagonists – and lasting alliance between partisan groups to govern an institution, resulting in joint participation in an executive. (Bué & Desage, 2009, p. 10)

The multiple theories developed on coalition negotiations have a dual purpose: first, to predict the formation of alliances and, second, to understand the decisions and behaviours of political actors. The starting point for these theories is a rational choice approach, which assumes that politicians act rationally by choosing the least resource-intensive and least costly option in terms of its returns (Downs, 1957, p. 137). Theories and analyses of coalition formation have rapidly expanded and enriched, identifying key motivations for coalition formation. Some theories and analyses have focused on 'process tracing' of deviant negotiations such as oversized coalitions (Dumont, De Winter & Andeweg, 2011) or have taken into account social psychological dimensions (Andeweg, 2003), enriching the literature on the subject.

The first motivation is 'office-seeking' (Debus, 2008a). Political parties thus integrate an executive to possess power, realised by mandates (Wille & Deschouwer, 2012, p. 25). In this perspective, political parties tend to minimise the number of partners in the majority to obtain more mandates (Bonnet & Schemeil, 1972, p. 270). They associate themselves only with partners that are strictly necessary to reach a majority, while rejecting superfluous partners. In doing so, they create a 'minimum winning coalition' (Riker, 1962, p. 32). In the context of this article, the groups studied do not a priori fit into this perspective because the partner who joins an absolute majority is not necessary. One must then consider 'oversized coalitions' (Riker, 1962, p. 54; Volden & Carrubba, 2004), where a political party wins an absolute majority and includes an additional partner in its executive. There are several reasons for this choice. A party may seek to preserve power in the longer term and secure its place in a future majority if it loses its absolute majority (Wille & Deschouwer, 2012, p. 112). Oversized coalitions can also be advantageous in periods of crisis (Baron & Diermeier, 2001; Diermeier & Merlo, 2000) or in institutional contexts (Lijphart, 1984; Sjölin, 1993).

The second motivation under which political actors choose to form a coalition is 'policy-seeking' by establishing an alliance that enables them to implement their electoral programme and achieve desired policy outcomes (Axelrod, 1970; Carrubba & Volden, 2000; Crombez, 1996; Strom, 1990). To do so, political parties can subsequently form a 'minimal connected winning coalition' (Axelrod, 1970). The latter is, however, debated (Volden & Carrubba, 2004). From the perspective of a minimal connected winning coalition, political parties tend to ally themselves with their neighbours on the political spectrum so as to minimise ideological dissonance and implement their electoral promises with greater ease (Andeweg, 2011; Olislagers & Steyvers, 2015). Research also shows that desired policy outcomes of parties are more likely to be reflected in coalition agreements and to be achieved when these parties have a key role in the coalition (Debus, 2008a). Moreover, median parties are more often included in an oversized coalition (Andeweg, 2011), and the search for more balanced public policies can be pursued through an oversized coalition (Jungar, 2011).

The third motivation for political parties is to maintain electoral support and even to attract new voters, in other words, 'vote-seeking'. This maximisation of electoral support can be understood as a means of gaining power and influence over public policy (Downs, 1957, pp. 34-35). Indeed, with a large number of elected representatives, a political party's bargaining power and its share in the political game are greater (Dodd, 1974, p. 1097), even if it does not necessarily obtain a greater number of positions within a coalition (Debus, 2008a). However, there is a limit to the search for electoral support: political parties tend not to form a coalition with another party that represents the most significant threat in electoral terms (Thrasher, 1999).

While these three types of motivation lead to different types of coalition formation, it is necessary to consider the multiple constraints that political parties face in forming coalitions. Numerous constraints have been identified in the literature insofar as "the real world of coalitions is one of constraints" (Strom, Budge & Laver, 1994, p. 307). First, the constraints are institutional because there

are a host of legal rules regarding the size and composition of executive coalitions, the nomination of coalitions and the conduct of negotiations (Strom et al., 1994). The effect of bicameralism on the formation of oversized coalitions is debated, and while some authors show this effect (Lijphart, 1984; Sjölin, 1993), others have refuted it (Volden & Carrubba, 2004). On the other hand, when qualified majorities are needed to pass certain reforms, oversized coalitions are necessary (Andeweg, 2011). Second, the constraints are contextual because coalitions are formed in political systems with historical, identity-related and symbolic variations in each country (Magre & Pano, 2019; Müller, Bergman & Strom, 2008). Crisis situations can also explain the formation of oversized coalitions, when existing public policies are rather extreme (Baron & Diermeier, 2001), although these results have been refuted (Volden & Carrubba, 2004). Third, the constraints are partisan because political parties may have specific rules for coalition formation (Strom et al., 1994) and because a high level of factionalising within a party negatively affects its likelihood of entering a coalition (Bäck, 2008). In this respect, not all members of political parties necessarily share the same goals (Budge & Laver, 1986): some aim to occupy a position of power, while others want to realise their ideologies or preserve their electoral support (Bué & Desage, 2009). Some new parties may also find it preferable to join an oversized coalition in order to avoid opposition that is not always electorally rewarding (Jungar, 2011). Fourth, coalition agreements are directly constrained by the political preferences of coalition partners (Müller et al., 2008; Müller & Strom, 2008), who seek to secure their political agenda when tensions within a coalition are high (Klüver & Bäck, 2019). These different constraints constitute path dependency factors that shape political coalitions (Müller & Strom, 2008). As a result, the search for coalition partners takes place in the 'shadow of the past' (Müller et al., 2008, p. 15). Past experiences are therefore highlighted to predict the composition of governments (Steyvers, Reynaert, De Ceuninck & Valcke, 2008).

If Belgium is a state affected more than others by oversized coalitions (Andeweg, 2011, p. 197), an analysis of coalition formations in the Belgian political system should ultimately take into account the multiple lessons learned from the scientific literature concerning the congruence of majorities between the different levels of power, given the federal and decentralised institutional organisation (Wille & Deschouwer, 2012, p. 112). Although it has been shown that coalition formations at the regional level are different from those at the national level, in particular in Belgium (Downs, 1998), and that regional political parties may adopt programmatic positions that differ from those of their federal organisation, in particular in Germany (Debus, 2008b), other studies have shown the importance of congruence between levels of power in coalition formations (Bäck, Debus, Müller & Bäck, 2013). For example, congruence is complete when the same parties are members of the executives at the different levels of power (Deschouwer, 2009). Congruence is also sought when there are no national political parties, as is the case in Belgium (Deschouwer, 2009). The main reason political parties seek congruence is the presence of a party at distinct levels of power, which allows for consistency in the way public policies are oriented, with the consequence that the credibility of the political party increases (Deschouwer, 2009).

While the many studies cited provide a fairly clear picture of the reasons for coalition formation, particularly in the political and legal context of Belgium, it is important to remember that coalition formation at the local level is quite different from that at the national and regional levels (Laver, 1989). For example, a host of differences have been observed, particularly in the UK context, as regards political gains, policy positions and negotiation contexts (Laver, Rallings & Thrasher, 1987). In addition, there are differences in regulatory concerns reflecting a norm of political consensus between actors, especially in the Danish context, for understanding oversized coalitions at the local level (Serritzlew, Skjæveland & Blom-Hansen, 2008). This means that local coalition formations deserve special attention, and this is the justification for this article.

The negotiations of political majorities at the local level in Belgium, in general, and in Wallonia, in particular, present certain specific characteristics. First, with regard to the theme of 'minimal connected winning coalitions', it has already been found that political programmes seem to be less decisive, as differences between parties are not insurmountable at the local level (Wille & Deschouwer, 2012, p. 117).

Second, the importance of institutional constraints at the local level must be emphasised. Indeed, these constraints weigh particularly heavily on the formation of local coalitions when the legal rules impose the direct election of the mayor, which reveals a form of 'presidentialisation' of local politics (Copus, 2019). The mayor is thus a 'powerful player' in the game of coalition building (Debus & Gross, 2016; Strom & Swindle, 2002), thereby weakening the influence of local councillors over him (Copus, 2019). It should be noted, however, that the mayors' confidence in achieving their political projects seems to be lower when they are directly elected (Ervik, 2015). The Walloon Region is particularly concerned by these results since, according to Article L1123-4 CDLD,

> a councillor is elected by right as mayor if he or she is of Belgian nationality and has obtained the most preferential votes on the list that obtained the most votes among the political groups that are parties to the majority covenant.

Let us emphasise the Walloon specificity, which implies that the negotiation of the local political majority takes place before the mayor is appointed. It is therefore necessary to be a party to the majority pact in order to be appointed mayor. As a result, it may happen that an elected official with the highest number of preference votes is not appointed mayor if his or her party is not included in the majority pact (Grandjean, 2016; Matagne, Radoux & Verjans, 2011).

Third, in terms of factionalising, the diversity of expectations can lead to dissension within political parties, especially in the case of an absolute majority (Wille & Deschouwer, 2012, p. 104). This dissension sometimes leads a party to form an 'oversized coalition' when the group feels weakened by the demands of one or more members or by the difficulties posed by a limited number of local councillors in adopting certain decisions, among other reasons (Laver & Schofield, 1990; Wille & Deschouwer, 2012, p. 22). The political party then allies itself with an additional list to preserve a stable majority throughout the term of office, even though this

may lead to conflicts between the running mates (Nasseaux, 2002, p. 6) or a longer decision-making process (Lupia & Strom, 2008, p. 13).

Fourth, as regards the political preferences of coalition partners, it has been shown that local majority negotiations take into account 'political history' (Grandjean, 2016) and that there is a greater probability of existing coalitions renewing than forming new collaborations (Wille & Deschouwer, 2012, p. 25). This is because partners know each other better and know what they can get from each other (Bäck, 2003, p. 463).

Fifth, with respect to congruence of majorities between the different levels of Belgian government, specificities have been identified with regard to the local level. Thus, when a political party has one or more ministers within the higher levels of power, contacts with the local political majorities to which this party belongs are facilitated (Wille & Deschouwer, 2012, p. 112), allowing certain projects to advance, in particular via more subsidies or information (Ibid., 129). A political party thus opens up its majority to another partner to have additional relays at higher levels (Dumont, De Winter & Ackaert, 2008). It should be noted that congruence between political majorities also allows members of a political party that is active at higher levels of power to influence the negotiations of a municipal political majority (Dumont et al., 2008). Representatives of the higher levels of a party have thus already encouraged a local section to ally itself with a certain partner in a municipal college (Dumont et al., 2008; Grandjean, 2016) or, on the contrary, have shown resistance to a particular coalition, leading, in some cases, to a failure of the negotiations (Dumont et al., 2008).

Sixth, given the numerous oversized and non-incumbent coalitions at the local level in Flanders, Ellen Olislagers identified the need to distinguish between 'necessary and supporting mechanisms' for such coalitions. She demonstrated that "imperfect information, good and bad relations between parties and politicians and higher party involvement stimulated the formation of this kind of coalitions" (Olislagers, 2013, pp. 167-208).

Compared with the existing literature, we focus on the process of majority formation. Our research is in line with that of authors who are interested in 'process tracing' (Dumont et al., 2011) by identifying motivations of the majority parties and by prioritising them to understand the opening of an absolute majority. To do this, by identifying the motivations that resulted in the coalition of the 22 political groups with an absolute majority after the municipal elections of 14 October 2018, our research question comprises two elements: 1) we seek to analyse the different motivations that explain the negotiations of oversized coalitions whose main partner obtained an absolute majority, 2) and we do so in the municipal context in the Walloon Region.

In relation to this second element, there is a factor that has not been sufficiently explored in the literature and that, in our opinion, is very important at the local level: this is the weight of interpersonal relations, which has long been identified (Gamson, 1961). Thus, several authors have emphasised the importance of social relations in the selection of coalition partners (Dumont et al., 2008, p. 133), particularly in view of their personality, trust, respect and mutual affinities (Wille

& Deschouwer, 2012, p. 122). In this study, therefore, we seek a better understanding of the weight of interpersonal relations in the opening of an absolute majority.

For this study, we chose a qualitative methodology, which we believe is the most appropriate for identifying the motivations behind opening an absolute majority.

2 The Study of All the Walloon Cases Concerned

The 22 municipalities that are the focus of this study have different characteristics that depend on their geographical location, the number of inhabitants, the almost directly appointed mayor, the lists present and the size of the absolute majority (see Annex 1).

We begin by detailing some of these characteristics. First, from a partisan point of view, 11 municipalities are led by a mayor affiliated to the Mouvement Réformateur (hereafter MR), seven are led by a mayor who is a member of the Parti Socialiste (hereafter PS) and four mayors are affiliated to the Centre Démocratique Humaniste (hereafter cdH)[3]. Fourteen mayors are men and eight are women. Second, the majority parties are divided into two types of lists. Most of the lists studied are national lists (Dandoy, Dodeigne, Matagne & Reuchamps, 2013) whose candidates ran under the official name of the national party (MR, PS, cdH). However, some lists can be considered 'quasi-national' (Ibid.), insofar as they adopted a name different from their party's, while clearly showing their reference to it. Examples of these lists are PSD@ (Andenne), NAP-MR (Rixensart) and MR-IC (Péruwelz). This category also includes lists whose members are affiliated to a party (Dodeigne, Close & Matagne, 2020). Third, the size of the absolute majority held by a party varies from one municipality to another. The majority is narrow when it is held by one or two councillors. It is wide when the majority party has at least three more councillors than half of the seats to be filled.[4] Finally, it should be noted that 20 majority groups formed a majority with only one additional partner, while the two remaining groups (the PS in Charleroi and the MR in Courcelles) included two additional partners.

To identify the motivations of the political groups in the 22 municipalities studied to open their absolute majority, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the mayors or leaders of the parties holding the absolute majority. There are three reasons for this choice. First, semi-structured interviews are the most appropriate method of data collection for understanding the motivations behind opening an absolute majority and, above all, for understanding the selection of the coalition partner from the perspective of the analysis of interpersonal relations and oversized coalitions (Coman et al., 2016, p. 110; Olislagers, 2013, p. 171). Second, as the number of communes concerned by the opening of an absolute majority is limited, we decided to study all coalition negotiations. This qualitative study therefore aims to be exhaustive in terms of the cases it covers. Third, as the decision to open is mainly in the hands of the leader or the candidate with the highest number of personal votes, we gave priority to meeting these people. In total, 18 mayors and one president of the local party with the absolute majority

were interviewed.[5] Two mayors never responded to our many requests, while one leader cancelled the appointment because of the Covid-19 health situation. To compensate for the lack of interviews and to enrich the data, local press articles published during the negotiations of the municipal majorities were collected.[6]

In addition to the interviews with the mayors and leaders of 19 political groups with an absolute majority, we also met five representatives of the support party who headed the list for the municipal elections and who became aldermen following the formation of the coalitions. We selected these five representatives on the basis of the communes in which the political parties had a majority, following both the communal elections of 14 October 2012 and the communal elections of 14 October 2018, but which only favoured opening following the second elections. The choice of this criterion stems from our desire to determine the potential triggers that led the representatives of these parties to open up their majority although they had not done so following the first election. Five municipalities meet this criterion: Aywaille, Bernissart, Grâce-Hollogne, Rixensart and Wavre.[7] We chose not to meet the representatives of the support party systematically for two reasons. To begin with, practical reasons prevented us from devoting resources and time to additional interviews, and, moreover, we were faced with a saturation of the data collected, in that additional interviews no longer seemed to allow, at a certain stage, the emergence of new information.

In conducting the interviews, the questions focused exclusively on one stage of the 'life cycle of political coalitions' (Müller et al., 2008), namely the coalition building phase. All interviews were transcribed. As some representatives wished to remain anonymous, references to the interviews are anonymised in the presentation of the results.

The method of analysis was qualitative content analysis, which is used to describe the meaning of the qualitative material studied (Schreier, 2012, pp. 1-19). To achieve this, we identified the paragraphs of the transcribed interviews referring to motivations related to the opening of the absolute majority. Our research question thus related to the angle from which we analysed our material. These paragraphs were coded into different categories according to their meaning. The coded paragraphs were gradually grouped into main themes, which are reflected in the structure of this article.[8] Annex 2 presents the first codes used to categorise the paragraphs from the interviews, as well as the main themes that emerged from the comparative work and that served as the basis for the structure of this article. As it is we who decided on the intrinsic meaning of the analysed material, our analysis had to be systematic, from two points of view: we first examined all our material by identifying those parts of it that could be related to our research question and coding them consecutively according to their meaning. We then applied, the same sequence of steps to each interview in our material: reading, identifying paragraphs related to the research question, coding and grouping into main themes. This work was carried out with the help of a qualitative analysis software belonging to the *computer-assisted qualitative data analysis* (CAQDAS) family, namely Weft. This software promotes reflexivity (Woods, Macklin, Lewis, 2016) and, above all, enabled us to match the different motivations apparent in the interviews, on the basis of the codes we established. The coding was carried out in light of previous

scientific findings. We regularly found traces of previous scientific studies in our qualitative content analysis. The identification of the different motivations explaining the opening of an absolute majority is thus the result of an iterative process (Sinkovics & Alfodi, 2012) between the results of previous research and our interviews.

3 Opening Local Absolute Majorities

On the basis of our qualitative content analysis, we present the motivations behind opening an absolute majority at the local level. Specifically, our analysis identified two key stages in the formation of the coalitions studied; the first relates to the decision to open (3.1), while the second refers to the choice of the minority partner (3.2).

3.1 The Choice to Open

There are three main reasons for justifying the choice to open: to ensure more 'efficient' municipal management, to have additional relays within the other levels of power, and to form a majority that is more representative of the population, making it possible to give an image of openness, while confirming some of the results of previous research and at the same time enriching it.

3.1.1 The Triple Efficiencies of Local Coalitions

The choice to open can be explained, first of all, by the desire to ensure a more efficient local management, thus refining the results of previous studies on the fulfilment of 'policy-seeking' (Axelrod, 1970; Carrubba & Volden, 2000; Crombez, 1996; Dumont et al., 2008; Olislagers & Steyvers, 2015; Strom, 1990; Wille & Deschouwer, 2012). More specifically, our study allows us to categorise this efficiency because the interviews reveal three different registers of discourse that allow a political ideology to be fulfilled.

First, efficiency is institutional. Seventeen of 22 political groups have a narrow absolute majority. This means that if one or two councillors from the majority group are absent from a meeting of the municipal council, the majority group loses its absolute majority and may not be able to adopt the items on the agenda. When a group within the municipal college has a number of councillors almost equivalent to the number of opposition members, the risk of blocking local management is considered too great by the actors interviewed (BA5, BD3, BX1, BA4, BA3, BX9, BX6, BA8 & PD9). The mayors indeed generally feel more comfortable carrying out the day-to-day work of a municipality when they hold a broader majority. This allows them to carry out the work more calmly and comfortably (BA5, BD3, BX1). Consequently, political groups with a narrow absolute majority prefer opening up to make it easier to run the municipality and to implement their electoral programme (PX2).

The interviews allow us to observe that this desire to form a coalition to strengthen the majority may stem from two factors. First, the introduction of a motion of individual and collective distrust in the local law of the Walloon Region

in December 2005 has, in some municipalities (BD3), accentuated this need to have a more comfortable majority. Since 2006, local majorities can effectively be overturned by "at least half of the councillors of each political group forming an alternative majority" (Article L1123-14 CDLD; Matagne et al., 2011; Gustin, 2018). Forming an oversized coalition thus reduces the risk of a vote of no confidence (BA3). Moreover, political formations want to form a comfortable majority because of past experience of political deadlock resulting from a narrow majority (BD3, BA4 & BX6).

Second, efficiency is strategic. The choice to open is explained by the leaders' desire to ensure a narrow minority in the local council (BX5, BD3, BX9 and BX4). Indeed, the consequence of a large majority is a smaller opposition. When the opposition is composed of a few people from one or two parties, it takes up little space, since criticism and remarks on the public policies adopted carry less weight. The aldermen and mayors say that they spend more time on their daily work and less on defending their projects before the population or the media (BX4). According to one mayor, a majority whose decisions are rarely contested has a better image among citizens (BX5).

Third, efficiency is stabilising. If the search for stability has already been analysed at the Belgian local level (Nassaux, 2002), we can see that this stability feeds efficiency in two ways. To begin with, dissensions can exist between the members of the same political group, which is notably the case for the opening lists made up of several political tendencies. The formation of a coalition is then a means to reduce tensions within political groups (BA6, BA7, BX7 and BX9). In addition, when the absolute majority is narrower, the relative weight of each of its members is all the more significant. The choice to open may therefore result from the desire not to depend on a minority of one or two people exercising 'pressure', attempting to 'blackmail' or imposing 'a veto' (BA3, BA7, BD3, BX6, BX4, PX2).

In the end, the three types of efficiency that justify opening an absolute majority contribute to the will to realise political ideologies through public policies, both by the party holding the absolute majority and by the coalition partner (BA3, BA5, BD2, PD6, PD9 and PD7), whether it is to have the necessary majority in the local council to adopt public policies, to ensure that the opposition is as narrow as possible and can criticise public policies or to guarantee a certain stability in the adoption of public policies.

3.1.2   The Relays of Local Coalitions

The choice to open is explained by the desire to achieve a certain congruence, as described previously. This congruence is particularly important for local political actors like the municipalities, acting as subordinate powers, who have discretionary decision-making power and organic autonomy under decentralisation but also exercise certain competences as representatives of federal, regional or community institutions under devolution (Articles 41 and 162 of the Belgian Constitution; Durviaux, 2018). In the context of implementing their competences, local political actors are therefore frequently in contact with higher levels of power, whether to 'obtain information on the progress of files', on decisions taken or on any other service (BA1, BD3, BA5, BX1, BD2, BA4, BA3, BX3, BA6, BX7, BX9 and BA2). In

such an institutional configuration, members of the municipal colleges find it easier to communicate with political representatives at higher levels of their political colour (BA3, BX7 and BA7), thereby revealing the importance of interpersonal relations. Consequently, political groups with an absolute majority form a coalition with another political group present in the executives of higher levels of power (BX1, BA4, BD2, BX7, BX5, BA8, BX4, BA1, BA5 and PX2). It should be noted that, generally speaking, leaders appreciate being in contact with political representatives at these levels even when their party is not in the majority. These representatives are relays that help to implement the municipal electoral programme (BD3, BX3, BA6 and PC1).

However, the desire to have relays in the higher levels of power is undermined by the election timetables. Indeed, municipal and provincial elections are held every six years in mid-October, while regional and federal elections are held every five years at the end of May (except in the case of early federal elections following a political crisis). Thus, when the local majorities were set up in 2018, the political groups did not know with certainty which parties would compose the federal, regional and community executives following the elections scheduled for 26 May 2019, although there were 'rumours' (BD8) about potential partners.

In the end, opening up an absolute majority is justified by the importance of the relays available to local elected officials, allowing them to facilitate the realisation of the communal electoral programme, thus confirming the results of previous scientific studies on congruence in a multilevel political system (Bäck et al., 2013; Deschouwer, 2009; Strom, 1990), while still stressing the importance of interpersonal relations.

3.1.3   The Representativeness of Local Coalitions

The choice to open is ultimately justified by the desire to have a more representative majority of the population (AC3, BA1 and BX5). To better understand this argument, let us detail a distinctive feature of the local electoral system in Belgium. In the 22 municipalities that are the focus of this study, 17 political groups won a majority in seats, but not in votes. This can be explained by the voting system and, more precisely, by the Imperiali key used to transform votes into seats (Close & Matagne, 2020). This key ensures a more advantageous representation for the list with the best result (Lagasse, 2001). For example, the PS in Charleroi, with 41.29% of the votes, won 26 out of 51 seats, i.e. the majority of the seats to be filled in the municipal council. In view of the Imperiali key, some mayors wish to ensure a broader representation (BX9 and PX2).

Opening an absolute majority is part of the desire of local political actors to project an image of openness (BA5). The leaders then mobilise a communication argument towards the citizens, demonstrating that they are listening to the electorate (BA3). In recent years, various municipalities have been affected by political and financial scandals that have tarnished the image of elected representatives (the Carolo, the Publifin affair and the Samusocial) (BD2). To improve this image, several mayors decided to stop governing alone and to share local power with other political groups (BX4, BA3, BA5, BD3, BA6, BA7 and PD8), thereby facilitating the gathering of a wider range of political information from

citizens (BX5 and BX8) and providing food for thought for the members of the communal colleges (BD2, BX7, BX8, BA2 and BA8)

Local political actors thus seem to have integrated the specificity of an institutional constraint (Strom et al., 1994) so as to further legitimise the decisions taken by the coalitions in place.

3.2 The Choice of the Minority Partner

Having presented the motivations that explain the opening up of an absolute majority, let us now detail the motivations that impel the leaders to choose one partner over another. Five were identified following the interviews with the leaders, allowing us to confirm some of the results of previous research while also enriching it.

3.2.1   Ideological and Programmatic Proximity to the Minority Partner

As various authors have already shown, by choosing to open an absolute majority, leaders ensure ideological and programmatic proximity with their majority partner (Adrian, 1977; Bué & Desage, 2009; Strom, 1990) and consequently form a 'minimal connected winning coalition' (Axelrod, 1970), thus making it easier to implement their electoral promises (Olislagers & Steyvers, 2015).

While this reason is clearly present in the leaders' speeches (BA5, BA7, BA2, BX1, BX3, BX6 and PX2), it is worth questioning the claim that political groups at local levels do not form 'minimal connected winning coalitions', preferring instead an ally that advocates similar local projects. To this end, we identified the associations favoured by the majority parties in the 22 municipalities studied (Table 1).

Table 1   **Numbers of Associations by Majority Parties**

		Majority Parties		
		PS	MR	cdH
Minority Parties	PS		6	I
	MR	3		3
	cdH	2	3	
	Ecolo	3	3	

Note: It should be remembered that in two municipalities the majority party has joined forces with two partners, so the total is 24.

It can be seen that the political groups do not systematically favour their ideological neighbour on a left-right axis. For example, the PS chooses the MR as many times as Ecolo (three times) and the MR is more likely to select the PS (six times) than the cdH (three times). There are two explanations for these associations. First, since certain majority political parties open their absolute majority to have relays at the higher levels of power, they tend to integrate a partner present at these levels of power (BX7 and BX5). Second, the proximity of the programmes at the local level should be highlighted. These programmes set out collaborative projects that are

sometimes close between political groups, given the specificity of the competences exercised by the municipalities as subordinate powers. The different political groups (BA4, BA5, BX1, BX7 and BX6) do indeed share common ways of considering the local interest at the heart of these programmes, even if there are some differences in the way the programmes are implemented and even if differences in priorities and means of achieving projects may divide local parties (BX5, BA8, BA7, PX2 and PD9). However, let us not forget the historical rivalry between the two major Walloon political parties, the PS and the MR (BX7, BD3, BA1, BX3, PC1 and PD9)

Although several interviews confirm the formation of minimal connected winning coalitions, it is clear that the specificity of local issues impels political actors to break away from them.

3.2.2   *Personal Affinities With the Minority Partner*

The choice of a coalition partner is based on personal affinities. This is certainly the main lesson that we could gather from our interviews (BA4, BA1, BD3, BX1, BA6, BX7, BX9, BA2 and BX4). According to several mayors, municipal politics, before being a relationship between political groups, is based on interpersonal relations (BA3, BA5, BX7, PC3 and PD9). From the interviews, we were able to identify five values that can strengthen these relations.

First, trust is a key factor in the development of personal affinities. Members of a community college must trust and rely on each other (BA2, BA4, BX8, BA7 and PX2). Trust also means keeping commitments and keeping one's word (BA1).

Second, loyalty to the stronger party is an essential element for governing together, according to the leaders. The sense of loyalty is revealed, for example, by an opposition that was constructively led in the previous term (BX7 and BD7) or by the absence of aggression both during the election campaign and in the previous term (BA2 and PX2). The consequence of loyalty, according to some mayors, is a sense of collegiality (BA4, BA6 and PX2).

Third, the way in which the day-to-day tasks are carried out must be in line with the way in which the future partner works; some prefer teamwork, while others have a more bilateral operation between the aldermen and the mayor (BX4).

Fourth, the involvement of politicians and their willingness to collaborate are factors in the selection of the minority party (BX6, BA5, BA3 and BX7), especially based on past behaviours (BX1).

Fifth, friendships may be formed within or beyond the local political sphere (BD5) and will have an impact on the choice of partner (BA4 and PX2).

These five values, which contribute to the consolidation of interpersonal relationships, support the findings of previous research that has not sufficiently highlighted the values that underpin personal affinities in coalition building.

3.2.3   *Memories of Past Experiences With the Minority Partner*

Coalition building takes place in the 'shadow of the past' (Müller et al., 2008). While we have already identified the impact of negative past experiences in choosing to open up, positive past experiences have a greater impact on the choice of partner. Thus, given the work done in the past and the quality of interpersonal

relations, the leaders of the majority party reaffirmed their willingness to work with the same partner again (BX7, BA2, BA8, BD3, BX1, BA4, BA6, BX8 and AC3). A few figures illustrate the importance of past positive experiences.

Of the 22 municipalities, three have been governed by the same coalition for at least 18 years. In ten municipalities, the party that won an absolute majority renewed the alliance of the previous mandate, during which it had fewer elected members. In addition, in one municipality, the mayor chose his partner because he had the opportunity to work closely with someone who had been his representative when he was an alderman in the previous mandate (BA7).

Finally, it should be noted that when two or even three parties formed a majority together during the previous mandate or when personal affinities linked politicians from different lists, pre-electoral negotiations took place, resulting either in simple 'hallway' chats (BX1, BA5, BA3, BA7 and PX2) or in an agreement that remained confidential (BA1, BD2, BA4, BX5 and BA6)

3.2.4   *The Number of Seats of the Minority Partner*

It has already been found that political parties tend to reduce the number of majority partners to obtain more mandates (Bonnet & Schemeil, 1972) and create 'minimum winning coalitions' (Riker, 1962). However, taking into account the number of seats held by the potential partner is not a prohibitive criterion (Olislagers & Steyvers, 2015). Our interviews confirm these results.

On the one hand, when the leaders explicitly state that they take into account the number of seats obtained by the potential partners in 2018 (BD3, BA7, BX6, BA3, BX3, BX1, BX9 and PX2), it is because of a break in municipal politics: there has been a change either in mayors or in partners. In addition, these leaders had all won a narrow majority, prompting them to pay particular attention to the number of seats of the other political groups in two ways. First, some of them considered the fluctuation of seats and chose either the partner who won votes in the elections or the one whose results were stable. Second, the majority groups could also look at the number of seats obtained as such. From the interviews, we saw that political groups with a narrow absolute majority and a desire to extend this majority exclude lists with low representation, that is, those with only one or two elected members (BD3 a BA7), considering that one person is not enough to make the majority more stable (BA3). More generally, it should be noted that in 16 municipalities, the majority group formed a coalition with a group comprising at least three elected members, without necessarily choosing the groups with the most seats to avoid giving them too much visibility or having to give them several mandates in the municipal college (BX9, BA4, BA8, PD8).

On the other hand, several mayors claimed that they did not take into account the number of seats obtained in 2018 by the potential partners. This is particularly the case for political groups bound by a pre-electoral agreement and not wishing to break it (BA4, BA1 and BD2), but it also applies to those with a majority considered sufficiently comfortable, without a partner, but who nevertheless decided to open to a party, regardless of its number of elected members (BA6 and BX5).

3.2.5   *The Influence of the Higher Party Authorities*

While previous research has emphasised the importance of coalitional congruence in multilevel systems (Bäck et al., 2013; Deschouwer, 2009; Strom, 1990), it is clear that the influence of the upper echelons of political parties (Dumont et al., 2008) has not been sufficiently considered at the local level. It should be noted that political parties are organised at several levels in French-speaking Belgium. There are three main levels of cdH, MR and PS: the national, the district and, finally, the local.[9] The higher authorities thus generally refer to the district president or the national president. On the basis of the interviews, we can distinguish three degrees of influence exercised by the higher authorities.

First, there was a simple exchange of information between local elected representatives and representatives of higher authorities. For example, some mayors state that the higher authorities did not intervene in the designation of the partner (BX8, BX4, BA1 and BA3), apart from a transmission of information between the leaders who won an absolute majority and the presidents of the federations (BA1, BX5, BA8, BC2, BD2, BA3, BA7, BA2, PD7, PD9 and PD6). This exchange of information is intended to only provide political parties at the national level with an overview of local political majorities (BD2 and BX1). Local elected representatives therefore have a broad measure of autonomy (BA7).

Second, some leaders explain that they have in the past experienced pressure from higher authorities in the form of 'recommendations' (BA4, BA6, BX6 and PD8). In such situations, the mayors claim that, regardless of these recommendations, local autonomy prevails (BA4, BA6 and BX6). In other words, other local considerations such as personal affinities or election results are taken into account (BX6).

Third, an 'imposition', that is, an agreement made by the party federations at the higher levels, is formulated to the majority political group (BA8, BX2, BD3, BX3, BA7, BX1, PX2, PD5 and PD7). It should be noted, however, that it is difficult to assess how often such agreements are concluded, as the figures given during the interviews vary widely. Some speak of two or three agreements for the 262 municipalities in the Walloon Region (BX1), others of a much higher percentage (BA6).

In the end, the three differentiated degrees of influence that we have identified through the interviews allow us to refine the understanding of the search for congruence in a multilevel system, like that of Belgium.

4   Towards a Model of Motivation

By answering the two questions posed in this article, we are able to draw some more general lessons regarding the negotiation of oversized coalitions and the negotiation of such majorities at the local level in Wallonia.

With respect to the negotiation of oversized coalitions, our research confirmed the results of previous research. Thus, by distinguishing the two stages of coalition formation (the choice to open and the choice of partner), we have shown that opening up absolute majorities to form oversized coalitions allows 1) policy-seeking,

2) accounting for political majorities at higher levels of power and seeking congruence, 3) integrating the institutional constraint of the voting system (Imperiali key), 4) moving away from minimal connected winning coalitions, 5) taking into account the shadow of the past and 6) avoiding dissension within political parties.

As regards the negotiation of oversized coalitions at the local Walloon level, our study has revealed new facets. Thus, by distinguishing between the two stages of coalition formation, we can draw seven additional lessons. First, we categorised the efficiencies (institutional, strategic and stabilising) that enabled the political ideologies of local political actors to be realised. Second, we identified the five values that strengthened personal affinities at the local level (trust, loyalty, way of working, involvement and friendship), while finding that the shadow of the past is likely to strengthen the quality of interpersonal relations and foster formal or informal pre-election agreements. Third, we have identified the reasons why political partners move away from 'minimal connected winning coalitions', namely, the conclusion of pre-election agreements as well as the broad nature of the absolute majority. Fourth, in the Belgian multilevel system we identified the role of the higher party instances through three differentiated degrees of influence (information, recommendation and imposition).

However, it is possible to go further in terms of insights by proposing a model to explain the motivations behind political negotiations of oversized coalitions at the local level when the main partner has an absolute majority of seats. To this end, we have attempted to prioritise the different motivations for opening an absolute majority and choosing the minority partner. Annex 3 contains a table showing, for each municipality, the presence or absence in the discourse of the actors interviewed of the three motivations relating to the choice to open and the five motivations relating to the choice of the minority partner. From this table, we can see that, as far as the choice to open is concerned, the search for greater representation is a necessary motivation to justify an oversized coalition. This motivation is indeed apparent in the speeches of the leaders of the 22 municipalities. As far as the choice of partner is concerned, personal affinities and memories of the past also seem to be necessary motivations to justify the choice of a minority partner. These motivations are indeed again apparent in the speeches of the leaders of the 22 communes.

On the basis of our qualitative analysis and the prioritisation of these motivations, we propose to establish a model for negotiating oversized coalitions at the local level when the main partner has an absolute majority of seats (Figure 1). This model identifies two successive stages: first, there is the choice to open; second, there is the choice of the minority partner. For each stage, we identify 'necessary motivations' for negotiating oversized coalitions and 'supporting motivations', to use Olislagers' compelling distinction (Olislagers, 2013, p. 198). As regards the former, if an oversized coalition is negotiated, then these motivations are necessary for such a negotiation. The latter, by contrast, support the former without being necessary for negotiating oversized coalitions at the local level when the main partner has an absolute majority of seats.

Figure 1 ***The model of negotiating oversized majorities at the local level***
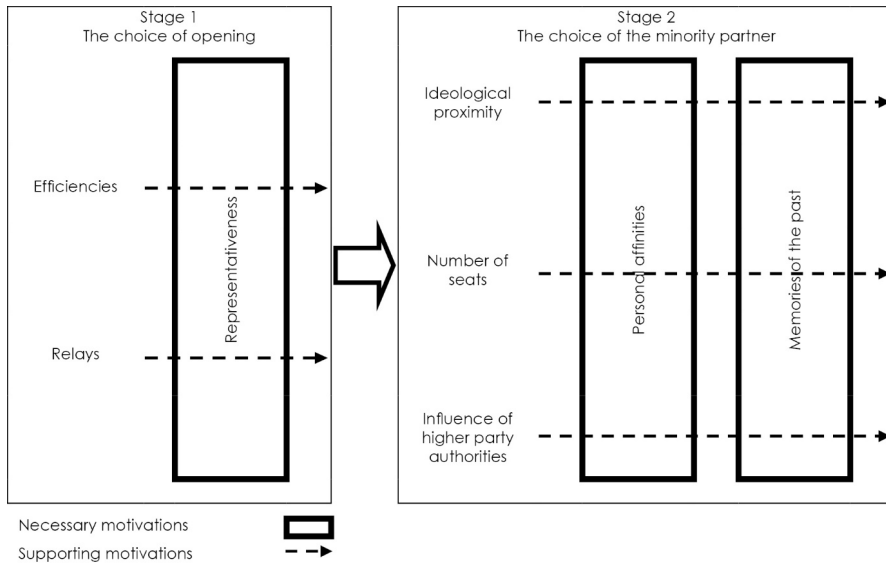
5 Conclusion

This study had a twofold objective: analysing the motivations that lead a political group to open its absolute majority at the local level and to choose a minority party. To this end, the 22 Walloon municipalities concerned by such an opening after the municipal elections of 14 October 2018 were studied through semi-structured interviews with the leaders of the different political groups in these municipalities. By categorising the different motivations underlying the choice to open and that of the minority partner, we established a model that identifies the necessary motivations, namely the search for greater representativeness, with regard to the choice to open and personal affinities and memories of the past with regard to the choice of partner. In addition, we identified the motivations that support the previous ones without conditioning the negotiation of an oversized coalition, namely the search for a certain efficiency and for relays in the higher levels of power with regard to the choice to open and the search for ideological proximity, the taking into account of the number of seats of the minority partner and of the influence of the higher instances with regard to the choice of the partner. By focusing on the process tracing of the negotiation of oversized majorities, our study makes a dual contribution to the scientific literature: first, it identifies the motivations (necessary and supporting) that explain the opening, and, second, it prioritises these motivations.

On the basis of these results, it seems to us that four lines of research should be pursued. First, it would be useful to conduct comparative studies to identify potential specificities of the political contexts studied. For example, the importance of personal affinities could be explained by the lower nationalisation of local

politics in Wallonia (Dodeigne et al., 2020). Some of the motivations identified in this article might be found in other local political contexts. Second, and further to the previous line of enquiry, it would be useful to develop a quantitative methodology to quantify, on larger scales, the importance of motivations for negotiating oversized coalitions, if a quantitative methodology is suitable, of which Ellen Olislagers is not convinced (2013, p. 171). This quantitative methodology would allow the results to be generalised by comparing the cases studied and distinguishing contextual factors. Third, it would now be necessary to identify the extent to which opening an absolute majority is advantageous for the majority group. Following the example of the study that identified the winners and losers of votes on a collective or individual motion of constructive mistrust over a period of two mandates (Gustin & Grandjean, 2019), it would be interesting to know the evolution of the results, over several mandates, of political groups that opted for opening their absolute majority. Fourth, it would be interesting to know the motivations of the partner parties to join oversized coalitions, again with the possibility of establishing a model of motivations. Such research would complement and enrich our research findings and identify some limitations.

More broadly, this article demonstrates that the subjectivities of actors are an important consideration in the study of coalitions' negotiations, thus inviting us to move away from a rational choice approach, on which many theories in this field of research are based.

Notes

1   The majority pact includes the indication of the political groups that form the munici-pal majority, the identity of the mayor, the aldermen and the president of the social action council. Article 1123-1 et seq. of the Code of Local Democracy and Decentralisation (hereafter CDLD).

2   The 22 communes are: Andenne, Ans, Aywaille, Bernissart, Binche, Charleroi, Courcelles, Estinnes, Florennes, Grâce-Hollogne, Ham-sur-Heure-Nalinnes, Marche-en-Famenne, Montigny-le-Tilleul, Mouscron, Péruwelz, Rixensart, Seneffe, Silly, Spa, Theux, Thuin and Wavre.

3   For the sake of clarity the parties may be positioned politically. Thus, the cdH is a Christian-democratic party, traditionally placed in the centre of the left-right axis. ECOLO is an environmentalist party, somewhat centre-left. The MR is a liberal party positioned on the right. The PS is a left-wing party.

4   Where there is an odd number of seats to be filled, half of them shall be rounded up.

5   Sixteen out of 18 interviews were conducted face-to-face, 1 interview was conducted by telephone, and 1 mayor wished to answer our questions in writing only.

6   It should be noted that the negotiation period is indirectly regulated by the CDLD, as the draft agreement(s) is (are) deposited with the director general by the second Monday of November following the elections (i.e. 12 November 2018). Article L 1123-1 §2 CDLD. The articles in the local press dealing with the coalition negotiations between 15 October 2018 and 18 November 2018 were therefore collected.

7   The interviews with these five aldermen were conducted by videoconference owing to the health situation related to Covid-19.
8   Our coding thus fulfilled the requirements of a qualitative content analysis: unidimensionality of the codes (the coding should capture only one aspect of the material), mutual exclusivity of the codes, completeness of the codes and saturation of the codes (all codes should refer to a content of the material) (Schreier, 2012, pp. 71-79).
9   There is also a provincial level within the MR.

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Annex 1 Characteristics of the Municipalities Studied

Table A1

Municipality								Short
Andenne	Namur	26,985	PSD@	MR	52.52	17/29	3	1
Ans	Liege	28,237	PS	MR-IC	45.32	16/29	6	0
Aywaille	Liege	12,393			42.52	12/23	2	0
Bernissart	Hainaut	11,868	PS	Ecolo	46.66	11/21	2	0
Binche	Hainaut	33,590	PS	MR-IC	57.00	20/31	5	1
Charleroi	Hainaut	201,327	PS	C+ (cdH); Ecolo	41.29	26/51	4 + 3	0
Courcelles	Hainaut	31,309	MR	cdH; Ecolo	50.55	18/31	1 + 3	0
Estinnes	Hainaut	7,716	EMC (cdH)	MR	46.28	10/19	2	0

(Continued)

Municipality								Short
Florennes	Namur	11,365	Contact 21 (cdH)	Ad 11 (MR)	45.02	11/21	7	0
Grâce-Hollogne	Liege	22,524	PS	Ecolo	42.11	15/27	3	0
	Hainaut	13,532	MR		69.73	18/23	2	1
		17,455	cdH	PS	47.48	14/25	4	0
	Hainaut	10,136	MR	PS	47.35	12/21	3	0
Mouscron	Hainaut	58,164	cdH	MR	47.45	19/37	5	0
Péruwelz	Hainaut	17,103	MR-IC	Ecolo	43.30	13/25	2	0
Rixensart		22,381			44.82	14/27	3	0
Seneffe	Hainaut	11,267	LB	Ecolo	47.44	11/21	3	0
Silly	Hainaut	8,403	LB (MR)	SENS (cdH)	53.81	12/19	4	1
Spa	Liege	10,371	MR	SPA (PS)	43.79	11/21	1	0
Theux	Liege	12,027	IFR (MR)	PS Plus	45.10	12/23	4	0
Thuin	Hainaut	14,683	PS	IC (cdH)	41.88	12/23	4	0
Wavre		34,310	LB (MR)	PS	40.63	16/31	3	0

Annex 2 The List of Codes and Themes

Table A2

Codes for Categorising Paragraphs		
Aldermen	Historic alliance	Personal affinities
Autonomy	Internal legitimacy	Personality of the leader
Campaign	Internal party life	Positive experiences
Carolo	Large majority	Pre-election discussions
Challenges	Local context	Pressures
Choice of partner	Long term	Proximity of programmes
Comfortable majority	Maintaining the coalition	Regional or federal context
Communal tensions	Negative experiences	Relay
Competencies	Number of partners	Representation
Culture	Number of seats	Stable majority
Current term of office	Opening image	Tradition of opening
Electorate	Opposition	Trust
Enriching the debate	Partisan independence	Type
General political context	Partner	Workers

(Continued)

Codes for Categorising Paragraphs		
Higher bodies		
Main Themes		
Large majority	Internal party life	Past experiences
Choice of partner	Mandate	Personal relationships
Context	Municipal mandates and derivatives	Pre-election discussions
Distribution of competences	Negotiations	Relations with higher levels of power
Electorate	Opposition	Representation
Enriching the debate	Partner's vision	

Annex 3 The Presence of the Motives for Opening an Absolute Majority and Selecting the Minority Partner

Table A3

	The Choice of Opening			Total	The Choice of the Minority Partner					Total
	Relays			/3						/5
	I	I	I	3	I	I	I	I	0	4
Ans	I	I	I	3	I	I	I	I	0	4
	I	I	I	3	I	I	I	I	0	4
	I	0	I	2	I	I	I	I	I	5
Binche	0	0	I	1	0	I	I	I	0	3
	I	I	I	3	0	I	I	I	0	3
	I	I	I	3	0	I	I	I	I	4
	I	I	I	3	0	I	I	I	I	4
	I	0	I	2	0	I	I	I	I	4
	0	0	I	1	I	I	I	0	I	4
	I	I	I	3	I	I	I	0	0	3
	0	0	I	1	0	I	I	0	0	2
	I	I	I	3	I	I	I	0	0	3
	I	I	I	3	0	I	I	I	I	4
	I	I	I	3	0	I	I	I	I	4
	I	0	I	2	0	I	I	I	I	4
	I	0	I	2	0	I	I	I	0	3
Silly	I	I	I	3	I	I	I	0	I	4
Spa	0	I	I	2	I	I	I	0	I	4
Theux	I	I	I	3	0	I	I	0	I	3

(Continued)

	The Choice of Opening			Total	The Choice of the Minority Partner					Total
	Relays			/3						/5
Thuin	1	1	1	3	1	1	1	1	0	4
Wavre	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	0	1	3
Total	18	15	22		11	22	22	14	12	

Morality in the Populist Radical Right

A Computer-Assisted Morality Frame Analysis of a Prototype*

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Abstract

> *This article provides a computer-assisted morality framing analysis of Vlaams Belang's 2019 manifesto. The VB is regarded in the literature as a prototypical example of the Populist Radical Right (PRR). We first concisely review what PRR politics is and what it consists of, tentatively distinguishing four elements that we hypothesise will materialise in corresponding subframes running throughout the manifesto. We point to a mismatch between the omnipresent role of morality in all PRR subframes and the little attention devoted to the concept in the PRR literature. We introduce a useful theory from social psychology into framing literature to create a novel methodological approach to frame analysis that builds a bridge between a qualitative content and a quantitative context approach. The results support our hypothesis that populism, nationalism, nativism and authoritarianism can be distinguished from one another. Additionally, we detect a fifth PRR subframe, crimmigration, by its unique role of morality.*

Keywords: Populist radical right, morality, frame analysis, word2vec, crimmigration.

1 Introduction

Morality and victimisation are frequently invoked as rhetorical devices, and, especially in populist radical right (PRR) discourse, have achieved an iconic status. Consider the PRR slogan 'Defend our people!' Although the slogan leaves open the question of who threatens 'our people', any interpretation of the slogan compels the audience to decide who or what 'our people' require defending from, i.e., what or who is the immoral (threatening) agent.

Although the literature on the PRR has skyrocketed over the last few decades, it lacks consensus as to what exactly makes it 'populist' and what 'radical right' (e.g. Aslanidis, 2018; cf., Berlin et al., 1968). Theoretical and epistemic difficulties have caused the field to be fragmented, and while some approaches locate populism in

ideology (Mudde, 2007; Urbinati, 2014), others locate it in discourse (Aslanidis, 2016, 2018; Bonikowski , 2017) and still others in strategies (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Rodrik, 2018) or regimes (Caramani, 2017). Despite this disintegration, the different approaches all underscore the fundamental importance of morality and *us* versus *them* rhetoric in PRR politics (Aslanidis, 2016; Bonikowski, Halikiopoulou, Kaufmann & Rooduijn, 2019; Gidron & Hall, 2020; Müller, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Velasco, 2020). It involves a Manichaean logic of good versus evil, of victim versus villain. Yet despite the obvious importance of morality in PRR politics, the concept is not normally unpacked in the literature using evidence-based theory. There are a few exceptions that look at morality in populism, but they disregard its role in other aspects of the PRR.

The present article addresses this gap and explores the relationship between morality and the key facets of PRR discourse. To this end, we introduce a recent theory of social psychology that provides a useful conceptualisation of morality. Focusing on the PRR through the lens of morality uncovers how different frames cast different entities as victims and wrongdoers. It draws attention to the fact that the ideal-typical elements of PRR politics (populism, nationalism, nativism and authoritarianism) all emerge from a Manichaean logic of good versus evil.

The article proceeds as follows. We first review pertinent literature on the PRR to help operationalise the term and disentangle its various elements. We then introduce a theory of morality and link it with a social constructivist framing approach to prepare our empirical analysis. Then follows our case study, the 2019 manifesto of the Belgian, Dutch-speaking, party Vlaams Belang (VB). The VB is often put forward as paradigmatic of the PRR (see for a comprehensive party genealogy, De Cleen, 2016). VB's predecessor, the Vlaams Blok, was already diagnosed by Ignazi (1992: 15) as a 'prototypical' example of PRR (for a similar diagnosis see, e.g., de Lange, van der Brug, Baller & Meijers, 2011; Mudde, 2007; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011). Prototypes are ideal-typical; they are hypothetical postulates never to be fully actualised. The concept dawned in the social sciences via Max Weber, who in turn borrowed it from the natural sciences, where it is used to formulate hypotheses about the potential attributes of undiscovered elements. An ideal-typical example of something unambiguously possesses all quintessential – or typical – characteristics belonging to it. Therefore, VB's recent manifesto provides an exemplary source to investigate how the defining features of the PRR are framed. In what follows we first develop the argument that morality is central to each of these aspects and then proceed empirically, providing evidence that shows *how* morality is framed differentially.

1.1 Morality in the Populist Radical Right
The most frequently cited definition of populism in the past decade comes from Cas Mudde (2004: 543), who submits that it is

> an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.

In other words, populism imagines a fundamental tension between public and power holders. It thus comprises two elements, people-centrism and anti-elitism. The elite or establishment, apart from the current government, includes academics, the media, or supranational institutions (Canovan, 1999; cf., De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). This does not mean that populism by itself should be regarded as a pathological symptom of, or threat to, democracy (Canovan, 1999; see also: Berlin et al., 1968; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2017). Although it reacts to structures of power, it relies on a framework of legitimacy that is provided by democracy itself. In sum, populism "is democratic in the `vox populi vox dei` sense" (Canovan, 1999: 10). It offers "a particular moralistic imagination of politics [where] 'the people' is seen as inherently good" (Müller, 2017: 19). The juxtaposition of good versus evil renders it a moral distinction, i.e., an opposition between a marginalised and innocent people versus a malevolent, evil elite. In turn, this "monist and moral distinction between the pure people and the corrupt elite reinforces the idea that a general will exists". (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017: 16; see also: Urbinati , 2019: 31).

The morality and subsequent *us* versus *them* rhetoric that characterises PRR politics is not restricted to populist people-centrism and anti-elitism. Mudde cautions against placing an overemphasis on populism in the study of the PRR. He defines the PRR "as a combination of nativism, authoritarianism and populism" (2016: 6). The literature on PRR politics agrees that it typically includes nationalist, nativist (ethnic- or ethno-nationalist) and authoritarian propensities but is at odds on the question of which element, if any, is most essential (Bonikowski et al., 2019; De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Glasius, 2018; Inglehart & Norris, 2017; Mudde, 2016, 2017b; Rydgren, 2017).

For practical purposes it is useful to start from clear analytical distinctions between the elements that comprise the PRR without allowing too much overlap between them (e.g. De Cleen, 2017). This is a challenging theoretical endeavour because the discursive borders between populism, authoritarianism, nationalism and nativism are not clear-cut or self-evident. On the contrary, the elements inevitably overlap because they work together in creating PRR discourse.

Nationalism and nativism are two constructs that are particularly similar.[1] Both prioritise the *own* over the foreign, but only nativism explicitly construes the *own* as a mirror image of the foreign, which, is hence rendered dangerous. Simplistically put, nationalism is rooted in positive associations with, or bias in favour of, the home country or culture, but nativism is rooted in a negative orientation, and hostility, towards other cultures. Xenophobia more accurately describes nativism than nationalism, although it remains a relative concept that, for example, manifests as scepticism in nationalism and as cynicism or contempt in nativism. Mudde aptly recognises that "labels [such] as 'Islamophobia' [have] an unmistakably moralistic dimension" (2017a: 156).

Both nationalism and nativism value national self-determination and (morally) oppose supranational sovereignty, whether at the federal or at the European level, but only the latter responds to a perceived cultural threat. Although they frequently occur together, this is not required. For example, the Scottish Nationalist Party

advocates for independence of Scotland from the UK but is not necessarily anti-multiculturalism or anti-immigration.

Authoritarianism is best understood as 'accountability sabotage' (Glasius et al., 2018). As with populism, it requires and reproduces clear moral boundaries (e.g. between state and subject). Most directly, authoritarianism (re)produces "the [moral] distinction between 'the good people' and criminals and other deviants" (De Cleen, 2016: 234; cf., Foucault, 1961 [2003]; Goffman, 1963).

Authoritarianism, in contradistinction to populism, is inherently undemocratic. It threatens fundamental human rights (e.g. to fair trial) and freedoms (e.g. of religion or of speech) and demands from its citizens conformity to prescriptive behaviours. Because obedience is rendered moral, defying these prescriptive behaviours is immoral and legitimises severe punishment (Glasius, 2018; Mudde, 2016).

Though morality plays a crucial role in all four characteristics of the PRR, there is strikingly little research that investigates this systematically. We propose a methodology that helps to disentangle discursive frames corresponding to the different characteristics of the PRR and to uncover how they are imbued with morality. Our empirical analysis inquires whether these frames occur in VB's latest manifesto and whether they are exhaustive or if additional frames can be distinguished. We are interested primarily in the exact role that morality plays in each frame and how it determines the problem definition of a frame and demarcates subframes from each other.

1.2 Morality Framing

The scarcity of studies focusing on morality in the PRR literature is striking given the potential of morality to mobilise people. The Manichean logic of good versus evil is understandable to everyone and not only includes people, but morally obliges them to take a position (see also the morality policy literature, e.g. Hurka, Knill & Rivière, 2017; Mooney & Schuldt, 2008). We conceptualise morality using the theory of dyadic morality (TDM: Gray , Young & Waitz, 2012). TDM does not, as do most theories of morality (e.g. Haidt, 2001; but see also Thijssen & Verheyen, 2020), attempt to taxonomise morality. Instead, disregarding the substantive, value-laden, *content* of discourse, it focuses on its *form*, i.e. on the juxtaposition of subject (agent) and object (patient) of (im)morality. In other words, TDM explains the blueprint, or basic template, of the formal structure in which morality appears. All morally significant behaviours, beliefs or judgments are dyadically composed of subjects (causal agents) and objects (affected patients). Represented as a formula,

(Im)morality = Agency (of Agent) + Experience (of Patient) (Wegner & Gray, 2016: 23).

The deposition of thinking dyadically, in terms of cause and effect (when it comes to morality), is psychological rather than 'rational' (i.e. epistemically accurate; cf., Hume, 1739) and forms the very basis of our syntax, reasoning and communicating. Linguistic scholarship suggests that immoral, threatening agents (referent subjects) are usually included in sentences as the grammatical subjects and are

attributed more agency and intentionality, thus deserving more blame and punishment, compared with patients, which are instead included as syntactic objects (Strickland, Fisher, Keil & Knobe, 2014; Strickland, Fisher & Knobe, 2012). TDM is fully compatible with historicism and its conclusion that there need not be *absolute* moral or immoral behaviours or judgments. It is entirely plausible that what is considered morally laudable by one group may be regarded as amoral (morally insignificant) or immoral (evil or morally reprehensible) by yet another. This is even likely to occur because morality is highly sensitive to cultural variation and framing processes.

TDM is compatible with the framing literature. In this literature, frames are generally understood as culturally contingent interpretation schemes that structure the meaning of reality. Frames "are defined by what they omit as well as include" (Entman, 1993: 54), i.e., they may contain latent messages (Van Gorp, 2005: 487). TDM explains how ambiguous morality frames (i.e., frames that lack either a causal agent or affected patient) compel people to complete a full-fledged frame. We follow Entman's (1993: 53) definition of frames as being constituted of "elements to construct an argument about problems and their causation, evaluation, and/or solution". As such, framing implies selection and omission; highlighting certain aspects while concealing others and pervasively influencing public opinion and people's reactions (Entman, 1993; Gamson, 1992; Goffman, 1974; Iyengar, 2005; Sunstein, 2005; Tversky & Kahneman, 1984; Van Gorp, 2005; Zaller, 1992). Yet, in contrast to Entman (1993; but also Gamson, 1992; Vossen, Van Gorp & Schulpen, 2018), we argue that the evaluative aspect of frames need not be moral but can, instead, be wholly amoral, i.e., morally insignificant. Whereas such technical frames may emphasise monetary, logistic, information, morality frames make matters subject to moral evaluations, say, about responsibility. Notwithstanding this analytical distinction, it *is* this second type of framing, morality framing, that frame analysts are usually concerned with (e.g. Entman, 1993; Gamson, 1992; Snow & Benford, 1988).

Ample previous empirical research (De Cleen, 2016; de Lange et al., 2011; Ignazi, 1992; Mudde, 2007; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011) has labelled the Flemish right-wing party VB as a PRR party. A close analysis of VB's 2019 party manifesto is therefore likely to uncover *how* the different elements of the PRR (populism, nationalism, nativism and authoritarianism) are moralised through framing. We hypothesise that the 2019 manifesto of VB contains frames that correspond to the four elements. Using an innovative methodological approach, we test whether these subframes can be identified and demarcated from each other in VB's 2019 manifesto and whether they exhaust it or whether additional frames can be detected.

2   Data and Method

In Belgium's 2019 elections, the VB once again achieved significant electoral successes after almost two decades of losing votes. They went from 6 to 23 seats in the Flemish Parliament, becoming the second largest party, and from three to 18

seats in Federal Parliament. They also achieved the greatest win – sharing first place – in the European Parliament. This unprecedented victory by itself warrants close investigation. Moreover, because the elections of May 2019 were held for all three levels simultaneously, VB's 2019 manifesto presents a unique opportunity to study how the party connects regional, federal and supranational policy frames and imbues them with morality.

In order to reliably detect and distinguish between subframes we employed a mixed method approach consisting of an in-depth qualitative frame analysis that receives support from a quantitative frame analysis that regards the context of key concepts of a subframe. These key concepts are identified in the qualitative assessment. Building a bridge between qualitative content analysis, on the one hand, and quantitative context analysis, on the other, thus attempts to reduce observer bias and provide statistical support for our hypothesised qualitative distinctions. The two mutually complement each other where the frame analysis benefits from the descriptive statistics provided by the quantitative analysis, which in turn relies on input from the qualitative analysis and a priori theoretical considerations about populism, nationalism, nativism and authoritarianism.

2.1 Qualitative Frame Analysis

Political discourse and framing strategies are normally studied using qualitative content analysis or types of frame analysis. As is customary in frame analysis, our computer-assisted morality frame analysis borrows the concepts *diagnosis, aetiology, prognosis* and *intervention* from the medical sciences to explain what morality frames look like. A prototypical morality frame explicitly includes a *diagnosis* that defines the situation as either moral – having to do with help – immoral – having to do with harm – or amoral – having nothing to do with help or harm. The diagnosis includes an evaluation of its *aetiology*, i.e., of the causal explanation offered by the frame. As such, an aetiology encompasses the causal agent and the patient. The dyadic morality that is implied by an aetiology need not be explicit. The aetiology may omit reference to either the agent (subject) or the patient (object). Note that neither (agent nor patient) need refer to a human being. Morality may instead be directed at the economy, specific values or institutions. Finally, an unambiguous problem diagnosis that includes a full aetiology heuristically points to what is likely to happen (*prognosis*) and, antithetically, how this can be solved (*intervention*).

Each identified subframe is taken apart, and both the components and the whole are scrutinised. We first report how a subframe *diagnoses* a scenario as (im) moral; this involves an analysis of the frame's *aetiology* and an abstraction of the elements – i.e. the causal agent and affected patient – that moralise a frame. The *prognosis* is simply the actualisation or exacerbation of the threat, culminating in crisis, chaos and moral disorder (anomie). This heuristically points to the (only) *intervention* or cure (cf., Sunstein, 2005). Although some subframes explicitly include a prognosis and intervention, the innate logic of a morality frame implicitly points to what can be expected if adequate interventions are not taken. In the case of an ambiguous frame, we discuss what is tacitly implied by it.

2.2 Quantitative Word Vector Analysis

Over the last few years, quantitative types of automated content analysis have gained much popularity (e.g. Kroon, Trilling & Raats, 2021). Compared with human coding, computative analysis is much more reliable because exactly the same results are achieved if a method is used repeatedly on the same data. We use state-of-the-art methodology to strengthen our frame analysis and help redefine our object of investigation (PRR politics).

Our computer-assisted morality frame analysis is reliable, easy to work with and yields face valid results that help explain value-laden discourse. RStudio's package word2vec (Mikolov et al., 2013) is used to transform tokens (words and word pairs) into vectors and estimate their similarities. Word2vec transforms tokens into vectors using only the word order of the manifesto. Words are thus treated as disorthogonal vectors that derive their numeric value, i.e., their meaning, from their relation to each other. Word embedding analysis estimates the similarity between concepts and expresses this similarity in cosines. Cosine similarities are easy to interpret; as with correlation, the closer this number gets to 1, the higher the similarity, whereas words that oppose each other in 90 degrees in the multidimensional vector space are unrelated and yield a cosine of 0. Specifically, we use word2vec to train a word embedding model for the manifesto and to predict the context of key words (such as 'people'). Using words that are essential to a subframe helps to mark the subframes' edges (by showing where they may overlap) and to demarcate different subframes from each other.

The cosine similarity (or euclidean distance) between two vectors provides an indication of the linguistic or semantic similarity of the two. By mapping words to numeric vectors and representing these in a multidimensional vector space, words that are conceptually alike will cluster together and form a frame.

A statistical analysis of frames gives some support for differentiating between subframes. It requires looking for words that convey (and create) *meaning*. Therefore, we filter out noise such as stop words. We also account for the fact that the formal structure of words is grammatically contingent by stemming and tokenising individual words (or unigrams) and word pairs (bigrams). This process instructs the computer which token (pair)s are conceptually identical and which rather similar (synonyms). Tokens are more alike when they co-occur frequently. Because of the inherent logical structure of natural language, next to synonyms, antonyms are rated similar. Antonyms negatively mirror the target word (pair). 'Defence', for instance, is similar to, yet also the opposite of, 'attack'; think only of the word 'fence' or 'fending', which are forms of attack yet are derived from the same word stem as 'defence'.

2.3 Data

The party manifesto comes from the Manifesto Project Database, which is an online repository for party manifestos and is freely accessible. In total, VB's 2019 manifesto includes 42,097 words. Forty thousand words is a small sample for training word embeddings. However, because we use it only to support the frame analysis with basic descriptive statistics, and not to tackle any serious methodological problems, the size is sufficient. (Using word2vec on much larger

data sets enables solving complex analogies such as '*man* is to *king* as *woman* is to …'. The unsupervised machine-learning algorithm that underlies word2vec will accurately predict the answer to this analogy as '*queen*'.)

We are concerned mainly with words (combinations) that are salient, that characterise a frame and that therefore occur relatively frequently (e.g. the word 'our' occurs 550 times). Cosine word similarities cannot be computed for words that occur but once or twice and, as a rule of thumb, word (pairs) that occur less than ten times, e.g. 'authority', are excluded. Data and replication instructions can be found in the supplementary materials.

3   Results and Discussion

VB has been assuming an increasingly populist character since its 1987 parliamentary election campaign – when it also first utilised a simple three-word slogan: 'Our nation first' ('*Eigen volk eerst!*', based on French Front National's '*Le français d'abord*'). By 2019 this had been rearranged to (the slightly less exclusive) 'First our people' ('*Eerst onze mensen*').

The central section of VB (2019)'s 100-page manifesto, entitled 'Defending our people' *('Onze mensen beschermen')* is almost double the length of the first and the last sections. According to its title, this middle section deals explicitly with victimisation, protectionism and securitisation. Because of its overarching significance in the manifesto as a whole as well as in the pamphlet (see Figure 1), we took this to be the master frame [MF]: *'defending our people!' (protectionism)* and analysed the manifesto in its entirety (see: Snow & Benford, 1988, for use of the concept master frame).

The PRR ideal-typically juxtaposes an (unspecified) threatening referent subject against 'our people'. That the referent object requires defending means, first, that it is something to be cherished and that, by implication, is vulnerable. The urgency that is conveyed by making this the campaign slogan and title of the manifesto only serves to emphasise the scale of the threat and to allude to potential crises if adequate measures are not taken.

The master frame is divided into five subframes that are chosen and labelled on the basis of a combination of inductive and deductive inquiry. We tentatively defined four of the five frames – populism, nationalism, nativism and authoritarianism – in our introduction as crucial elements of PRR politics (e.g. De Vries & Hobolt, 2020; Margalit, 2019). The frames we identified are summed up in Table 1. Table 2 features the cosine similarities of subframes' key concepts. In what follows we discuss each subframe individually, analyse the role that morality plays in them, and examine frames' outlines by considering which words are essential to it and which are less essential or also encompassed by another frame.

Table 1   *Computer-Assisted Morality Frame Analysis of VB's 2019 Party Manifesto*

Frame	*Aetiology*				
	Agent	**Diagnosis**	**Patient**	**Prognosis**	
[MF] Protectionism	All agents listed below	Ontological/ existential threat	All patients listed below	Crisis & anomie	Defending our people
[1] Populism	The political/ cultural elite	Belgium is a particracy	The people		Democracy
[2a] Euroscepticism	European Union	Critically infringes upon	Flemish sovereignty	Loss of economy, freedom, subsidiarity, democracy and rule of law	Take back sovereignty
[2b] Separatism	Wallonia		Flanders	Institutional crises, increasing taxes and lower wages create a new class of working poor	Separatism
[3] Nativism	Islamic values		Western Values	A fifth column of Islamic extremists and terrorism	Stopping immigration
[4] Authoritarianism	Leftist ideology	Terrorism threat	The Flemish (people)	Loss of identity and increased criminality	Declaring state of emergency
[5] Crimmigration	Immigrants	Cause criminality at the cost of	Vulnerable Flemish people	Loss of economy, social security, safety and identity	Law and order

Table 2 *Top Word Similarities Per Subframe from VB's 2019 Party Manifesto (Cosine > 0.57)*

[1a] People-centrism	Citizen	Ordinary, gap between, representative, democracy, referendum , plebiscite
	Stopping, wealth, traditions, solidarity, productivity, health, safety	
[1b] Anti-establishment	Democracy	Particracy, politicians, vote, power, legitimacy, cleavage between
	Particracy, voters, elections, parties, cleavage between	
	Democratic, defend, billions, contributed, position, politically correct	
[2a] Euroscepticism	Europe	Super state, nations, member states, sovereignty
	Fleming, EU super state, member states, totalitarian, billion euros	
[2b] Separatism	Walloon	Unitary, separation, communitarianism, Fleming, institutional
	Separation, democratic, competences, unitary, Francisation	
	Legitimacy, borders, solidarity, democracy, independence, sovereignty, governments, elite, pride	

[3] Nativism	Our	Life/living, identity, traditions, culture, values, society, Islamisation
	Individual, traditions, origin, our, Islamisation, adjust, language	
	Numbers, non-European, groups, allochthones,[2] Rupo,[3] development aid	
	Refugees, rules, origin, residence permit, illegals, repatriation	
[4] Authoritarianism	Law enforcement	Decisive action, judges, police, safe, punished
	External borders, military, Islamic, cultural, traditions, stop	
[5] Crimmigration	Policy	Crime, mass, immigration
	Community service, released, security policy, foreigner/stranger	
[N/A] Economy	Economy	Job market, innovation, simultaneous, positive, sustainable
	Pays, euro per, Fleming, costs, amounts, member states	

[2] Literally: 'not-from-here persons'.
[3] The minister-president of Wallonia.

The first [1] subframe, populism, as we expected from our literature review, consists of people-centrism and anti-elitism, each associated with its own set of words. Flemish sovereignty, its economy, freedom, identity, way of life and, more generally, the 'ordinary Flemish people' – everyone who "leads an ordinary life, who studies, is employed, saves money and raises children" (VB, 2019: 37) – must be defended. Ordinary life is increasingly under attack by a cultural and political elite. Word embeddings show that the word 'ordinary' is most similar to 'citizen', followed by 'democracy', 'representative' and 'particracy'. What it means to be an ordinary citizen, i.e., or 'the people', and what it means to have a representative democracy, can be understood in part based on this contraposition to the word particracy. Analogously, consider the word particracy as photographic negative of democracy, the one is inherently good and legitimate which makes the other inherently evil and corrupt. Likewise, the word most similar to 'parliament' and 'democracy' is 'particracy', followed by 'voters', 'elections', 'parties', 'politicians', 'the same' and

'cleavage between'. Not only does particracy refer to an imbalance of power, where parties are the primary basis of rule rather than the demos, but it is also rendered the political status quo in which politicians fool and exploit the citizens. The frame diagnoses a "cleavage between citizen and politics" (VB, 2019: 12) and casts parties as immoral, "treating the government as their property" (VB, 2019: 12). The following passage is illustrative of the subframe:

> *The citizen increasingly has the feeling he [sic] is being silenced in this country. Belgium is not a democracy but a particracy. In Belgium, party headquarters decide, not the citizens. The political elite deliberately protects its own position and resorts to self-service with political appointments. Politicians only act as if they strongly disagree with each other with an eye at the elections while, behind the scenes, they haggle with applications and prearrangements*. (VB, 2019: 11; emphasis added)

The word 'identity' has no real negatives among its top similarities (see Table 2). Except for 'stopping', which implies a reaction to something bad, all words in Table 2 are positive synonyms or adjectives. It is categorised under the subframe populism because group identity and solidarity are products of people being driven together, being united to defend 'the people'. This categorisation is, moreover, congruent with the data; first, it has no words among its top similarities that remind of the other frames, and, second, the words that are closely associated with it, like 'solidarity' and 'traditions', characterise the nature, or essence, of 'the people'. As anticipated, anti-elitism in VB's manifesto is unambiguously expressed. This is illustrated by the finding that the word 'elite' is most similar to the word 'democratic'. Their relationship is strong because they are often framed together as incompatible and negatively mirroring each other: 'democracy' is (morally) juxtaposed with the 'elite'. The intervention presented by the frame is simple: vote for the only party that "aims for policy which benefits not the political elite, but the nation" (VB, 2019: 59).

The second [2] subframe is Flemish nationalism and includes [2a] Euroscepticism and [2b] separatism. The first juxtaposes the European Union (agent) with the Flemish and national sovereignty (patient) because:

> in its current shape, it is determined to take away more competences from its individual member states and goes against the grain of a healthy European mindset' ("staat haaks op een gezonde Europese gedachte"). (VB, 2019: 19)

It "makes everything its business" (VB, 2019: 36) and is "evolving towards becoming a super-state, a United States of Europe" (VB, 2019: 18); therefore, the EU threatens not only Belgium's and Flemish's sovereignty but also their economy, freedom, subsidiarity, democracy and the rule of law (*ibid*.). Word embedding analysis indicates the word 'superstate' is strongly associated with 'Europe', and so is the word 'sovereignty'. 'EU' is most strongly associated with 'Fleming' and also with 'superstate'. "The EU is increasingly showing its totalitarian tendencies … the EU-elite does not care about whatever the average Flemish, Italian or Danish person thinks" (VB, 2019: 19). Note that Euroscepticism can be infused with

populism, as in this example, which contains people-centrism and anti-elitism. The frame morally juxtaposes a defenceless Fleming with an almighty EU with its own, self-serving, agenda. It wants to expand ever further, first by making Turkey a member state. A flood of refugees would follow as Turkish people 'seize the opportunity' and settle elsewhere within the EU (VB, 2019: 20-21).

As in the first subframe, the only intervention that remains is for the people to vote for the party so that they can fulfil their promises. Concretely, in this regard, "Islamic countries cannot become member states of the EU" (VB, 2019: 21). They, furthermore, propose to abolish the Schengen Agreement because this "simply means we are no longer boss over our own borders" (VB, 2019: 19). More generally, they seek to abolish 'useless EU-institutions' and both the European Committee and parliament (VB, 2019: 19-20).

The second piece of Flemish nationalism is separatism [2b]. The frame casts the current federal government as consisting, fundamentally, of 'two democracies' that run counter to one another (VB, 2019: 7).[2] The government is therefore the immoral agent. The frame diagnoses a "left and Marxist oriented Walloons [stands] diametrically opposed to a right and liberal-oriented ('*vrijheidslievend*') Flanders" (VB, 2019: 7) and this prognosis inevitably results "in new institutional crises" (*ibid*.). This is because the two democracies are evolving in different directions – e.g. "the challenge in Flanders is job supply whereas that in Wallonia is job demand (unemployment)" (VB, 2019: 38).

The economy, in this frame, is included both as a patient and as prognosis:

Taxes are sky high ("torenhoog") because Flemish people are made to pay for the expenses of the Walloon ("Waalse rekening"), creating a "new class of working poor". (VB, 2019: 37)

In other words, ordinary people have unjust costs as it is, which will only be exacerbated (prognosis) under the current administration. The frame's intervention is for Flanders to have its "own economic policy tailored to the Flemish economy" (VB, 2019: 38) and be able to lower taxes and make them transparent (VB, 2019: 36). It is complete separatism because "all attempts to create a political structure that gives due to each [Flanders and Wallonia] [are] doomed to fail" (VB, 2019: 7). Concretely, they would draw up a 'separation treaty with Wallonia', that is, they would form a separate nation with its own new constitution that retains Brussels as its (bilingual) capital (VB, 2019: 7-8).

Quantitatively, the word 'Walloon' co-occurs with 'independence' and 'unitary' and with none of the words associated with the other subframes, suggesting separatism warrants its own subframe. The word-clot is most closely related to positive goals that VB aims for such as 'separation', 'competences', and 'communitarianism' and to a few words such as 'Francisation', and, of course, 'Walloon', which VB aims to negate.

The word 'nation' has less exclusivist word similarities than the words 'our' and 'society', which, because of their association with Islamisation, are included as nativist rather than nationalist words. The top word associations of 'nation' include 'legitimacy', 'borders', 'independence', 'sovereignty' and 'governments' (plural), all

of which seem to indicate the Flemish, not Belgian nationalism. Finally, the words 'pride' and 'elite' are similar to 'nation'. This suggests populism is not confined to Euroscepticism but extends to separatism. That there is a link between populism and (Flemish) nationalism is not at all surprising. Conceptually, the nation and one of the elements of populism, people-centrism, are intertwined, and empirically, nationalism frequently co-occurs with populism.

The third [3] subframe, nativism, casts the native culture, identity and sovereignty as being threatened by increased globalisation and the mindset of the current "leftist government" and "anonymous share-keepers" (VB, 2019: 35). Together they have brought about immigration-liberalism, or a "bed-bath-breakfast perspective" (VB, 2019: 58). The resultant ideological programme made for the worst deportation rates of Europe and will culminate in economic hardship (VB, 2019: 28). To make this more provocative, VB juxtaposes the asylum seeker with the pensioner – personifying the Fleming in general – stating,

> the government spends more money on asylum seekers, who have never contributed to our social security, than it does on our own elderly who have been paying for our social security for decades. (VB, 2019: 59)

Nativism, like nationalism, can use people-centrism (and, at least theoretically, anti-elitism), for instance:

> *For people like you and me, each asylum seeker costs 1249 euro a month. This is more than the average pension. Our government chooses to place asylum seekers above pensioned who have paid their whole life for the public treasury [and] social security.* (VB, 2019: 62)

Apart from the economic (e.g. social security) costs, this ideological mindset of the current government threatens the very way of life and being, the identity, of the ordinary people. The clear prognosis here is that ordinary people will start to "feel like strangers in their own country" (VB, 2019: 25). All proposed remedies are bordering practices that either prohibit immigration or limit new forms of (economic) migration and family reunion (e.g. VB, 2019: 27).

In the section entitled 'putting a stop to Islamisation', they point to what they argue is the root cause (aetiology): "Islamic values [which stand] in sharp moral juxtaposition to Western values" (VB, 2019: 31) that include freedom and equality between man and woman. Excluded from the agents are "allochthonous girls" (VB, 2019: 30) who are framed as patients that have to be protected from give-away marriage practices, held customary among immigrants. Interestingly, in this particular case, the Islamic customs are juxtaposed with 'Western values', not Flemish values. This broader juxtaposition serves to increase the cleavage with Islamic values. This, in effect, integrates allochthonous girls with the victims of Islam, that is, among 'the people'. In other words, allochthonous girls are instrumentalised in the process of scapegoating Islam.

Word embeddings suggest the keywords 'our' and 'society' are similar to the positives 'traditions', 'culture' and 'values'. They are both also quantitatively similar

to the big negative 'Islamisation'. This fits with our theorising that VB morally juxtaposes the native versus the nonnative and, specifically, versus the Islam. The words 'stranger/foreigner' and 'immigrants' are statistically similar to different words that are qualitatively quite synonymous. The strongest similarity is with the word 'numbers'. Framing immigration as a logistic problem dehumanises foreigners to quantifiable objects. Other similar words include ethnic attributes, such as 'non-European' and 'origin', or references to status, such as 'residence permit', 'illegals' and 'repatriation'. Finally, one negative emerged among the words most similar to 'stranger/foreigner', namely minister-president of Wallonia 'Rupo'. Rupo is the one scapegoat put forward in the manifesto who is responsible for the immigration liberalism and decline of Flemish identity.

Penultimately [4], VB's authoritarianism frame regards immigration as having constituted distinct security threats (agents) by itself. Among these are illegality (of residence), criminality and terrorism. The section entitled 'merciless tackling of (*aanpakken van*) Islamic terrorism' most distinctly borders over from nativism to authoritarianism. It speaks of the 'continuous threat of terrorism' (VB, 2019: 47&56) and argues that "Islamic extremism inspired over ten attacks over ten years" (VB, 2019: 55). Although it is clear who is the threatening causal agent, unlike in the previous frames, it is not made explicit who or what is threatened by terrorism and Islamic extremism. That this is 'the ordinary citizen' or 'the people' is very much implied and required for dyadic completion. The intervention that is suggested starts with "drying up the breeding ground, namely Islam" (VB, 2019: 56). Associating Islam with terrorism, i.e. with fear for its own sake, warrants severe infringements on several fundamental human rights. This is a textbook example of authoritarianism. Still more paradigmatically, the VB proposes:

> the declaration of a state of emergency so that known radicalised Muslims can be locked up preventively ... conform art. 15 of the European Convention on Human Rights. (VB, 2019: 56-57)

Word embedding analysis of the unigrams 'police' and 'terrorism' show little overlap with the words associated with the other frames, supporting the idea that authoritarianism constitutes a stand-alone frame. The bigram 'law enforcement' – which is statistically similar to 'decisive action', 'police', and 'punished' – characterises the PRR's authoritarian, law and order, frame. The word 'terrorism' is associated not only with Islam and the non-native but also with the word 'military'. Finally, next to declaring a state of emergency, the frame proposes some extreme measures, such as "limiting medical help of illegals to life-threatening situations and attach it to repatriation" (VB, 2019: 29), that are evidently authoritarian but cross over into a fifth frame that we identified.

The final [5] subframe, crimmigration, is borrowed from criminology and immigration law, where it marks "the convergence of immigration and criminal law" (Stumpf, 2006: 367). Crimmigration frames carefully juxtapose two groups, casting each (the crimmigrants) as a threat to the other's ('the people's') physical (and moral) well-being. The logic that comes with perceived (threat of) victimisation intimates that the first group is culpable, and *evil*, while it renders the latter

innocent and morally *good* (Brouwer, Van der Woude & Van der Leun, 2017; García Hernández & Cuauhtémoc, 2013). Although some would argue this can simply be subsumed under nativism (or authoritarianism), our analysis indicates that the crimmigration frame is not exhausted by nativism and authoritarianism but that it infuses aspects of both, as well as of populism, while still providing a distinctive framing of morality that renders it a stand-alone frame.

Criminality and illegality caused by immigration, or 'crimmigration' as the VB calls it on several occasions on their official website and in party slogans (see Figure 1), is framed in both economic and physical terms. The crimmigration frame blends penal populism and criminal law together with immigration policy and Islamophobia. In the middle of the central section, titled 'Protecting our people', in the paragraph headlined 'Stopping stranger criminality', they argue that "more than one out of three suspected offenders are foreigners"[3] and that

> *non-Europeans are six times more likely to engage in criminal activities than are Belgians … One detainee costs our community about 146 euros a day. Almost half of the prisoner population consists of foreigners.5 [This amounts to a cost of] hundreds of millions a day*. (VB, 2019: 54-55)

The interventions that follow this logic resemble the preceding interventions reported in the other frames: to take back border control and sovereignty so that the government can limit citizenship and restrict or send back anyone who is unwelcome.

Word embedding analysis supports isolating crimmigration as a distinct subframe. This is illustrated by the words 'foreigner/stranger' that are closely associated with 'criminals'. More revealing still, as an example of the pervasive influence of morality frames on political discourse, the word 'policy' (which is very much politically salient) is most similar to the words 'crime', 'mass' and 'immigration'. The strong association of these terms together with the observation that 'policy' is not associated with any particular words that comprise the other subframes suggests it is apt to speak of a fifth distinct frame.

Our quantitative and qualitative analysis both support the idea that the crimmigration frame cannot be subsumed under nativism or authoritarianism and provide a distinctive framing of morality that renders it a stand-alone frame. Stated differently, the idiosyncratic causal analysis of morality with an unambiguous focus on the individual suggests that the crimmigration frame constitutes a distinct subframe. In our analysis of the other frames, we observe that nativism is more about cultural values, populism about elites and authoritarianism about legitimacy. Crimmigration is about the convergence of immigration and penal law and differs from these most visibly in terms of its unique moral aetiology, which casts individual immigrants as responsible scapegoats.

Figure 1   *'Defend Our People! Crimmigrants Out'.*

4   Conclusion: Defending our People

By looking at the PRR through the lens of morality, this article uncovers how the elements that constitute the PRR differ from each other because of varying causal analyses that they offer and in which unique entities are cast as (morally) responsible or as victimised. Populism, for instance, constructs a moral juxtaposition between 'the [innocent/good] people' and 'the [threatening/evil] elite'. Our qualitative frame analysis shows that, in fact, all ideal-typical elements of the PRR (nationalism, nativism and authoritarianism) emerge from a Manichaean logic that juxtaposes an *evil* subject with a *good* object. It is this juxtaposition of agent versus patient that moralises a frame.

Using a recent theory of social psychology, we focus on the essence of each subframe from an Archimedean platform that acknowledges contextual and temporal variability while specifying the structural elements that morality consists of. The methodological focus on morality throughout the subframes pinpointed the role of identity (re)formation (e.g. Velasco, 2020). That is, all subframes comprise both an agent (or referent subject, e.g. 'the Marxist leftists') and a patient (or referent object, e.g. 'the vulnerable Flemish people'), and they are assigned various attributes. The precise identification is of utmost importance as it makes the difference between whether a frame resonates with the audience and is accepted or not. The most frequently encountered attributes refer to gender (roles), ethnicity, religion and ideology. Each of these is associated with stereotyped beliefs and (implicit) bias.

The patient of the master frame 'our people' runs throughout all the subframes. The economy and cultural identity of the 'ordinary Flemish people' are threatened by various culprits besides the elites. Most directly, they are defenceless against loss of social security and of industry and jobs. Yet, besides logistic problems,

Flanders' citizens are also threatened by rising criminality and detainee and immigration costs. Although each subframe has its own specific agent and patient, left-wing ideology, 'the people' and the economy play a role in all frames albeit in different ways. Left-wing ideology threatens national sovereignty by facilitating, and in turn being instigated by, the EU, globalisation and immigration liberalism. The nativist fear of losing identity also features as a significant threat throughout all subframes although it also constitutes its own subframe. The clear prognosis here is that ordinary people will start to "feel like strangers in their own country" (VB, 2019: 25 see also, e.g., Hochschild, 2018).

Next to 'the people' the role of the economy runs through almost all subframes. Our word embedding analysis could not pin the words 'economy' and 'euro' to a specific subframe. Only the second subframe casts the Flemish taxpayers as victims, paying off Wallonian bills. In the other frames, economic crisis is included as prognosis. As in the medical sciences, crisis means that there is no longer control over the vital parts of the body politic or of the nation. In democratic politics, these vital parts start with sovereignty, the rule of law and democratic legitimacy as 'the will of the people' and end with the nation's borders and economy. Of these vital parts, the economy is perhaps most salient and most manifest. Yet because (like borders and other constructs) it is very much a human creation (e.g. Marx, 1867 [2018]), it is subject to interpretation and framing processes. Zero-sum economic rhetoric serves to point out more distal crises. Loss of economy feeds, for example, back into the available capacity and resources to deal with (illegal or criminal) immigrants, which in turn results in more criminality and undocumented immigrants who cannot be detained any longer after having been processed. The role of the economy and its relationship to different PRR elements merits further academic attention.

Notwithstanding the central importance of morality in all elements of the PRR, the subframes corresponding to them vary from each other by who or what they cast as subject and object. Our quantitative context analysis provides further support for the hypothesis that the prototypical PRR manifesto includes at least one subframe per ideal-typical element of PRR politics. The word embeddings further corroborate the PRR literature's claim that [1] populism comprises [1a] people-centrism and [1b] anti-elitism (e.g., Aslanidis, 2018) and that the second subframe that we identified, [2] Flemish nationalism, consists of [2a] Euroscepticism and [2b] separatism (e.g. De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). The frames [3] nativism, and [4] authoritarianism, are, like the other subframes, each associated with their own set (or cluster) of words. Yet, especially, subframes [3] nativism and [4] authoritarianism significantly overlap with a fifth frame we isolated. This subframe, [5] 'crimmigration', is an innovative mixture of components of the other frames (mainly of nativism and authoritarianism) that constitute its own subframe rather than be subsumed under one of the others, first because of the distinctive words associated with it (that fall outside the borders of the other frames) and, second, because of the unique role morality plays in it. Analogously, colours (like subframes) are named and distinguished rather arbitrarily (e.g. at what wavelength do we start speaking of 'red', and where does it become 'yellow'). Yet *difference* is necessary in order to speak of, and compare, the exceptional qualities of distinct things such as

colours (cf., Derrida, 1967 [2001]). The boundary between different colours, however, is not black and white but allows many shades of grey. In some cases where colours overlap, a new colour can be identified (e.g. 'orange' at the nexus of 'red' and 'yellow'). Such is the case with the fifth subframe that we identify in VB's discourse: crimmigration, which has its own causal explanation that directly holds individual immigrants responsible rather than referring to more ultimate causal agents such as the leftist globalist ideology of the current government, as is the case in populism and authoritarianism. Future research investigating crimmigration should take note of its close resemblance to other PRR subframes.

While populism relies on a framework of legitimacy that is provided by democracy itself, authoritarianism understood as 'accountability sabotage' contests democracy and includes violations of fundamental human rights (e.g. limiting healthcare) and freedoms (e.g. of religion). And although the subframes nationalism and nativism both start from the signifier 'the nation' or 'the native', nationalism does not automatically contrapose the native to the foreign, as does nativism, and define the own (the self) based on what is not one's own (the other). Instead, nationalism is best understood as being synonymous with patriotism, i.e., with strong affection for one's home country. We pointed out that while borders separate neighbouring nations, these nations also differ from each other with regard to their nature, their identity, i.e., their way of life, or ethos. Nativism is very pronounced in PRR politics, as our analysis of the VB manifesto illustrates, and boundary-making practices are the foundation not only of nativism, but also of PRR, more generally, whether literally, such as in separatism, or figuratively, such as in nationalism and authoritarianism. Although the implications of boundary-making politics are manifold, this article points especially to the dynamics in identity (re)formation and how each monist distinction "reinforces the idea that a general will exists" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017: 16). That is, identifying a group on the basis of, or in contraposition to, a collective threat, reifies both threat and identity. Our findings warrant further academic attention to determine whether they can be extrapolated to other PRR parties and over different sources (such as social media).

Notes

1   Nations and natives are both products and producers of their nature. It both characterises them and also limits them: one nation's nature is distinct from another (nation's) nature. Borders and natures are very important in nationalism and nativism. They create order by separating neighbouring nations from each other and demarcating natives from strangers. Incidentally, the words originate from the same source (from the Latin 'nātiōnem', nātīvus and 'nātūra', which are all accusatives of '(g)nātiō', from '(g)nātus', past participle stem of the deponent verb '(g)nāscī', which means 'to be born, originate') and are used consistently in most European languages (in Dutch, 'nation' translates as 'natie'; in German, Danish, English and Swedish 'nation', and 'nasjon' in Norwegian).

2   Note that the governing party N-VA on different occasions uses this nationalist framing of the federal government as consisting, fundamentally, of 'two democracies' that run counter to one another (VB, 2019: 7). The N-VA is, like VB, a Flemish nationalist party but is far less exclusive and is distinguished from the VB nativism.

3   In Dutch, the word used is *vreemdeling*. We translate it as 'foreigner' even though *vreemdeling* (which literally means 'stranger' or 'alien') is more xenophobic.

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Fit for Office? The Perception of Female and Male Politicians by Dutch Voters

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Abstract

> *The underrepresentation of women in politics is a worldwide phenomenon and the Netherlands fit the pattern: about 39% of the Dutch MPs are female. Based on social role incongruity theory, it is expected that female politicians are evaluated more negatively than male politicians since women do not fit the dominant male politician role. However, most research is conducted in the United States, that is, a candidate-centred system where individual characteristics play an important role. This article focuses on the party-centred parliamentary context in which we examine (1) whether gender stereotypes are present among citizens and (2) to what extent these stereotypes influence the evaluation of politicians. We do this by conducting an experimental vignette survey design. We find that at the mass level there is no difference between the evaluation of male and female politicians, although gender stereotypes are present.*

Keywords: political underrepresentation, gender stereotypes, role incongruity, candidate evaluation, experimental vignette study.

1 Introduction

Some women come close. In the Dutch parliamentary elections of 2021, Sigrid Kaag managed to get a record number of votes for D66, but her party trailed the VVD led by Mark Rutte. Some women do make it all the way to the top; Angela Merkel, the German federal chancellor for over a decade, and Jacinda Ardern, president of New Zealand, are probably the most well-known. Overall, however, women are underrepresented in Western liberal democracies: at the beginning of 2021, 26% of all parliamentarians elected at the national level were female (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021b).

Scholars refer to various factors to explain this underrepresentation. Some look at the institutional setting, of which the electoral context is crucial: an election can be considered a marketplace with parties supplying candidates and voters picking their preferred candidate(s). Here we focus on the demand side: do voters perceive female and male politicians differently? Specifically, are women considered

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less fit for office because of a gender bias? We test whether citizens hold gender stereotypes and their impact on politicians' evaluations, and do so via an experimental survey design with vignettes. Our findings show that male and female candidates are *not* perceived differently. Although gender stereotypes exist, citizens do not seem to use these stereotypes in evaluating candidates.

This article downplays the 'public wisdom' or common explanation that female candidates are negatively evaluated by voters by showing that gender stereotypes do not explain the evaluation of political candidates. Alternatively, we suggest that such stereotypes play a role mainly within the context of political parties. Another possible explanation is that citizens are 'impressed' by female politicians because they assume that they must be extremely qualified since women have to overcome extra barriers to become active in men-dominated politics.

We study gender bias in a party-centred parliamentary system. Most similar research is conducted in the United States, that is, a candidate-centred system with weak parties where individual candidate characteristics are highly relevant, with findings that cannot simply be generalised to the European context with party-centred systems. It is thus essential to study the impact of gender on candidate evaluations outside the United States. Furthermore, a meta-analysis shows that for European proportional systems the effect of gender on voting is inconsistent: both in Norway and Switzerland there were significant positive effects of being a woman, but in Denmark and Romania there was no effect (Schwarz & Coppock, 2019).

Our study focuses on the Dutch case. Studying such a least-likely case is important: if women are underrepresented in countries where we would expect it least, it is even harder to fight underrepresentation in countries where we would expect it. More generally, it is crucial to understand contextual mechanisms at play in a least-likely case; studying other countries than the 'usual suspect' is relevant since contextual variables impact the effect of gender stereotypes. Exposure theory (Jennings, 2006), for example, poses that when voters become more familiar with female politicians, they are more likely to develop a gender-neutral attitude towards them. Taylor-Robinson et al. (2016) indeed shows this effect: in Costa Rica, a country with experience with women in government, voters have a relatively neutral attitude towards female politicians, while in Israel, with less experience with women in politics, female candidates are evaluated less positively than male candidates. For Europe, findings are mixed. Matland (1994) shows that the presence of women in Norwegian politics is not associated with gender-neutral evaluations. However, for Denmark (Dahl & Nyrup, 2021) and Belgium (Devroe & Wauters, 2018), where historically women have been present in politics, there is no difference between the evaluation of male and female politicians. Our study thus contributes to these nuanced findings by including the Dutch case.

This article starts with a short overview of why it is important to study the representation of women in politics, followed by a theoretical framework on why gender stereotypes disadvantage women in politics. However, our findings show differently: the evaluation of women is relatively positive, and gender stereotypes do not explain these findings. In the discussion and conclusion, we suggest alternative explanations for our main finding by pointing at different stereotypes

and the understudied role of a crucial actor in party-centred systems: political parties.

2 Why Representation of Women Is Important

Various forms of representation exist, as authoritatively argued by Pitkin (1967). The concept of *standing for* is related to descriptive representation and refers to the resemblance of voters/citizens and their representatives. Parliament as a representative body should mirror society (Pitkin, 1967). This form of descriptive representation is essentially about *who* the representative is; arguments in favour may be based on ideas of justice, fairness, and equity (e.g. Celis & Meier, 2006; Phillips, 1994). This reasoning entails that when half of the population consists of women, it is logical and from a normative perspective imperative that women are present in politics in proportional numbers.

Descriptive representation shows that (sub)groups of citizens are equal and equally present in the main democratic body, signalling that all groups have equal opportunities to govern (Mansbridge, 1999). Consequently, descriptive representation counters the conventional 'wisdom' and often implicit but dominant norm that politics is for (white, middle-aged) men; if every second Member of Parliament (MP) is a woman, politics obviously is not an exclusively male affair. Moreover, descriptive representation impacts positively on the legitimacy of policies and politics since multiple societal (sub)groups are involved in deliberation and participate in law- and policy-making processes (Celis & Meier, 2006; Mansbridge, 1999).

It can be argued – and empirically substantiated – that descriptive representation is related to and enables substantive representation, essentially meaning that politicians act for the (sub)group of citizens they represent: *acting for* (Pitkin, 1972). The basic idea is that with women present in politics, they are likely to act in favour of women and women's issues (Celis & Childs, 2008). In electoral democracies dominated by political parties (at least in Europe), representatives are elected on a party programme. However, when policy is considered that is not (clearly) identified in this programme the position and judgement of the individual MP is very important. In such circumstances, background and identity characteristics (e.g. gender) are relevant or even crucial (Blais, 2011; Celis & Meier, 2006; Mansbridge, 1999). The underlying logic or mechanism is that identity characteristics reflect particular life experiences (Celis & Childs, 2014; Mansbridge, 1999). Arguably, the life experience of women is not universal (Celis & Childs, 2008; Celis & Meier, 2006), but women as a group do share a common core identity and have essentially different interests, needs and life experiences compared to men. These can be *gendered* (Celis & Meier, 2006), and because of such differing interests, descriptive representation of women is important on its own and also due to its impact on substantive representation. Descriptive representation allows for different, gendered interests to be present in politics: the *Politics of Presence* (Phillips, 1995).

3   Evaluating Politicians and Gender Stereotypes

To explain the political underrepresentation of women, the four-stage recruitment model (Norris & Lovenduski, 1993) is often used. This model is a chain containing four links: from being a citizen to being an eligible citizen (phase 1); being an eligible citizen aspiring to be a politician (phase 2); being a candidate for office (phase 3); and, ultimately, becoming elected (phase 4). For this last phase voters are crucial: they decide who will be elected. Consequently, it is important to know how voters perceive candidates.

Voters form impressions of candidates by inferring character traits (e.g. McGraw, 2003); such traits are cues for future political behaviour (Blais, 2011; McGraw, 2003). In a seminal study by Kinder et al. (1980), respondents had to describe an ideal president and based on the traits they mentioned, two clusters were compiled: competence and trust traits. Kinder (1983) specified the two 'dimensions' into four sub-dimensions: competence, leadership, integrity and empathy. The competence (sub)dimension entails traits such as technical skills to lead; leadership is about being an 'heroic' leader; integrity concerns being ethical or honest; and finally, the empathy subdimension is about whether a politician is understanding and compassionate (Kinder, 1983). Forty years later and based on a comprehensive meta-analysis of politically relevant character traits, Bittner concluded that these traits could again be ordered into two categories: integrity/character (integrity and empathy) and competence (competence and leadership). Traits belonging to the integrity/character category are for example being warm, honest and fair; intelligence, effectiveness and respectability belong to the competence category (Bittner, 2011).

To infer a candidate's character traits, citizens use heuristics. One commonly used set of heuristics are stereotypes (e.g. Lau & Redlawsk, 2006). According to Lippmann, who introduced the concept of a stereotype in relation to human groups (Blum, 2004), a stereotype is a 'picture' that comes to mind when thinking about a particular social group (Lippmann, 1922). Classifying an individual into a particular group facilitates drawing inferences about this individual and his or her intentions (Fiske et al., 2002; Kahn, 1996; Lippmann, 1922); stereotypes are cognitive schemas for processing information and simplifying reality (Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996; Kahn, 1996). Stereotyping is common when one needs to draw conclusions based on imperfect information, which during elections is often the case (Kahn, 1996; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Sanbonmatsu, 2002).

"The most common political application found in research on (…) stereotype in person perception concerns response to male and female candidates and political leaders" (Sapiro, 2003, pp. 616-617). Together with physical appearance and race – and in an American context: partisanship – gender is the main category at the basis of stereotypical inferences (McGraw, 2003). When voters see a candidate, their first impression likely is related to the candidate's sex or gender (Kahn, 1996) and this may activate a gender stereotype (Dolan 2014). Consequently, voters infer that an individual has certain character traits based on gender and connected gender roles, that is beliefs and ideas about personality traits of men and women and qualities and behaviour based on their socially identified gender (Eagly, 1987).

These beliefs entail two main types of expectations or norms (Eagly & Karau, 2002): descriptive and injunctive norms. Descriptive norms are expectations about what men and women *actually* do; injunctive norms are expectations about what a group *ought* to do. Descriptive expectations are similar to stereotypes, but a gender *role* contains both descriptive and injunctive expectations.

The fact that traditionally men have been in charge, inside and outside politics (Glick & Rudman, 2010), has established a conviction about appropriate behaviour connected to gender roles. Men are supposed to be leaders; therefore, men are considered competent and independent, that is agentic. Women are perceived as warm, expressive and supportive, that is communal. When specific individual behaviour does not match these social roles, this results in role incongruity. One of the consequences of role incongruity is that people are evaluated negatively. For example, a career-oriented woman is likely to be perceived as task competent – but not warm. This is contrary to the common idea that women are warm – but less competent (Fiske, 1998; Fiske et al., 2002; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010).

This 'mismatch' between observed and expected behaviour may occur when a politician is female, because men are supposed to be in charge (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koenig et al., 2011). Political leaders are considered to have agentic traits and women do not fit: women are supposed to be communal and less agentic (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Because of such conflicting expectations – being a politician violates the female gender role – we expect:

H1: Female politicians are evaluated less positively than male politicians.

As argued, a 'good' politician should have different traits. Citizens ascribe both competence and integrity traits to their ideal politician. The integrity dimension entails traits such as being trustworthy and empathic, and the female gender role is not necessarily in violation with these traits; the female gender role implies being warm and supportive and this is similar to the integrity/character traits that are important for a politician. For the male gender role, on the other hand, it is expected that men do not, or to a lesser extent, embody these traits. Therefore: it is argued that female politicians will be evaluated more positively than male politicians on integrity traits:

H2a: Female politicians are evaluated more positively than male politicians on integrity traits.

On the other hand, female candidates fulfil a political function, which is out of line with being a 'real' woman according to conventional gender beliefs. Consequently, they may be evaluated relatively low, as role incongruity theory suggests (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Since the expectations concerning the evaluations of female politicians on the character dimension are ambiguous, we test the following competing hypothesis:

H2b: Female politicians are evaluated more negatively than male politicians on integrity traits.

Regarding the evaluation of the competence traits, the expectations are more straightforward. The competence traits fit the agentic dimension of the male gender role: being confident and competent. Women do not, or to a lesser extent, have these traits according to their gender role. Consequently, female politicians are expected to be perceived as less agentic/competent.

> H2c: Female politicians are evaluated less positively than male politicians on competency traits.

In her overview of the literature on gender stereotypes in a political context, Sapiro (2003, p. 617) concludes that "[t]hese studies vary the stimulus, circumstances, or questions, but their conclusions converge: the public uses common gender stereotypes to fill in information about candidates, especially in low-information elections". For example, female candidates are perceived as relatively compassionate and honest and men as stronger leaders and better crisis managers (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; Kahn, 1996). Moreover, gender stereotypes impact people's willingness to support female candidates (Dolan, 2010). Consequently, the underlying gender stereotypes are relevant to explain the underrepresentation of women in politics; these gender stereotypes may influence why a voter rejects or prefers a female candidate.

Stereotypes could impact candidate evaluations and indirectly also impact party or candidate choice (Dolan, 2014). Obviously, party choice is structured by numerous factors next to gender, making it difficult to isolate and estimate the separate effect of gender stereotypes (e.g. Kahn, 1996). However, it has been demonstrated that party cues do not rule out gender effects (e.g. Sanbonmatsu & Dolan, 2009). Fox and Smith explored the electoral effect of gender and observed that male candidates were consistently favoured over female candidates. They even found that when a man ran against a woman, voters liked the man better than when that same man ran against another male candidate (Fox & Smith, 1998)! Sanbonmatsu showed that voters have a gender baseline with respect to voting, that is a predisposition to support female over male candidates (or the other way around). She found that a preference for male candidates was explained by negative stereotypes about female traits and positive stereotypes about a man's ability to handle 'male' policy issues. A similar preference for female candidates could be explained by positive stereotypes about women's position and ability to deal with 'female' issues (Sanbonmatsu, 2002). Valdini (2013) showed that in countries with the opportunity to cast personal votes, gender bias, especially in conservative countries, has a negative effect for women. Other scholars show that women, to do equally well in elections as men, should perform better to achieve equal results (Crowder-Meyer et al., 2015; Fulton, 2012), indicating that female candidates must 'compensate for being a woman'. Overall, gender bias thus matters in the electoral context.

Despite various studies demonstrating that gender bias matters, there are mixed findings about *how* exactly stereotypes matter. Dolan (2014) hypothesised that gender stereotypes impact electoral choice either by directly influencing this choice or because gender stereotypes influence candidate evaluations and these

evaluations impact on electoral choice, but she did not find the expected effects. Teele et al. (2018) also find no 'outright discrimination' against female politicians; in fact, the respondents in their study show a preference for female candidates.

All in all, there are mixed and puzzling findings concerning gender stereotypes and their electoral effects (Dolan, 2010; Fox & Smith, 1998; Hayes, 2011; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; Kahn, 1996; Sanbonmatsu, 2002; Sapiro, 1981/1982). In such a situation another empirical test is in order; to start with, we need to test what the direct effect is of having a gender stereotype. If voters have gender stereotypes, does this influence candidate evaluation?[1] We expect the following:

> H3: Respondents who hold gender stereotypes evaluate female politicians less positively on character traits than respondents who do not have such a stereotype.

4 Case Selection, Data and Method

4.1 The Dutch Case

We study gender stereotypes and their impact in the Netherlands, an advanced Western liberal democracy. Still, over a century after the introduction of female suffrage (1917/1919), the number of female MPs has never equalled the number of male MPs. After the 2021 elections for the Second Chamber, 59 members (39%) of all 150 MPs are women. In the Senate and at the regional and local level the picture is similar, with respectively 39%, 34% and 33% female politicians (Joop, 2019; NOS, 2018). Theoretically, the underrepresentation of women in Dutch politics could be due to a lack of supply. It could be that there are simply too few women opting for a political career and on candidate lists, because, for example, a lack of political ambition (e.g. Fox & Lawless, 2014). However, this explanation seems not applicable. In the 2021 elections, for example, 439 female politicians were on the candidate lists of all the parties then participating (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021b). The Second Chamber has 150 seats, so theoretically, voters could have filled the Dutch parliament with female MPs twice.[2]

The puzzle of female underrepresentation is even more intriguing if we consider key features of the electoral system: the Dutch system should be advantageous for female politicians (Leijenaar, 2004). There is consensus on the positive effects of a proportional electoral system on female representation (e.g. Diaz, 2005; Paxton, 1997; Rule, 1987); the Dutch system is qualified as extremely proportional (e.g. Lijphart, 1999). Another factor is district magnitude. In multimember districts female candidates do not threaten or 'push away' male candidates from the list (Matland, 2005; Matland & Brown, 1992); the Netherlands with its nationwide 150-member district should be advantageous for female candidates. Finally, the fact that voters may cast a preference vote on an open list is beneficial (Golder et al., 2017), although Valdini (2013) argues that this electoral option may be disadvantageous for female candidates in a conservative cultural context. As regards the latter, the Netherlands is according to the Hofstede index a feminine society (Hofstede & Soeters, 2002) wherein "emotional gender roles

overlap" (Hofstede et al., 2005, p. 140); this cultural feature should benefit female representation. Also, there has been a steady increase in the number of preference votes with almost 30% of Dutch voters casting a preference vote in recent national elections; many of these votes are cast for female candidates (Andeweg & Van Holsteyn, 2011; Van Holsteyn & Andeweg, 2012; Nagtzaam, 2019). This clearly signals that even though the Netherlands may still be a party-centred system, individual candidates are increasingly relevant as an element of the electoral calculus.

Based on relevant institutional and cultural features of the Netherlands, one would expect equal representation. As already mentioned, this is obviously not the case – so how come that a country that is so likely to show equal representation, has never achieved this? Studying such least-likely or atypical cases deviating from theoretical expectations (Levy, 2008) may offer comparative insights as well. If women are underrepresented in countries such as the Netherlands, where we would not expect women underrepresentation, it might be even harder to understand and fight underrepresentation in countries where we would expect it.

4.2 Data and Method

We conducted a survey experiment with a post-test only design. The questionnaire consisted of question modules on (1) general political attitudes; (2) the evaluation of a political candidate; (3) the perception of societal attitudes with respect to character traits of men and women; and (4) women in Dutch politics.[3] Key were vignette questions referring to a fictitious candidate for Second Chamber elections. We manipulated the gender of the candidate; following the logic of the experimental design (cf. Auspurg & Hinz, 2015) respondents were randomly assigned to a single scenario of a candidate running for office being:

A1: male politician A who was presented with a short text only

A2: female politician A who was presented with a short text only, identical to the text for A1, except for his/her name[4] (see Appendix for the vignette text)

The vignette was followed by a randomised block of statements on competency and integrity traits, asking respondents to rate on a 7-point scale from fully agree to fully disagree whether the candidate was intelligent, knowledgeable, lazy, inspiring, effective, commanding respect, compassionate, connected, dishonest and decent.

The third block contained questions on gender stereotypes based on the Stereotype Content Model (e.g. Fiske et al., 2002). To control for social desirability effects the questions did not ask for the respondents' personal opinion, but for the perception of the general attitude of or public opinion in society (see for a similar approach e.g. Fiske et al., 2002; Kerevel & Atkeson, 2015; Schneider & Bos, 2014). The assumption is that these "perceptions" are (predominantly or at least partly) the result of the psychological process of projection, that is "seeing one's own traits in other people" (Baumeister et al., 1998, p. 1091). Respondents were asked to rate men and women on a 5-point scale[5] on four items representing the dimensions of gender stereotypes competence and warmth: self-confidence, competence, warmth

and sincerity. We qualified respondents with extreme perceptions of societal stereotypes as citizens having these stereotypes themselves, that is treating perceptions as projections and consequently as indications of underlying personal attitudes. Respondents that are in the highest quartile of agentic perceptions of men, that is a combination of the self-confidence and competence scale, and respondents in the lowest quartile of communal perceptions of men, that is a combination of the warmth and sincerity scale, are classified as having strong men stereotypes. The typical women stereotype is its mirror image: the highest quartile on the communal dimension and the lowest quartile in the agentic dimension.[6]

A risk to our approach is that respondents who indicate that there are stereotypes in society do not hold these stereotypes themselves: they could simply observe the stereotypes in society. To check whether this may have been the case, we attempted to validate this approach. In our survey we included statements about women and politics. When respondents whom we classified as having gender stereotypes in fact do not have such stereotypes, they arguably are more 'progressive' in responding to these statements. However, there is no difference regarding the statement whether women are less interested in politics than men: 40% of the respondents with stereotypes about women agreed, 36% of the respondents with stereotypes about men agreed and 37% of the respondents without stereotypes agreed. There are also no differences with regard to the statement that women do not try hard enough to be elected. On the other hand, there is some difference about the statement that women have less opportunities to get into politics than men: 67% of the respondents with stereotypes about men agreed, 62% of the respondents about women agreed and 49% of the respondents without stereotypes agreed to this statement. So overall the findings of our validation may be mixed but do not reveal a pattern that convincingly contradicts our assumption. In conclusion, our approach leaves room for improvement but is not unprecedented nor obviously inadequate. Consequently, we use these projection data to test hypothesis 3.

The data were collected via the online survey facility *EenVandaag Opiniepanel* (EVO).[7] This EVO consists of respondents who have signed up for participation. During the data collection (13-18 May 2016) about 50,000 people were registered; 19,384 respondents participated in our study. Most respondents are men (70%), while men are a minority of the voter population (49%). Regarding age, 4% of the respondents is between 18 and 35 years of age; 46% is between 35 and 65 years of age and the plurality of the respondents (50%) is 65 or older; older voters are overrepresented, since 22% of the Dutch voter population is 65 or older. With regard to education, 55% of our population is highly educated, while 25% of the voters are.[8]

The non-probability sampling of the panel means that the sample is not truly representative of the population and that external validity or generalisation may be problematic. However, such estimation of population parameters is *not* our main goal: our study primarily addresses the impact of different political candidates in a between-subjects experimental design, in which not the random selection but the random *assignment* of respondents to experimental and control groups is key. Moreover, it can be argued that "[w]e should not exaggerate the self-selection

problem": the seriousness of the problem depends on scholarly ambition, but also in various respects the EVO data are similar to actual, real outcomes. Moreover, the large size of the panel guarantees variation on relevant variables[9] (Van Holsteyn, 2015; van Elsas et al., 2014). All in all, we concur with the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) recommendation that there 'are times when a nonprobability online panel is an appropriate choice', in particular if researchers do not primarily aim for estimates of population values (Baker et al., 2010, p. 714). This article contains descriptive data, but its focus is on the causal impact of gender on the perception and evaluation of candidates at the mass level and individual characteristics that interrelate with the impact of gender. This scholarly and analytical aim, with internal validity trumping external validity, is perfectly feasible based on the EVO panel data.

5   Results – The Perception and Evaluation of Female (and Male) Politicians

We expect male candidates to be evaluated more positively than female candidates. To test this expectation, a t-test is conducted, resulting in a consistent pattern: our female candidate is slightly more *positively* evaluated than her male counterpart (Table 1).[10] All differences are statistically significant at conventional levels, but the differences are small from a substantive perspective. Still, the data show a consistent pattern in the evaluation of candidates for political office: female candidates are considered to be *better* fit for office. Consequently, we reject our hypothesis that female politicians are evaluated less positively compared to male politicians.

Table 1   Mean scores traits evaluations and t-test results[11,12]

	Gender		
	Male politician (n=9,516)		Female politician (n=9,628)
Intelligence	4.70 (1.50)	<	4.93*** (1.46)
Knows a lot	3.95 (1.56)	<	4.07*** (1.55)
Hardworking	5.15 (1.68)	<	5.50*** (1.59)
Inspiring	3.35 (1.81)	<	3.46*** (1.82)
Effective	3.79 (1.52)	=	3.83 (1.54)
Commands respect	3.83 (1.66)	<	4.04*** (1.66)
Compassionate	4.34 (1.60)	<	4.59*** (1.56)
Connected	4.19 (1.63)	<	4.40*** (1.57)
Honest	5.12 (1.67)	<	5.39*** (1.63)
Decent	4.89 (1.45)	<	5.12*** (1.41)

*Note: * p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.001, standard deviation in brackets*
Results for vignette 1

Overall, there is also no pattern for the male candidate to be rated higher on competence traits[13] compared to the female candidate. This finding contradicts our hypothesis that female politicians will be evaluated less positively than male politicians on precisely these traits. If anything, the opposite pattern is empirically supported: regarding politically relevant character traits, women are slightly more positively evaluated than their male counterparts.

Although the differences between the evaluation of the female and male candidate are contrary to what was expected, we need to further analyse the role of gender stereotypes. It may be that Dutch citizens simply do not have such stereotypes and that the absence of active gender stereotypes explains the relative positive evaluation of female candidates.

To gauge the existence of gender stereotypes, questions from the Stereotype Content Model were used. Our data show that stereotypes are present in Dutch society, at least according to our respondents: women are rated as being warmer and more sincere and less competent and self-confident compared to men (see Table 2). These differences between men and women are statistically significant (p < 0.001). If we combine the two characteristics for the agentic dimension, men score on average 7.8 and women 6.7; a similar score for the communal facet results in a mean of 5.7 for men and 7.3 for women (see Table 2).

Table 2   *Mean scores gender Stereotype Content Model*

	Gender		
	Men		Women
Confidence	4.00	>	3.34
Competent	3.81	>	3.41
Agentic	7.8	>	6.7
Warm	2.80	<	3.81
Sincere	2.95	<	3.47
Communal	5.7	<	7.3

Assuming an underlying active psychological projection process, we qualified respondents with extreme perceptions of societal stereotypes as citizens having gender stereotypes. We classified respondents as having 'extreme' perceptions about men when they were in the highest quartile of agentic perceptions about men and respondents in the lowest quartile of communal perceptions about men. The stereotype about women mirrors this approach, resulting (in our sample) in 1,454 respondents (8%) identified with a male and 3,232 (18%) with a woman stereotype. This is not an exclusive male or female phenomenon: 40% of the respondents with this perception were female and 60% male. Most respondents with a woman stereotype were male (63%), completed higher education (64%) and were between 55 and 75 years old (67%). There is minor overlap (3%) between the groups of respondents who think that both stereotypes about both men and women are present.

The third hypothesis stated that gender stereotypes impact evaluations: respondents with gender stereotypes evaluate female candidates relatively negative. A distinction is made between character and competence traits. With respect to the latter, women are expected to be evaluated even more negatively, since these traits are not in line with the traditional woman's gender role. To assess whether gender stereotypes about men and women affect the evaluation of female and male politicians, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. Table 3 contains the results for five models with the dependent variables being the five different 'competence' traits. In this test we controlled for the 'usual suspects' political knowledge, age, left-right self-placement – not partisanship or party identification, since this 'American' concept has been proven not to travel well to the Netherlands; (see Thomassen, 1976; Thomassen & Rosema, 2009) – and the respondent's gender. The main independent variables of interest are whether people hold stereotypes and whether they employ these stereotypes to evaluate female and male politicians. These are interaction effects.

Table 3   *Multiple regression analysis explaining evaluation on five 'competence' traits[14]*

	Intelligence	Knowledgeable	Hard working	Inspiring	Effective
(Intercept)	3.26***	2.77***	4.47***	1.70***	2.67***
	(0.19)	(0.20)	(0.21)	(0.23)	(0.20)
Vignette type (1=female)	0.20***	0.05	0.29***	0.04	−0.02
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)
Gender respondent (1=female)	0.12**	0.08*	0.16***	0.00	0.15***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Stereotype about men (1=present)	0.08	−0.09	0.02	−0.15*	−0.14*
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Stereotype about women (1=present)	0.04	−0.02	0.00	−0.07	−0.01
	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Age	0.01***	0.01***	0.01***	0.02***	0.01***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Left-right self-placement	−0.01	0.01	−0.03***	0.01	−0.00
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Political knowledge	0.13***	0.08***	0.08***	0.06**	0.11***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)

Table 3   *(Continued)*

	Intelligence	Knowledgeable	Hard working	Inspiring	Effective
Education level 2 (ref = 1)	0.63***	0.46*	0.18	0.62**	0.46*
	(0.17)	(0.18)	(0.19)	(0.20)	(0.18)
Education level 3 (ref = 1)	0.67***	0.38*	0.36	0.49*	0.46*
	(0.17)	(0.18)	(0.19)	(0.21)	(0.18)
Education level 4 (ref = 1)	0.59***	0.37*	0.19	0.54**	0.39*
	(0.17)	(0.18)	(0.19)	(0.20)	(0.18)
Education level 5 (ref = 1)	0.52**	0.08	0.25	0.19	0.24
	(0.17)	(0.18)	(0.19)	(0.20)	(0.18)
Vignette female × respondent female	0.06	0.18**	0.08	0.21***	0.20***
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Vignette female × stereotype about men	0.11	0.11	0.14	0.04	−0.02
	(0.09)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Vignette female × stereotype about women	0.05	0.09	0.12	0.15*	0.05
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
R^2	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.02
Adj. R^2	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.02
Num. obs.	15302	14691	14790	16139	14030

***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$.

Based on the regression analysis we again conclude that female politicians are more positively evaluated; see the positive effects of 'Vignette type'. The control variables age and left-right self-placement have no effect, while political knowledge has a positive effect: respondents claiming to have more political knowledge are more positive in their evaluation of politicians.

Regarding the stereotypes the results are intriguing. When a respondent has a stereotype about women and evaluates a female candidate, this respondent will do so in a relatively positive way; the coefficients for this interaction effect are positive. To facilitate interpretation, the effects for the trait being knowledgeable are presented in Figure 1, showing that respondents with and without a stereotype about women evaluate a male politician in a similar manner. When they are confronted with a female politician, both become more positive. However, respondents with a stereotype about women become even *more positive* than

respondents with no such stereotype. Although the difference is small and except for the trait 'inspiring' statistically insignificant, this finding is unexpected: one would expect that respondents holding a stereotype about women, that is thinking that women ought to be communal instead of agentic, would not rate female politicians positively on more agentic competence traits.

We also controlled for the respondent's gender, since this is an important variable in explaining how people evaluate politicians (e.g. Sanbonmatsu, 2002). We included gender as a separate variable and as an interaction variable in which the respondent's gender interacts with the gender of the politician. Our findings show that women in general tend to be slightly more positive than men. The interaction effect shows that women are even more positive when they evaluate a female politician.

Figure 1   *Predicted probabilities for the character trait knowledgeable based on the interaction effect of having a stereotype of women and evaluating the male or female politician.*
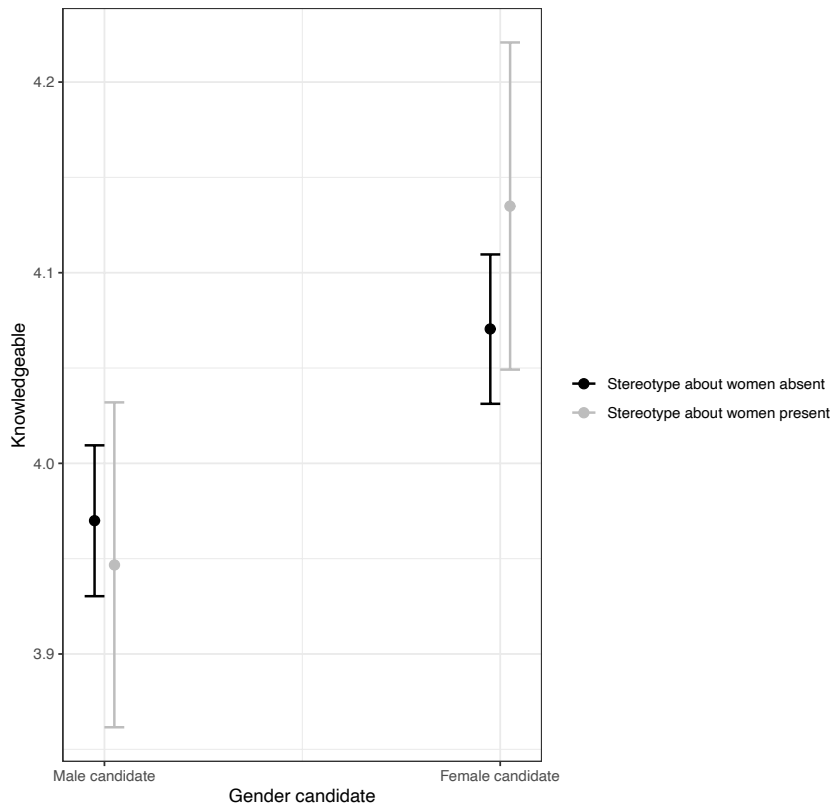
When we consider traits that are assumed to be related to the character dimension, we again see some conflicting findings (Table 4). The female candidate is a significant positive predictor for a higher evaluation; this concurs with earlier findings, although for the character traits the effects are larger. With respect to the stereotypes about men and women and the interaction with the politician's gender, the findings are mixed. Having a stereotype of men does not seem to affect the evaluation of female candidates in an unambiguous way; the direction of the effect differs, and its size is small. There is no clear effect of having a stereotype about women and evaluating a female politician. However, for two traits the positive effect is statistically significant. These regression analyses thus warrant the conclusion that stereotypes about men and women are *not* influencing the evaluation of female and male candidates in a major and consistent way. Moreover, having gender stereotypes (according to our operationalisation, based on the assumption of projection) does not result in giving female candidates a lower evaluation. We reject our third hypothesis.

Table 4   *Multiple regression analysis explaining evaluation on five 'character' traits[15]*

	Commands respect	Compassionate	Connected	Fair	Decent
(Intercept)	2.15***	2.86***	2.74***	4.17***	3.25***
	(0.21)	(0.20)	(0.21)	(0.22)	(0.18)
Vignette type (1=female)	0.17***	0.20***	0.16***	0.21***	0.23***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Gender respondent (1=female)	0.11**	0.09*	0.10*	0.19***	0.16***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Stereotype about men (1=present)	−0.16*	−0.04	0.01	0.07	0.03
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.06)
Stereotype about women (1=present)	−0.01	−0.02	−0.12**	0.01	0.11*
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.04)
Age	0.02***	0.01***	0.01***	0.01***	0.01***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Left-right self-placement	0.01*	0.03***	0.04***	−0.01*	0.01*
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Political knowledge	0.06**	0.10***	0.11***	0.01	0.07***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)

Table 4   (Continued)

	Commands respect	Compassionate	Connected	Fair	Decent
Education level 2 (ref = 1)	0.44*	0.49**	0.53**	0.06	0.83***
	(0.19)	(0.18)	(0.18)	(0.20)	(0.16)
Education level 3 (ref = 1)	0.38*	0.48**	0.52**	0.24	0.82***
	(0.19)	(0.18)	(0.19)	(0.20)	(0.17)
Education level 4 (ref = 1)	0.31	0.38*	0.47**	0.01	0.79***
	(0.19)	(0.18)	(0.18)	(0.20)	(0.16)
Education level 5 (ref = 1)	0.08	0.22	0.26	0.14	0.76***
	(0.19)	(0.18)	(0.18)	(0.20)	(0.16)
Vignette female × respondent female	0.13*	0.11	0.12*	0.08	−0.02
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.05)
Vignette female × stereotype about men	0.09	0.02	−0.10	0.00	0.10
	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.09)
Vignette female × stereotype about women	0.03	0.09	0.20**	0.19**	−0.01
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.06)
R^2	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.02
Adj. R^2	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.02
Num. obs.	15516	15500	15111	13979	14863

***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$.

Finally, when we look at the interaction effect of gender, there is again a positive effect, except for the trait 'being decent'. It thus seems that in general women are more positive in evaluating politicians, but they are even more positive when this evaluation refers to a female candidate. This concurs with earlier findings (Sanbonmatsu, 2002) and seems to suggest the existence of a gender baseline.

Overall, our data strongly suggest that gender stereotypes do exist among Dutch citizens, but that these stereotypes do *not* influence the evaluation of political candidates, *at least not to the disadvantage of female candidates* – and this we did not expect to find. Based on role incongruity theory we expected that female politicians would be 'punished', because a political role and function would not fit with their conventional female role. However, according to our data and analyses, this in fact is not the case. Among Dutch citizens there appears to be no gender

difference in the evaluation of political candidates. Women are considered to be as fit for office as men.

6 Conclusion and Discussion

'Where is *our* female Prime Minister?' (*Waar blijft onze vrouwelijke premier?*) was the heading of a newspaper article (*NRC*, 11 May 2019; also *De Telegraaf*, 7 May 2019) sketching the lasting puzzle that in a supposedly modern Western, highly emancipated, progressive country as the Netherlands the political elite is predominantly male. Women have been underrepresented in most legislatures and the Netherlands is no exception to this rule. The most recent national elections of 2021 resulted in only 39% female MPs.

We tried to understand this underrepresentation by focussing on the attitudes of Dutch citizens. Do they evaluate male and female political candidates differently, and are female candidates evaluated less positively, maybe as a result of gender stereotypes? In response to these important questions, our study can be considered an optimistic contribution to the debate on women in politics: our findings strongly suggest that at the mass level there are no differences in the evaluation of female and male politicians! Any differences we did find were substantively small. Moreover, such differences were in *favour* of female candidates: if there is any difference, citizens are more positive towards female compared to male politicians. Also, we contributed to the existing literature by focussing on a European party-centred parliamentary democracy. Most relevant literature mainly focuses on the United States and, although valuable, these results not necessarily transfer well to the European context due to the different political institutions and electoral dynamics.

Our results are intriguing, as they cannot be explained by the absence of gender stereotypes. Among Dutch citizens gender stereotypes likely exist. However, these stereotypes do *not* seem to influence the evaluation of politicians – and this is *not* to be expected based on the theory of social role incongruity, arguing that women entering the political arena are evaluated relatively negative because they do not 'belong' there. Our findings suggest that role incongruity, in the Dutch case, does not result in negative evaluations. And although our findings are rather surprising, they are not unique and may fit a more general but yet not commonly known pattern: a recent meta-analysis of Schwarz and Coppock (2019) suggests that female politicians may be slightly preferred with regard to vote choice above male politicians.

We focused on gender stereotypes based on character traits, but our approach did not solve the puzzle of female underrepresentation in politics. This may be due to the existence of a different 'stereotype' for women in politics. Schneider and Bos (2014) found little overlap of stereotype content between women and female politicians, suggesting that female politicians may be a *sub*-stereotype of women. Brooks (2013) refers to this 'leaders-not-ladies' phenomenon: women entering the political arena are evaluated as leaders instead of women. Sanbonmatsu (2002) suggests that voters develop expectations about male or female candidates based

on either gender stereotypes *or* experiences with previous candidates and officeholders: citizens differentiate and develop stereotypes for politicians based on their experiences with female and male candidates and officeholders. In future studies this intriguing phenomenon should be further explored.

The relatively positive evaluation of women may also be explained by the women-are-wonderful effect, suggesting that women are overall more positively evaluated than men (Eagly & Mladinic, 1994). Another potential explanation for the 'bias' in favour of female politicians is that citizens are impressed by the female politician: assuming that women must have had a relatively hard time entering the political arena, citizens also assume that she is highly qualified. This idea that women in politics are of 'superior' quality (e.g., Crowder-Meyer et al., 2015; Fulton, 2012) must be theoretically developed and empirically explored in future studies. Yet another explanation refers to the mechanism proposed by Bauer (2020), who argues that the stereotype about women does not align with the masculine expectation of political leaders. Consequently, women are perceived as not so qualified for office, which creates a low qualification bar for female candidates. Voters simply expect less from female candidates: "a female candidate does not need much political experience for voters to consider her more qualified than a typical woman" (Bauer, 2020, p. 3). This may explain the positive evaluation in our experiment, suggesting that citizens compared the female candidate with a 'typical woman' instead of a politician; compared to a 'typical woman' the female politician is very qualified. Bauer further argues that when a female candidate is compared to a male candidate, the woman will be evaluated on the basis of the political role and *in that case* she will be evaluated less well than the male candidate. Importantly, this argument may suggest that although our results indicate a gender-neutral evaluation, we must be wary to conclude that gender does not play any role in the electoral calculus.

Admittedly, the measurement of gender stereotypes can be considered a vulnerability of our study. To avoid social desirability effects, we asked whether respondents think that people in society hold gender stereotypes and it could be that respondents who indicated that there are stereotypes in society, simply state their perception of public opinion, and do not hold these stereotypes themselves, as we assumed based on projection. We empirically and satisfactory (but not fully!) validated our approach, but we acknowledge that this measure is imperfect and that an alternative measure is needed. Despite our suboptimal measure, the main conclusion that female politicians are more positively evaluated than men on different traits firmly stands and is intriguing in and of itself. If citizens do not make an electorally relevant difference between male and female candidates, how then to explain the political underrepresentation of women?

As mentioned, in the Netherlands there are enough women on party lists to fill over two times the lower house of parliament with female politicians. Yet, overall there are fewer female than male candidates. So it could be that not citizens as electors, but gatekeepers of parties are influenced by gender stereotypes. We suggest that ultimately the party-political gatekeepers – predominantly men: party membership is a male affair (Heidar & Wauters, 2019) – are crucial in explaining the underrepresentation of women in party-centred democracies: they recruit

candidates and order the candidate list, and by doing so 'determine' who will be represented in parliament. Not only can stereotypes play a role here, also the way candidate selection is (in)formally organised may impact on the candidate list and its ranking.

Since the main hypotheses were rejected, this article essentially contains a 'null finding' – but the derogatory term should not suggest that our findings are irrelevant. "When null findings are not published, they cannot place anomalously large and statistically significant results into their proper context" (Esarey & Wu, 2016, p. 1). Presenting null results is relevant for various reasons (Franco et al., 2014). First, it may prevent future researchers spending time and resources in conducting studies that already are conducted. Second, if future similar studies about gender stereotypes and the effect on candidate evaluations do find statistically and substantively significant effects, the absence of null findings would suggest, erroneously, that these reported effects are more evident and stronger than they in fact may be (Franco et al., 2014). This would hinder the true explanation and real understanding of the problem of female underrepresentation in politics.

Our study arguably adds to confusion instead of the contribution to the final solution of this puzzle. At the same time, we end on a positive note: we have empirically shown that female and male politicians or political candidates are evaluated in a similar and equal way at the mass level, at least in the Netherlands. This is a welcome finding from a normative democratic perspective – although we cannot deny that this result does not add a single woman to the female minority of about one-third of 150 MPs.

Notes

1   Stereotypes can have both negative and positive dimensions. We focus on the positive dimension, since this dimension entails the agentic and communal traits (Schneider & Bos, 2014) which are essential in role incongruity theory. Negative stereotypes are for example being emotionally weak (for women) and greedy (for men) (Schneider & Bos, 2014), but these traits are not typical agentic and communal traits.

2   For a more elaborate argument on the use of raw numbers instead of proportionality tests to study the supply side, see Ashe & Stewart (2012, p. 691).

3   A copy of the questionnaire (in Dutch) can be obtained on request from the corresponding author.

4   Since particular names may elicit (negative) responses (Newman et al., 2018), we have chosen names that are 'common' and easy to alter in an equivalent male or female version (Karel and Carolien). We also made sure that the names did not match the names of well-known politicians. The surnames are also common, belonging to the 50 most used surnames in the Netherlands (Nederlandse Familienamenbank, 2007). At the time of the experiment, there were no national politicians with these surnames.

5   The exact wording (translated from Dutch by the authors) is: 'The following statements are about what society feels about men and women. It is not about your personal opinion, but how you think Dutch society feels. How *confident/competent/warm/sincere* are

men/women perceived?' Every trait was mentioned separately for men and women. There were 8 statements in total.

6　Whether respondents have gender stereotypes was measured after the stimulus was presented. We have chosen to do so, since we considered it a risk to ask respondents about gender stereotypes first and subsequently ask them to evaluate a candidate. Therefore, we chose to do it in a reverse order, taking the risk that our stimulus has influenced the measure of gender stereotypes. However, we compared the outcomes of the Stereotype Content Model between experimental groups and no substantive differences were found. Therefore, we are confident that there is no post-treatment bias. A table with these checks is presented in the appendix (Table A1).

7　The second author was involved in the development of the EVO and has been a scientific adviser to this panel.

8　Data about the voter population are from 2012 and are retrieved from Statistics Netherlands.

9　We have run our analysis on a weighted dataset, but this did not substantially change our results: female politicians were still evaluated more positively than male politicians.

10　The vignette used in the analysis is about a politician with an expertise in economics. However, the specific policy area might be gendered: economics can be seen as a 'male' policy area (Kerevel & Atkeson, 2015; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). To check for the impact of policy area, we included another vignette about a politician with an expertise in health care in the questionnaire and analyses. The results for both policy areas are similar.

11　The politician presented in the vignette is married and has children. Some research suggests that being married and/or having children can be advantageous for a politician's evaluation (e.g., Bell & Kaufman, 2015; Campbell & Cowley, 2018). In another vignette we did not include any information about parental or marital status, and in this vignette the evaluation pattern persisted: female politicians were rated relatively high (see the appendix for results).

12　See note 9.

13　In the result section, we discuss the two categories of character and competence traits. However, a principal component analysis shows that the ten traits do not load on the two categories (cf. Bittner, 2011). Instead, the eight positive phrased traits form one factor and two negatively phrased traits the second; see the appendix (Table A2) with factor loadings. Because of this result we did not create two variables of character and competence traits but proceed the analyses with all separate traits.

14　See the appendix for the results of the analysis on the data of the second vignette in Table A3.

15　See the appendix for the results of the analysis on the data of the second vignette in Table A4.

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Appendix

The Appendix is only available online and can be found here: https://www.elevenjournals.com/tijdschrift/PLC/2022/1/PLC-D-20-00007A.

Did the COVID-19 Pandemic Reduce Attention to Environmental Issues?

A Panel Study Among Parents in Belgium, 2019-2020

Sari Verachtert, Dieter Stiers & Marc Hooghe*

Abstract

Theories on issue competition assume that there is only a limited number of issues that a person prioritises simultaneously. In this research note, we test this mechanism by using a panel study that was conducted among Belgian parents in 2019 and 2020. Between the two observations of the study, the country suffered a severe health crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We investigate whether this crisis reduced the priority of environmental issues among respondents. Our results show that there was indeed a significant decline of some indicators for environmental concern, but not for others. Furthermore, we show that a higher priority for the health-related and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic was associated with a steeper decline in environmental concern.

1 Introduction

For most citizens, social and political issues will not receive all that much time and attention (Zaller, 1992). The topics that are being singled out to receive scarce cognitive resources will be the ones that are considered as being most important by the actor (Wlezien, 2005). The literature on issue salience suggests that both citizens and political systems can only prioritise a limited number of issues simultaneously. It has been argued that sudden negative events such as externally induced crises tend to take priority, crowding out other issues from their place in the limelight (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Thus far, most of the studies on issue competition deal with attention in the mass media, or with a place on the political agenda, but from a cognitive perspective a similar dynamic should be present on the individual level, too (Zaller, 1992). Moreover, previous research on

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issue competition has focused on the obvious example of the economy and economic crises (Cho & Young, 2002; Singer, 2013). As a result, we do not know whether the mechanism of issue competition also works on the individual level, and whether it applies to other examples of negative events or crises. Therefore, the aim of this research note is to examine the effects of a suddenly imposed major health crisis and high impact event on individuals' issue priorities. More specifically, for the purpose of this study, we test whether the COVID-19 crisis that started in 2020 had a negative effect on the priority of and attention to another major issue: climate change. In the years prior to 2020, climate change gradually gained importance, both among public opinion as within the international community, and this led to a wave of protest in industrialised societies (Boulianne et al., 2020). Environmental issues (e.g. climate change, protection of the environment) are key issues of concern in many countries around the world (Milfont & Schultz, 2016). An obvious question in the context of environmental concern is whether the COVID-19 pandemic, which rapidly evolved into a major social and political crisis, has led to a downgrading of the environment as an important priority. At present, there are only some studies available on whether the literature on issue competition can help us to explain how the pandemic crowded out attention for climate change in the mass media (Rauchfleisch, Siegen & Vogler, forthcoming). This finding about the mass media, however, is not automatically also valid for public opinion as a whole, and therefore it is important to investigate whether citizens changed their attention for environmental issues due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Our main research question therefore is: to what extent did the COVID-19 pandemic reduce concern about climate change and the priority of environmental issues?

Although the COVID-19 pandemic is not structurally different compared to other previous crises and pandemics (e.g. the Financial Crisis of 2008 and subsequent years), this study wants to examine the issue competition theory in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic because of its global nature and its unprecedented impact on almost all domains of life, including employment, culture, family life and health. Globally, COVID-19 has had an extremely large impact on the lives of citizens, not just because of the health risk, but also because of the experience with isolation, social distancing, lockdowns and various national and international restrictions (Baker et al., 2020; Murray & Piot, 2021). If issue competition does occur, we would expect it in such extreme conditions. Empirically, compared to other research in the field of issue competition, this article offers a contribution to the literature on issue competition by making use of a unique two-wave panel data survey, a format that is rather essential if one wishes to investigate the effect of an external event like this. The 634 panel respondents consisted of parents of school-age children, set up as part of a study on environmental concern among pupils and their parents. The vast majority, ca. 78% (E. Vloeberghs, Statbel, personal communication, 12 October 2021) of the adult population in Belgium has children. This means that our sample of parents covers a substantial majority of adults, but self-evidently we cannot make any claims about generalisability

toward the full adult population. However, our research covers the majority of the population of Belgian parents. The panel survey is unique in the sense that the first wave was implemented well before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic while the second wave was conducted after the initial wave of the pandemic in Belgium, a country that has been seriously affected by the pandemic. This setting allows us to go beyond investigating differences in attention for the environment, as we can investigate for which respondents we observe *change* in priority for environmental issues. Doing so, the study provides a unique insight in changes in people's issue priorities during a major health crisis.

1.1 Issue Competition

Most citizens tend to have a limited ability to process information about social and current events (Zaller, 1992). Citizens are sometimes characterised as 'cognitive misers', who try to economise the intellectual effort that is needed to keep up with a rapidly evolving world (Peffley et al., 1987). This view implies that there could be a zero-sum relation between the priority of different topics competing for attention. To express it differently: if one topic increases in salience (i.e. the level of importance placed on a given issue (e.g. Burden & Sanberg, 2003)), it is assumed that other topics will necessarily decrease in priority (Zhu, 1992). Moreover, if one topic rises in visibility and importance on the agenda, other issues are given less attention in the media, the popular discourse, and to voters (Zaller, 1992).

The mechanism of issue competition among public opinion has been well documented within the field of economic voting. There is an ongoing debate within this literature about whether an economic crisis increases the priority of the economy (Singer, 2013). Some scholars argue that a weak or volatile economy increases attention for the economy (Bloom & Price, 1975; Cho & Young, 2002; Singer, 2011), while other studies claim that the economy is always an important issue to voters (Duch & Stevenson, 2010; Fiorina & Shepsle, 1989). A more recent study from Singer (2013) argues that voters are more likely to emphasise importance for the economy during periods of bad or volatile economic performance. The study confirms that voters' attention to economic issues is not stable but changes systematically. Moreover, during a period with a weak economy in which the priority of the economy increases in people's minds, voters are distracted from social policy, foreign affairs and issues related to the environment (Singer, 2013). Hence, the literature on the salience of the economy shows that, at least for some topics, issue salience seems to be a zero-sum game. Therefore, next to the first aim to examine the effects of a suddenly imposed major health crisis on individuals' priorities, our second goal here is to test whether the mechanism of a zero-sum game manifests itself in other crises and for issues other than the economy as well.

1.2 Concern for the Environment

Most previous studies on issue competition have been based on the effects of an economic crisis, as this is indeed the kind of crisis that contemporary industrialised societies will experience most frequently. We do not know, therefore, whether findings from these studies can be generalised towards the effects

of other externally induced crisis experiences, and therefore our aim is to investigate the effects of a sudden health crisis, on a scale that Western societies had not experienced since decades. The aim of this study is to examine another important current policy issue: climate change and other environmental issues. We want to further investigate how the environmental concern of the Belgian population could also be subjected to the mechanism of issue competition, as it is generally considered a long-term problem with real-life consequences for most citizens after a considerable delay of time. We know from previous research that there is indeed a widespread concern about this issue among public opinion in industrialised societies (Bergquist & Warshaw, 2019; Egan & Mullin, 2017; Lewis et al., 2018; Scruggs & Benegal, 2012). However, most of the existing literature on public opinion on climate change, neglected to include the priority of the issue (Crawley et al., 2019). It is important to note in this regard that public concern about climate change can have real-life consequences on climate policy. Studies have shown that governments are more likely to implement a strong climate policy when they have the impression that citizens are actually concerned about this issue (Burstein, 2003; Tjernström & Tietenberg, 2008). However, this relationship cannot always be taken for granted. Issues such as gun control, immigration and climate change have regularly gotten attention in the United States for instance, with little to no policy response (Bromley-Trujillo & Poe, 2020).

For an empirical study on the occurrence of environmental concern, it is important to note that there are a number of theoretical perspectives on the nature of this concern. While some researchers consider environmental concern as a general attitude (Bamberg, 2003), others highlight the fact that this concept is in fact multidimensional. According to Dunlap and Jones (2002, p. 485), environmental concern can be defined as the following: "the degree to which people are aware of environmental problems, support efforts to solve the problems, and are willing to contribute personally to the solution." As is clear from this definition, environmental concern includes different dimensions, including attitudes and behaviours, and therefore, we will use a full set of indicators to operationalise this concept. It is also noteworthy that there has been an example where concern for climate change decreased in priority because of a crisis. In 1972, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment stated that concerns about the global environment should dominate the political agenda in the years to come (Strong, 1973). However, the economic crisis that started in 1973 quickly pushed away the environment from the political agenda (Hooghe, 1991). The environment only made its reappearance on the global political agenda with the publication of the Brundtland report in 1987 (Brundtland, 1987). We test whether the same mechanism applies in people's minds in the COVID-19 pandemic in Belgium.

1.3 The Case of Belgium
The current study was implemented in Belgium, a country that can be seen as an average European country. From a policy perspective, the Belgian government tends to follow European rules and policies in order to mitigate climate change, and with regard to public opinion, Belgian youth has been quite active

in various protests on climate change (Maurissen, 2020). With regard to pro-environmental behaviour, concern and responsibility towards climate change, Belgian citizens score above average compared to other European countries (European Social Survey, 2016).

Belgium was one of the worst victims of the COVID-19 pandemic during the first months of the pandemic, with death rates per capita reaching the same magnitude as France and Spain (ECDC, 2020). Citizens of Belgium, therefore, had every reason to be concerned about the spread of the virus, rendering the country a well-suited case to investigate the priority of climate change and other environmental issues.[1] Following our overview of the existing literature, we hypothesise that the COVID-19 pandemic reduces the priority and concern of environmental issues. Specifically, we hypothesise that citizens who are most concerned about the impact of the pandemic on the health system and the economy will become less and less involved in the environmental issue.

2   Data and Methods

Our data were collected as part of a broader survey on environmental education in Belgium – that is, the VALIES project. For this project, a total of 2,565 children aged from 10 to 14 years old from 47 different Flemish primary and secondary schools in each of the five Flemish provinces were recruited for the survey's first wave.[2] Every child who participated in the VALIES project filled in a survey in the classroom in September 2019. In addition, each student received an additional paper questionnaire with similar questions, which was handed over to one of the parents for completion. The focus of our investigation is on this group of parents. Both parents and children had a choice between completing a paper survey or an online survey.[3] Four weeks later, a first reminder was sent to the parents via the teachers.

In order to recruit parents for the second wave survey, the researchers asked the respondents' approval and contact details to take part in the second wave in June 2020 (8 months after the first survey wave). For this project, 2,565 parents were contacted by their children to fill in the first survey. In total, 1,027 parents from the VALIES project (a response rate of 40.04 %) filled in the first survey, and 895 parents from the project agreed to participate in the second wave survey. In June 2020, we contacted the parents for the second wave. Again, a first reminder letter was sent four weeks later, and another four weeks later a second reminder was sent, with inclusion of a hard copy of the survey. The second sample consisted of 634 parents (551 parents of the project and 83 parents of the control group). This means that panel attrition stands at 39.96% for the entire group.[4] In all, our final parent sample included 634 participants who participated in both the first and the second wave. 78% of the respondents were mothers, 21% were fathers and 1% were other participants (e.g. grandparent, foster parent).[5] Parents' mean age was 43.43 years (SD = 5.60).[6] The youngest respondent in our study was 31 years old and the oldest was 71 years old. Details about the age distribution can be found in Appendix D. For this analysis, we only include full panel participants, that is parents that partici-

pated in both waves of the panel, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.[7] This panel design offers us a unique way of looking at *changes* in people's attitudes between the two survey waves, which in this case means before and after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This offers us a more solid test of the issue competition mechanism than studies that were fielded during the pandemic itself, and that can only look at differences in levels of priority instead of changes.

2.1 Measures

In order to answer our research question by investigating changes in respondents' concern about the environment, we focus on two reliable and one-dimensional measurement scales covering respectively attitudes and behaviour. Details about all variables are included in Appendix A. The first dependent variable is an attitudinal measure. Respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they agree with the statement 'all attention for the climate change is exaggerated', 'more attention is needed for the protection of the environment', on a 5-point scale ranging from fully agree to fully disagree. A third item measures 'government expenditure for environmental policy should be increased or decreased on a scale ranging from "much less" to "much more"'. The fourth and the fifth indicators measure the respondents' interest in climate change and protecting the environment respectively – both on 4-point scales. As these five attitudes are substantially correlated (see Appendix A), we create one measure of environmental attitude as an index score.[8] The second indicator of interest is a behavioural measure. Respondents were asked to indicate how often they

engage in certain behaviours, three of which were directed towards their environmentally friendly behaviour (i.e. sorting waste, sorting organic waste and reducing waste). As these behaviours are strongly correlated (see Appendix A), we create one measure of environmentally friendly behaviour as an index score.[9] These two dependent variables were chosen because of their connection with environmental issues.

An important note that needs to be made about the dependent variables is that the measurement scales differ between the different indicators; whereas some questions had a 4-point scale, some others had a 5-point scale. Therefore, for reasons of comparability, we rescaled all dependent variables to range from a minimum value of 0 to a maximum value of 1. The main test of our research question will be to test whether the values of these variables changed significantly between the first and second survey waves.

Besides testing changing concern about the environment using the measures described earlier, we also test which respondents were more likely to change than others. To do so, we use two indicators of issue priority, which were only included in the second wave of the panel. Respondents were asked to evaluate the importance of two important issues (i.e.. health and economy) to which people were exposed to during the COVID-19 pandemic, in trade-off with the importance of the environment. These trade-off questions have been shown to provide a good measure of respondents' environmental concern (Kenny, 2021). The priority of health was measured by the item 'our own health is more important than the climate/environment'. Answers could be given on a 5-point Likert-type scale

ranging from 1 (totally disagree – i.e. not only concerned about health) to 5 (totally agree – i.e. mostly concerned about health). The average score on this item was 3.23, indicating that respondents in general do not clearly prioritise the environment or their own health. The level of importance of the economy was measured by the item 'to save our economy we should postpone green measures'. Answers could vary from 1 (totally disagree – i.e. not only concerned about the economy) to 5 (totally agree – i.e. mostly concerned about the economy). These two questions allow respondents to indicate which issues are personally important to them, making an explicit trade-off with the alternative option. The average score on this item was 2.47, which is close to the middle of this scale, suggesting that opinions on this specific question, too, tend to be rather ambiguous. In the regression analyses (see below), we add several covariates to control for their impact in changes in priority. First, we include the standard socio-demographics age and sex (1=female). Furthermore, we control by the respondent's position in society by including educational level and income. Education level variable has three categories, ranging from 0 (low), 1 (middle) to 2 (high; see Appendix A for more details). Income is included as a self-reported measure of how comfortably the family of the respondent can live on the current family income. We also control for participation of the respondent's child in the main environmental education project because this could have affected their environmental concern, even though most of the project was cancelled due to the pandemic.[10]

2.2 Method

Our main research question is to investigate whether concern for the environment decreased during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a most straightforward test, we compare respondents' scores from the first and the second survey waves using paired sample t-tests. All variables have been coded in such a way that higher levels indicate a higher concern for the environment. It should be noted that the dependent variables are left-skewed, with the result that there is more than sufficient room for a decrease, without any risk for a floor effect. In a second step, we examine to what extent a high priority of health or the economy respectively can explain people's changing concern about the environment. To do so, we first calculate different scores of people's attention for the environment between the two waves – higher scores indicating a (stronger) increase in attention, lower scores indicating a (stronger) decrease. We then include these differences as dependent variables in a series of OLS regression models. In a first model, we include our independent variable of interest (salience of health or the economy, respectively); in a second model, we include our control variables. The expectation in these models is that changes in concern for the environment will be most pronounced among respondents who prioritise health and the economy over the climate.

3 Results

3.1 Concern for the Environment and Climate Change

First, we test whether attention for the environment and climate change decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic. We compare the average answers to the different indicators of interest between the first survey wave (September 2019; before the pandemic) and the second survey wave (June 2020; during the pandemic). First, we present the results of paired sample t-test for our two respective sum scales. The results are summarised in Table 1 – note that both scales have been rescaled to range from 0 to 1. The results show mixed support for our expectation that the pandemic decreased concern about the climate. As can be seen in Table 1, of our two measures of attention and priority for the environment and climate, the sum scale of behaviours shows a significant increase between t1 and t2. People seem to have been more environmentally friendly during the pandemic than before which is a less expected result. For the environmental attitudes, we do not find evidence of a significant change.

3.2 Explaining Changes in Concern for the Environment

Next to the change in individuals' issue priorities, we also test whether there really is a zero-sum relation between the level of attention for competing issues. The expectation is that the level of importance attached to the 'new' issue is positively associated with the steepness of the decline. In order to test the occurrence of this mechanism, we estimate a series of regression analyses, where the difference in the environmental measurements between t1 and t2 serves as the dependent variable. As explained earlier, we test the effect of the increasing priority for two issues that have been particularly prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic: health and the economy. We expect that the priority for health and the economy will be negatively related to the evolution in respondents' concern about sustainability. The results are summarised in Table 2 for health and Table 3 for the economy.

Table 1   Paired sample t-tests change in sum scales

	Survey wave 1	**Survey wave 2**	**Difference between waves**
Environmental attitudes	0.737	0.731	−0.006
Environmental behaviour	0.864	0.878	0.012*

Note. Average scores on the different indicators in the two survey waves respectively.
Paired sample t-test: significance levels: +: p < 0.01; * *p* < 0.05; **: *p* < 0.01; ***: *p* < 0.001.

Table 2   ***Explaining changes in concern about the environment with attention for health***

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Attitudes B (s.e.)	**Attitudes B (s.e.)**	**Behaviours B (s.e.)**	**Behaviours B (s.e.)**
Health more important than climate	−0.008[+] (0.004)	−0.008[+] (0.005)	0.008 (0.005)	0.008 (0.006)
Sex (ref.=male)		−0.008 (0.012)		−0.013 (0.014)
Age		−0.001 (0.001)		−0.001 (0.001)
Education: low				
Middle		0.015 (0.021)		0.017 (0.026)
High		0.009 (0.021)		0.005 (0.025)
Income		0.001 (0.007)		0.005 (0.008)
School child in project		0.007 (0.013)		0.023 (0.016)
Constant	0.019 (0.015)	0.043 (0.054)	−0.013 (0.018)	−0.010 (0.066)
N	574	574	553	553
R^2	0.005	0.009	0.004	0.014

Note. Entries are unstandardised OLS coefficients, standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels: +: $p < 0.01$; *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$.

Table 3   *Explaining changes in concern about the environment with salience of the economy*

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Attitudes B (s.e.)	**Attitudes B (s.e.)**	**Behaviours B (s.e.)**	**Behaviours B (s.e.)**
Postpone green deal to save economy	−0.016*** (0.004)	−0.017*** (0.005)	0.008 (0.005)	0.009 (0.006)
Sex (ref.=male)		−0.007 (0.011)		−0.010 (0.014)
Age		−0.001 (0.001)		−0.001 (0.001)
Education: low				
Middle		0.012 (0.021)		0.023 (0.026)
High		0.000 (0.021)		0.009 (0.026)
Income		−0.001 (0.007)		0.009 (0.008)
School child in project		0.006 (0.013)		0.023 (0.016)
Constant	0.033** (0.012)	0.064 (0.053)	−0.007 (0.014)	−0.020 (0.066)
N	571	571	550	550
R^2	0.023	0.028	0.004	0.015

Note. Entries are unstandardised OLS coefficients, standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels: +: $p < 0.01$; *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$.

Figure 1   Importance of health and change in concern about the environment
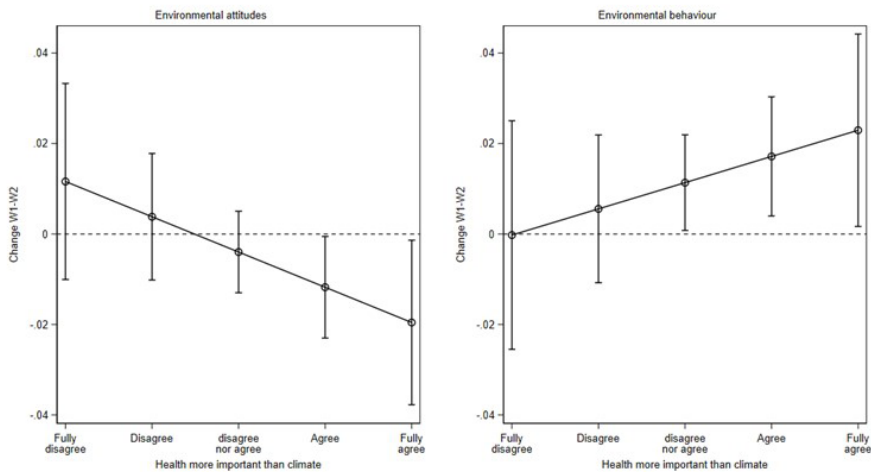
The results show mixed support for our hypothesis. No significant associations were observed between the changes in environmental attitudes and priority of health. There is more support for a moderating impact of salience of the economy. It seems like attention for the economy strongly decreases people's environmental attitudes. More specifically, the coefficient indicates that the more people agree that health is more important than the environment, the larger the decrease in environmental attitudes. For the other indicator of environmental concern, we do not find a significant association with priority for health care. For a detailed view on the effects and for ease of interpretation, we show the average decline of each indicator at the different levels of priority of health in Figure 1.

The results in Figure 1 show a more nuanced picture of the change in concern about the environment. The results in Table 1 indicated a decreased support for more spending on environmental policy overall. While the results

in Table 2 did not show a significant association between this decrease and priority of health, Figure 1 shows that there is a decrease for individuals who strongly believe that health is more important than the environment, while there is no such association for respondents who strongly disagree with the higher importance of health. Hence, while the difference between the two groups is not significant, it provides some evidence that issue priorities can be a zero-sum game. While those who do not consider health as being very important do not change significantly in the importance they attach to the environment, those who say that health is more important show a significant decrease in importance to the environment.

As a second test of our hypothesis, we estimate the same models, including as main independent variable a measure of the respondents' opinions on postponing environmentally friendly measures in order to save the economy. The results are summarised in Table 3.

Figure 2   *Importance of the economy and change in concern about the environ-*
ment
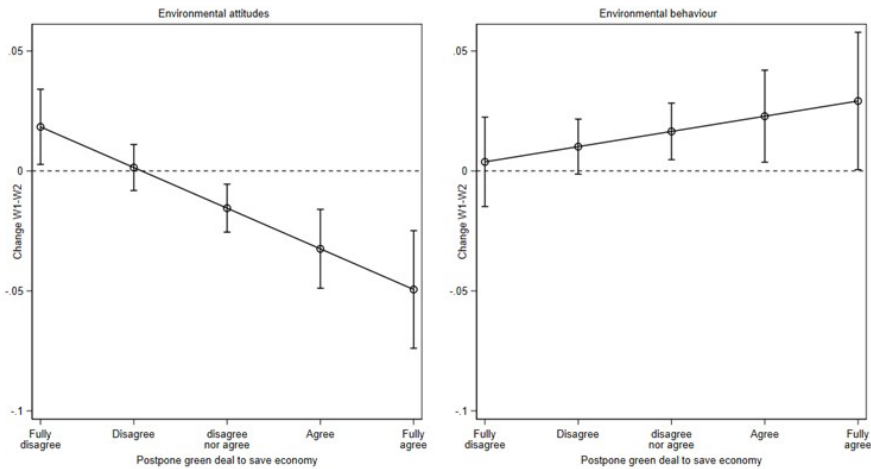
There is more support for a moderating impact of salience of the economy. It seems like attention for the economy strongly decreases people's environmental attitudes. Again, we provide a more detailed look into the effects by displaying average levels of change at different levels of salience for the economy (Figure 2).

The results in Figure 2 are somewhat similar to those in Figure 1. We also find differences in the levels of attitudes between the two survey waves of our panel in the extent to which people change their attitudes following their issue priorities. With this issue, we even find opposite changes in the importance of the environment between respondents who think that the economy is more important than green policies and those who do not. In short, respondents who value the economy more than the environment decrease in environmental attitudes. On the contrary, respondents who attach less importance to the economy, increase their level of importance to environmental attitudes.

4   Conclusion

In this research note, we contribute to the theoretical development of the concept of issue competition by investigating the priority of environmental issues in the context of a crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic, it can be assumed that this issue dominated the political agenda, the media and public opinion during most of the year 2020. Despite this rather unique, and strong external, negative event, it has to be noted that the mechanism of issue competition theory is not fully supported by the results of this panel study.

We found the strongest evidence for a zero-sum game in concern for the climate for the attitudinal dimension. However, our results suggest that this mechanism does not seem to apply at all to environmental behaviour, as

there is no apparent reason that worries about the pandemic implied that one did not have time anymore to sort household waste. In fact, the opposite occurred, as respondents actually seemed to have more time to engage in this form of environment friendly behaviour. Future research on issue competition should hence distinguish various dimensions of environmental behaviour under investigation. Next, to be able to generalise the results of this study which are based on a sample of Belgian parents, it is important that future studies investigating the change in attention for the environment and climate change include a more representative sample of people.

The relevance for policy is that different dimensions need to be distinguished. Among environmental policymakers there is a concern that attention for the environment and climate change will be neglected, as a result of other important issues and worries that rise within a society (Weber, 2015). With regard to the COVID-19 health crisis, which was tested in this research, this is obviously true for environmental attitudes. But for other dimensions as environmental behaviours, this is less obvious. This is in line with the study from Singer (2011) who states that the economy is certainly not the only issue citizens care about. Environmental and climate change concern is still present among the population, and is expressed in manners that, apparently, are perfectly compatible with the pandemic.

Notes

1   It is important to note that in June, July and August 2020 which was the time period of our data collection of the second wave of the survey, the number of cases, deaths and hospital admissions of COVID-19 were lower compared to the first months of the pandemic. Between the 1st of June and the 31st of August 2020, Belgium counted 534 deaths, 2,038 hospitalisations and 27,066 confirmed COVID-19 cases in a population of about 11 million people (Sciensano, 2021).

2   Belgium is a federal country, where education falls under the purview of the language communities. The current study was conducted only in the Dutch language education system, which accounts for ca. 60% of the Belgian population, with the other 40% comprising education in the French or German language system.

3   For the main analysis, we controlled whether the paper/online format made a difference to our results (Appendix C). In total, 47% of our panel sample filled in the paper survey while 53% opted for the online survey. The results show that the format used to fill in the questionnaire, online or offline, did not have any substantive effect on the results in the analyses.

4   It is important to note that attrition was only slightly influenced by socio-economic status. 59.75% of the full panel respondents had higher education credentials, compared to 49.06% of the respondents who participated in the first wave only.

5   As expected, there was an overrepresentation of women in our sample, as is common in surveys starting within a school context.

6   In our survey sample 93% of the respondents indicated that Dutch was their main spoken language at home while the remaining 7% mainly spoke another language at home. Looking at the education level, 5% of our respond-

ents have a low level of education (no education, primary or lower secondary), 35% has completed middle education (upper secondary education or post-secondary education) as their highest education level. High-income groups were overrepresented: 60% have completed higher education (bachelor or above). Parental income was assessed as the subjective household income. Respondents were asked to describe their family income and had to indicate how easy or difficult it was to live within their income. 50% indicated that it was easy to live within their family income while 42% stated it was not easy or difficult to make ends meet. 7% indicated it was difficult to cope and less than 1% mentioned it was very difficult to live on the household income. In general, therefore, it has to be acknowledged that the panel respondents have a higher socio-economic status than the general population of Belgium.

7   This statement has been phrased in a negative way to limit social desirability in the answers, and is reversed so that higher answers denote more attention for the environment.

8   In Appendix B, we show the results for the different attitudes separately, and these are in line with the results shown here.

9   In Appendix B, we show the results for the different behaviours separately, and these are in line with results shown here.

10 We also wanted to test our models with an extra independent variable measuring the exposure of the COVID-19 pandemic. By doing so, we could actually look at individual respondents whose lives had been considerably uprooted because of the events. We tested our model with two extra independent var-

iables 'change in occupational status' and 'change in household income'. The results are reported in Appendix E and show a small significant effect of change in occupation for environmental attitudes. However, due to the limited sample of respondents that have experienced these changes, the two independent variables were not included in the main analyses.

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Appendices

The Appendices A-E are only available online and can be found here: https://www.elevenjournals.com/tijdschrift/PLC/2022/1/PLC-21-00024A.

Mapping Cabinet Conflicts and Conflict Features

Refined Definitions, Coding Instructions and Results From Belgium (1995-2018)

Maxime Vandenberghe*

Abstract

> *This research note presents new definitions, measurements and data of cabinet conflicts and conflict features. Particular attention is given to the ethno-territorial nature of conflicts. This approach can easily be applied to various sources, periods, policy levels and countries. As an example, this note describes a novel dataset that provides the most fine-grained picture of Belgian cabinet conflicts to date (N = 1,090; 1995-2018).*

Keywords: cabinet conflict, coalition politics, Belgium.

1 Introduction

Conflict is inherent to coalition politics and both descriptive and explanatory analyses of cabinet conflicts are on the rise (Andeweg & Timmermans, 2008; Blondel & Müller-Rommel, 1993; Marangoni & Vercesi, 2015; Moury & Timmermans, 2013; Nousiainen, 1993; Timmermans & Moury, 2006). However, this emerging field is marked by several lacunae. First, existing (operation-al) definitions of cabinet conflict fail to discern them from mere disagreements. Indeed, this very distinction is often ignored and some studies use indicators of disagreement (e.g. the range of party positions) to operationalise cabinet conflicts (e.g. Klüver & Bäck, 2019). But in coalition politics, disagreement between partners is abundant. Such different views and stances can but need not lead to clashes. Conflict does not refer to disagreement as such, but to the way disagreement is handled (i.e. the behaviour of those who disagree). Second, empirical analyses are scarce and coding choices are often unclear or suboptimal: What about cases of doubt? What search strategy is used to select and code sources, for example what keywords are used to search digital archives? Also, many studies only focus on major clashes. One example is the set of 44 conflicts in Dutch and Belgian cabinets (1989-2003) discussed by Timmermans and Moury (2006) (see also Moury & Timmermans, 2013). But when is a conflict 'major' enough to be included? And why exclude smaller clashes? Others, such as Marangoni and Vercesi (2015), search digital news archives and succeed in exposing more conflicts (851 Italian cabinet conflicts between 1996 and 2011). However, by using keywords that refer to clashes directly (e.g. 'conflict', 'struggle'), such existing analyses are blind to the many

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conflicts that are not explicitly labelled as such. Third, the intensity of conflict is usually grasped by using 'risk factors' as proxies. For instance, divergent preferences are riskier than tangential preferences and interparty conflict outweighs interdepartmental conflict (Andeweg & Timmermans, 2008; Marangoni & Vercesi, 2015; Nousiainen, 1993). But proxies are no direct indicators, and using them comes with avoidable distortion (e.g. not all interparty conflicts are more intense than interdepartmental conflicts).

Building on and adding to these previous works, this research note wishes to address these lacunae. It presents a novel approach to defining and measuring cabinet conflicts. These are defined as explicit and antagonistic disagreements between cabinet members and/or relevant coalition party actors. This analysis uses a detailed codebook and provides an intercoder reliability test (*cf. infra*). Conflict intensities are discerned directly, and several variables keep track of doubtful cases. The approach presented here is suitable for comparative applications on a wide range of sources (newspapers, digital news archives, TV or radio shows, etc.). I also discuss one such application, the result of which is the most fine-grained dataset on the frequency and features of Belgian cabinet conflicts to date (N = 1,090; 1995-2018).[1] Specific attention goes to ethno-territorial conflicts. They shaped the course of Belgium's history, and empirical studies on the subject are on the rise (e.g. Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015; De Winter & Baudewyns, 2009; Deschouwer, 2006; Hooghe, 2004). For instance, the duration of cabinet negotiations and the number of failed cabinet formation attempts have been shown to increase

when ethno-territorial issues are on the table (De Winter & Dumont, 2014). Similarly, we know that most fatal cabinet conflicts between 1946 and 1999 were ethno-territorial in nature (Dumont et al., 2001). These insights are valuable, but only expose the tip of the iceberg. What lacks is a profound and systematic view of the prevalence and evolution of such conflicts. In addressing this gap, small clashes and minor tensions deserve our attention too. They are indicative of the general political atmosphere and the cooperative or confrontational nature of everyday politics. As consociational theory posits (Lijphart, 1969, 1977, 2002), it is exactly this 'mundane' kind of day-to-day elite cooperation that is key to understanding the stability of divided states.

I proceed as follows. The first section addresses cabinet conflict's definition and measurement, while conflict variables are discussed in the second section. Illustrating the potential of the new approach described here, the third section presents some first results on conflicts in Belgium (1995-2018).

2 Defining and Mapping Cabinet Conflict

2.1 Defining Cabinet Conflict

Cabinet conflict has been defined as "any situation in which cabinet members differ in opinion, preference, interest or activity" (Appendix II in Blondel & Müller-Rommel, 1993, p. 316) or as "any quarrel or explicit disagreement between two or more executive members and/or coalition (individual or collective) party actors" (Marangoni & Vercesi, 2015, p. 21). In practice, disagreement must of course be externally visible for conflicts to be mapped (e.g.

reported in media sources). But not all disagreements are conflicts. Coalition partners disagree constantly, but in many cases, different views never turn ugly. A third criterion is needed. Disagreement must be 'antagonistic' or 'hostile', that is the pathway of accommodative politics must be left. This shift from constructive to confrontational politics can manifest itself in many ways: forms of swearing, blocking, threatening and so forth (*cf. infra*). Also, not all coalition party actors are relevant. For instance, is an individual backbencher's frustrated rant really a 'cabinet conflict'? A 'relevance criterion' excludes such ballast: those involved must be cabinet members or represent a coalition party at large (e.g. president, PPG leader). When this is certainly not the case, situations are ignored. Cases of doubt are included and coded as such (*cf. infra*). In sum, cabinet conflicts are defined as any explicit and antagonistic disagreement between two or more cabinet members and/or relevant coalition party actors.

2.2 Mapping Cabinet Conflict
A fine-grained codebook (available on demand) was used to identify new conflicts and code conflict variables. It includes both general rules and detailed guidelines (e.g. 'code according to the nub of the conflict', 'when hesitating, opt for the least extreme category', 'code as a conflict when term X is used'). To guarantee coding consistency and transparency, a logbook was used. The main coding rationales are discussed here. To begin with, I inductively constructed six conflict indicators to decide whether disagreements are 'antagonistic' (Table 1). Note that combinations are possible (e.g. threatening with resignation).

To find and code cabinet conflicts, most studies use (amongst others) quantitative content analyses of printed newspapers or keyword searches in digital newspaper archives (e.g. Blondel & Müller-Rommel, 1993; Marangoni & Vercesi, 2015; Moury & Timmermans, 2013; Timmermans & Moury, 2006). The codebook used here can easily be applied to a wide range of sources, including TV or radio archives, printed newspapers, magazines and political yearbooks. My own exploration of sources taught me some noteworthy lessons. Importantly, unless a very large team of coders is used, it is not feasible to read and code decades of newspapers when the focus is on all articles on all pages of every newspaper of every single day. Longitudinal analyses of printed newspapers only seem to be feasible when coders focus on samples of certain journals, issues (days in the week), pages and perhaps even articles (based on their titles). My own attempts to find Belgian cabinet conflicts this way only exposed the major conflicts but provided no consistent view of smaller tensions (grumpy sneers, short-lived criticism, etc.). Indeed, reading full journals (as a test) showed that the sample approach only exposed some of these small tensions, while many clashes of equal magnitude remained hidden. Numerous other sources were also prone to the feasibility problem, or were manageably short but failed to report most small clashes.[2]

Table 1   ***Conflict indicators and intensity levels***

Indicator	Description	Intensity level
Verbal	Pejorative criticism, swearing, scapegoating, anger, etc.	0
Block	Manifest blocking (attempts) (restrictive coding): empty chair tactics, sharp veto against X despite urgency, etc.	1
Impose	Imposing or trying to impose X on partner (restrictive coding): faits accomplis, sharp ultimatum for X, etc.	1
Threat	Threatening partner (whatever the threat). Any reference to future retaliations against the behaviour of partner(s) (if they do X, we will Y)	1 (2 if survival)
Branding	Situation is labelled a conflict (or crisis, tensions, escalation, etc.) by coalition partner(s) or third actor(s)	1 (2 if 'crisis')
Survival	Resignation of the cabinet, a coalition party or a cabinet member is in the balance, openly questioned (incl. threats), or effectively occurring	2
Other	Residual category (logbook)	case-specific

Details: codebook (available on demand)

The first results described below are based on a coding effort of digital news archives (GoPress). Similar archives are available in most countries and typically cover many years if not decades. Hence, the usage of digital news archives is a fruitful avenue for comparative and longitudinal reflections. It also avoids the feasibility problem that characterises for example printed newspaper analysis (where no prior keyword selection can downsize the sample of articles). I searched the full Dutch selection of Belga, the largest and most authoritative Belgian news agency.[3] For several reasons, news agency articles are preferred over journal or magazine articles. First, most incidents are covered by various journals or magazines, resulting in a large selection of similar articles without added value. Second, using digital news archives avoids the issue of having to choose a selection of specific journals or magazines (to keep coding feasible). Third, news agency articles include all articles and news releases of all days (which is a major asset). Finally, as compared to journals and magazines, news agencies such as Belga also use more straightforward headlines, which further facilitates data collection.

Media sources are well suited for mapping and coding conflicts. It is widely known that the media focuses on conflict in political news (*cf*. Lengauer et al., 2012) and uses strategy and game-frames (*cf*. Aalberg et al., 2012). Using media sources thus ensures that few conflicts slip through the net. Rather, a significant bycatch was thrown overboard after checking for conflict indicators myself. I am aware of the debates on the potentially growing media focus on conflict (e.g. Vliegenthart et al., 2011), which could distort the data.

To some extent, this problem is unavoidable. All sources can be prone to such trends – including statements by politicians themselves (perhaps, their focus on conflict increases too). The only view we have is an indirect one. There is no 'direct' source exposing cabinet clashes. We are not flies on the cabinet's walls. Although it serves as a relevant nuance, the potential presence of blind spots should not withhold us from studying what is visible. Also, in this respect, the first findings presented below are rather comforting (*cf. infra*). They show no general increase in conflict levels since 1995, but strong fluctuations. Roughly speaking, conflict was on the rise for years, but this trend did not persist. The most recent years covered by the data (2017 and 2018) even show the lowest conflict levels in more than a decade (except for 2011). If anything, a growing media focus on conflicts would imply that this apparent decline is even sharper in reality.

Having discussed the issue of sources, I now turn to the equally important issue of sample selection (using keywords). Previous studies use keywords referring to cabinet conflicts directly, such as 'contrast', 'conflict', 'disagreement', 'struggle' or 'against' (Marangoni & Vercesi, 2015, n. 11). One problem with this approach is that it is hard to establish an exhaustive list of relevant concepts. A second and related problem is that it leaves us blind to the many clashes that are not explicitly labelled as such. Not all articles on conflicts actually mention such terms. To avoid missing conflicts, a more thorough approach was used. First, a keyword search with Boolean operators finds all articles on a given coalition (Table 2). To exclude irrelevant articles, this search had to apply to articles' texts and titles. In a second phase, I read all headlines of the resulting selection of tens of thousands of articles. Articles were selected when their headline included conflict indicators, pleas against something (e.g. "Proposal X faces criticism") or potential rebuttals against sneers (e.g. "Proposal X is not unrealistic, says PM"). The only excluded articles are the ones whose titles fail to indicate any kind of disagreement and articles that are certainly not about the coalition partners. In this phase, and to avoid missing conflicts, being overly inclusive was preferred to being overly restrictive. The gold was sieved from the resulting selection in a third phase, when the 9,547 resulting articles were fully read to find and code conflicts.

3 Conflict Variables

Conflict variables are listed in Table 3. Each conflict's starting date, cabinet and source information is provided, next to a detailed description (355 words on average). Using the conflict indicators, three levels of intensity are discerned (*cf*. Table 1). Dummy variables grasp whether conflicts are between actors of the same party and identify cases of doubt.

Table 2   GoPress keyword search

Boolean operators

Seven distinct references to (Belgian) cabinets (separated by OR), all cabinet members (ministers, secretaries of state, prime minister) (separated by OR), all names of coalition parties (separated by OR) and all names of coalition party presidents (separated by OR), excluding (NOT) nine irrelevant recurring article titles (separated by OR).

For a cabinet with n parties and m cabinet members (ministers and secretaries of state):
("reference to cabinet 1"OR"reference to cabinet 2"OR(…)"reference to cabinet 7"OR"name party 1"OR"name party 2"OR(…)"name party n"OR"name PM"OR"name cabinet member 1"OR"name cabinet member 2"OR(…)"name cabinet member m")NOT("recurring article title 1"OR"recurring article title 2"OR(…)"recurring article title 9")

Example: Leterme I

("meerderheid"OR"regering"OR"federale regering"OR"Belgische regering"OR"federale coalitie"OR"Belgische coalitie"OR"wetstraat"OR"PS"OR"MR"OR"VLD"OR"Open Vld"OR"CD&V"OR"CDH"OR"FDF"OR"Leterme"OR"Reynders"OR"Onkelinx"OR"De-wael"OR"Vandeurzen"OR"Milquet"OR"Vervotte"OR"De Gucht"OR"Magnette"OR"Laruel-le"OR"De Crem"OR"Arena"OR"Turtelboom"OR"Van Quickenborne"OR"Michel"OR"Laloux-"OR"Delizee"OR"Delizée"OR"Wathelet"OR"Chastel"OR"Devlies"OR"Schouppe"OR"Fernan-dez"OR"Clerfayt"OR"Maingain"OR"Reynders"OR"Di Rupo"OR"Beke"OR"Thyssen"OR"Somers")NOT("persselectie"OR"krantentitels"OR"program of the day"OR"BELGA CORRECTION"OR"1LEAD"OR"Bilan de l'actualité"OR"titres journeaux"OR"Revue sélective de la presse"OR"Actualité internationale pour la semaine")

Table 3   Cabinet conflict in Belgium: variables (N = 1,090; 1995-2018)

Variable	N	%	Value(s)
ID			Identification number
Cabinet			Cabinet name
Year			Starting year
mm/yy start			Starting month and year
Topic+summary			Topic and description
Article first			Date of first article on conflict
Intensity	855	78.4	0 (low)
	149	13.7	1 (intermediate)
	85	7.8	2 (high)
	0	0	T (doubt/missing)
Copa	1,013	92.9	0 (no doubt: conflict is between coalition partners)
	77	7.1	T (doubt/missing)
Copa.doubt+non-pol	1,043	95.7	0 (no doubt: conflict is between political actors)
	47	4.3	T (doubt/missing)
Same_PP	1,028	94.3	0 (not solely between actors of same party)
	13	1.2	1 (solely between actors of same party)
	49	4.5	T (doubt/missing)

Table 3 **(Continued)**

Variable	N	%	Value(s)
Solo_doubt	893	81.9	0 (no doubt: conflict meets relevance criterion)
	197	18.1	T (doubt/missing)
ET_issue	919	84.3	0 (no ethno-territorial issue)
	169	15.5	1 (ethno-territorial issue)
	2	0.2	T (doubt/missing)
ET_issue_ detail	919	84.3	0 (no ethno-territorial issue)
	45	4.1	1 (linguistic struggle; e.g. language law)
	39	3.6	2 (state reform; not fiscal/financial aspects)
	3	0.3	3 (fiscal/financial aspects of state reform)
	44	4.0	4 (distribution of assets and liabilities; e.g. allocation key for doctor contingents, distribution of EU funds)
	11	1.0	5 (combinations)
	27	2.5	6 (other)
	2	0.2	T (doubt/missing)
SGS2.0	1,013	92.9	0 (no full segmental sides/no info)
	57	5.2	1 (one full segmental side)
	15	1.4	2 (two full segmental sides)
	5	0.5	6 (segmental frame, unverifiable)
	0	0	T (doubt/missing)
SGS_detail	245	22.5	0 (mixed sides)
	123	11.3	1 (intra-Francophone)
	260	23.9	2 (intra-Flemish)
	295	27.1	3 (partial segmental sides; e.g. one of the Flemish against one of the Francophone parties)
	43	3.9	4 (full Francophone vs. partial Flemish side; e.g. all Francophone parties against one Flemish minister)
	14	1.3	5 (partial Francophone vs. full Flemish side)
	15	1.4	6 (two full segmental sides)
	95	8.7	T (doubt/missing)

Four variables grasp conflicts' ethno-territorial nature. Building on the concept of segmental cleavages presented by Eckstein (1966, p. 34), ethno-territorial conflicts are defined here as conflicts between segmental sides (Flemings vs. Francophones) and/or on ethno-territorial issues (e.g. language policy, state reform). To identify such issues, I use the codebook of the Belgian Agendas Project (BAP) which is customised to fit the Belgian context (*cf*. Walgrave et al., 2019).[4] The BAP is part of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) (Baumgartner et al., 2019), which collects data on the 'issue attention' of different institutions and actors (newspapers, parties, etc.). It is not preoccupied with conflicts itself, but the categorisation of issues it presents is useful for operationalising ethno-territorial issues. Specifically, three codes are combined, two of which are amended to fit this study: intergovernmental relations (e.g. transfers, decentralisation; code 2001), state reform and constitution (2033) and the promotion and defence of national culture (e.g. language law; 2311). When clearly linked to these codes, conflicts are also coded as clashes on ethno-territorial issues (e.g. clashes on the appointment of a minister due to his/her legacy of language law violations). Ethno-territorial issues are mapped on two levels: with a dummy variable (ET_issue: 0/1) and with a detailed variable that distinguishes four subsets of issues: language struggle, state reform, fiscal/financial issues and the distribution of assets and liabilities (ET_issue_detail).

Segmental sides are linguistically homogeneous and encompassing. So, all Flemish and/or all Francophone coalition partners must stand oppose: e.g. when all Francophone parties attack one Flemish minister (one segmental side) or when all Flemish parties clash with all Francophone parties (two segmental sides). A general variable (SGS2.0) discerns 0, 1 or 2 segmental sides and grasps when conflict was described by the news agency in segmental terms that could not be verified (e.g. "proposal X fiercely criticised *in Flanders*"). A second variable (SGS_detail) grasps intra-Flemish and intra-Francophone conflicts as well as variations of intersegmental conflicts. To be considered an ethno-territorial conflict, "ET_issue" must be 1 and/or "SGS2.0" must be 1 or 2.[5] As its exceptional composition would cause distortion, an exception was made for the Michel I cabinet (which included three Flemish parties but only one Francophone party: MR, *Mouvement Réformateur*). Here, two segmental sides are needed to be considered a conflict along segmental lines (one side does not suffice). This avoids any clash between the MR and a coalition partner from being considered an ethno-territorial conflict.

An intercoder reliability test measures the degree of resemblance (Cohen's κ) between the original coding and that of an external coder with layman's knowledge of Belgian politics (Appendix 1). After an extensive briefing on the codebook and a day of practice, all variables of 32 randomly selected conflicts were coded. All κ values indicate excellent (κ > 0.8) or good (κ > 0.7) intercoder reliability ratings (*p* < 0.001), except for the ethno-territorial issue variable (fair agreement; κ = 0.434; *p* < 0.05).

4 First Results: Conflicts in Belgium (1995-2018)

Using the method described above allowed me to expose 1,090 conflicts between 1995 and 2018.[6] Most conflicts are not intense (78.4%). Intermediate intensity characterises 13.7% of cases, while the cabinet's survival or composition is at stake in 7.8% of clashes. Conflict between same party actors is scarce (1.2%).

Of all conflicts, 16.5% is ethno-territorial in nature (N = 180). Ethno-territorial issues triggered 169 cabinet conflicts (15.5%). Most of these concerned linguistic issues (4.1%), state reform (3.6%) or the distribution of assets/liabilities (4.0%). Strikingly, at the cabinet level, fiscal/financial issues such as interregional transfers are hardly explosive. Of the 1,090 conflicts I found, only 3 revolved around such debates (0.3%). Conflicts on ethno-territorial issues are almost two and a half times as frequent as conflicts along segmental lines (when the Flemings and/or the Francophones are mobilised as a block; 6.6%). In most of these clashes, only one segmental side is involved (5.2%). Recall that for the Michel I cabinet, such clashes are not considered as ethno-territorial conflicts. Often, some of the Flemish partners (e.g. one party) clash with some of the Francophones (e.g. one minister) (27.1%). Intra-segmental conflict is also frequent, although more amongst Flemings (23.9%) than amongst Francophones (11.3%).

What about the evolution of conflicts? Strong fluctuations can be noted. Conflict levels were generally on the rise for years and peaked around 2008. This is clear both at the yearly (Figure 1) and cabinet level (Figure 2). What follows is a blurry picture. Figure 1 also depicts the absolute number of ethno-territorial conflicts, which shows no linear trend. Furthermore, assessing intensity levels shows that intense conflicts were clearly more frequent in the past. Also, and confirming its reputation as a 'bickering cabinet', Michel I was subject to an unprecedented number of small sneers and minor clashes (peaking in 2016). This coalition ended with a fatal clash (in December 2018) but in terms of conflict frequency, its final year is the calmest year of coalition governance since the late 1990s (except for 2011, when the caretaker cabinet could work in the shadows of the formation negotiations). This indicates that raw conflict frequency need not predict a cabinet's survival chances.

Figure 2 shows the yearly equivalent of cabinet conflicts for each cabinet (number of conflicts divided by cabinet duration in days, multiplied by 365).[7] This allows for a solid comparison of cabinets with highly divergent lifespans (ranging from three months to over four years). Here, the consecutive rise and decline of conflict levels is even clearer.

Figure 1   *Yearly Cabinet Conflict Frequency by Intensity and Ethno-territorial Nature (1995-2018) (N=1,090)*
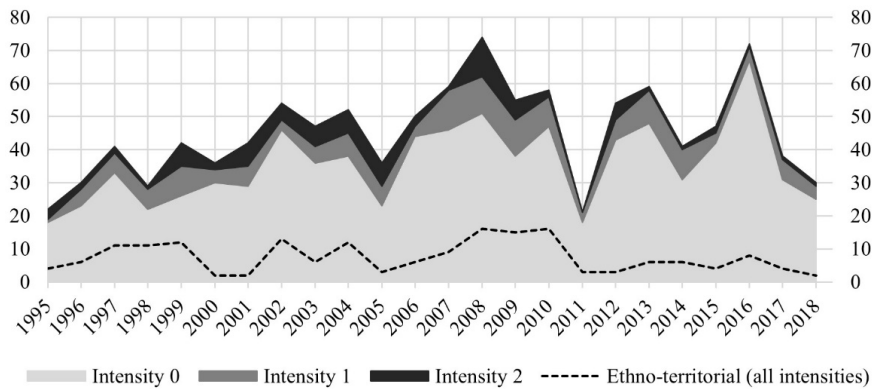
Figure 2   *Cabinet Conflict Frequency: Yearly Equivalent by Cabinet (1995-2018)*

Maxime Vandenberghe
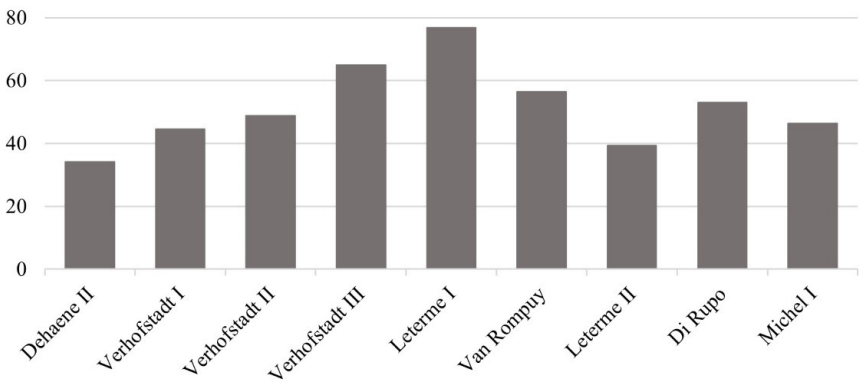
5 Conclusion

This research note presents a novel approach to defining, mapping and coding cabinet conflicts. Illustrating its potential, it also presents some first results of an application to Belgium (N = 1,090; 1995-2018). Doing so might add to the field in several ways. First and importantly, the underlying methodology is easily applicable to other sources, periods, policy levels and countries. Second, assessing the relation between dataset variables and/or external variables opens many doors, including that of re-examinations of explanatory theories of cabinet conflict. What is the role of cabinet composition, coalition agreements, external factors, and so forth (for factors, *cf*. Bergman et al., 2008)? Why are some periods characterised by intense conflicts while others are not? Similarly, the data provide an impetus for debates on ethno-territorial tensions. Are such conflicts more intense than other clashes? What factors explain their prevalence? Do the Flemish and the Francophones stand increasingly opposed? Apart from pleasing academics, answering such questions would provide a more solid factual basis for public debates on the functioning and future of Belgium and other such cases. Perhaps, this is its greatest contribution.

Funding

Notes

1   Following an embargo, the data will be available on 1 November 2023 in Mendeley Data (Vandenberghe, M. (2022). Cabinet conflicts in Belgium (1979-2018) - Extended version. In: *Mendeley Data*. doi: 10.17632/zvyt86jffd.1). Meanwhile, data can be made available by the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

2   I explored magazines like Knack, parliamentary records, EJPR Political Data Yearbooks and political or news shows on TV and the radio (using the archives of the Flemish public broadcaster, VRT).

3   Except for the period between 15 May 1997 and 31 December 2000 (French selection, as no Dutch Belga titles were available). Therefore, the selection includes 1,213 French articles.

4   Original data collection: Walgrave, Joly, Hardy, Zicha, Sevenans and Van Assche. Funding: European Science Foundation (07-ECRP-008), Flemish National Science Foundation (G.0117.11N), Belgian Federal Science Policy (IUAP P7/46).

5   I acknowledge the media's tendency to depict segments as homogeneous, conflicting players, and their tendency to present actions of individuals/parties as those of 'Flanders' or 'Francophone Belgium' as a whole (Sinardet, 2008, 2012). But these trends do not really distort the data since, with very few exceptions, I didn't have to rely on media frames. The articles usually provided sufficient info on the specific parties or actors involved.

6   The reported results include cases of doubt.

7   Including the periods in which the coalitions were caretaker cabinets. Dehaene I not included (only its last

months are covered by the data). Michel I cabinet: end date equals resignation date, as this marks the end of the coding effort.

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Appendix 1   Intercoder reliability: Cohen's κ by variable (N = 32)

Variable	Cohen's κ[a]
Intensity	0.770
Coalition parties (doubt)	1.000[b]
Same party conflict	1.000
Solo doubt (relevance criterion)	0.834
Ethno-territorial issue (binary)	0.434[c]
Ethno-territorial issue (detailed)	0.887[d]
Segmental sides (general: SGS2.0)	0.724
Segmental sides (detailed: SGS_detail)	0.824

[a] $p < 0.001$ (all variables except[c])
[b] No results (variable was a constant in the selection of cases for this test).
[c] $p < 0.05$
[d] Original coding done by the person who was 'coder 2' for the other variables (and vice versa).