

Table of Contents

Articles	
Ruling the Dutch Tax Haven: How the United States Drove the Rise and Fall of the Ruling Practice of the Netherlands <i>Diederik Stadig</i>	103
Instrument of Institutional Empowerment? An Explorative Study of the Local Council Chair in Flanders <i>Raf Reuse & Tom Verhelst</i>	124
From Divergence to Convergence: Degrees of Formality in the Connections Between Two Flemish Progressive Political Parties and Organised Civil Society <i>Nick Martin</i>	149
Literature Review	
A Lower Voting Age in the Low Countries? Potential Effects of Voting Age at 16 for the Low Countries <i>Kevin Meyvaert</i>	173

ARTICLES

Ruling the Dutch Tax Haven: How the United States Drove the Rise and Fall of the Ruling Practice of the Netherlands

Diederik Stadig*

Abstract

Until recently, the Netherlands was one of the world's largest tax havens. A key factor in the country's fiscal appeal was its ruling practice, which was created as a result of the Marshall aid in 1945. The ruling practice has remained mostly stable since its foundation: it underwent incremental reforms in the 1990s and 2000s, but radical reforms in the 2010s. This article seeks to explain this stability and radical change. To do so, it turns to theories on the role of ideas and institutional path dependence. It finds that the tolerance of the US for aggressive tax policies by small states was an important precondition for the stability of the Dutch ruling practice. When this tolerance disappeared in the 2010s, the Netherlands was forced to reform its ruling practice. Thus, the agency of political actors may be overestimated and the structuring role of institutions and the international context downplayed.

Keywords: corporate taxation, tax competition, historical institutionalism, globalisation, tax rulings.

1 Introduction

In 1789, Benjamin Franklin wrote that there are two certainties in life: death and taxes. Fast-forward to the 21st century, and the latter is not so certain anymore, especially if you are a multinational corporation. The certainty of taxes disappeared because the economy globalised as states negotiated trade, tax and other multilateral treaties to encourage cross-border investments and stimulate the economy. These treaties agreed on the removal of regulatory boundaries, hereby increasing capital mobility and investments. Yet, increased capital mobility also enhanced tax competition between states and, thus, opportunities for tax avoidance by multinational corporations. Capital became so footloose that some scholars spoke of 'hyperglobalisation' and argued that the ability of nation states

* Diederik Stadig, PhD Candidate, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

to make autonomous and democratic policies was severely at risk (Rodrik, 2011; Streeck & Thelen, 2005).

As a result of increased capital mobility and ensuing tax competition, states started to offer ever-lower effective tax rates to big corporations. If they were successful in drawing in these corporations, they could gain some tax revenue and possibly jobs. However, as the number of large corporations is finite, this increased competition means that while some states gained tax revenue, others lost out. Therefore, tax policy is a most likely case of policy competition in a globalised world. Naturally, this is a worrisome development for many states as taxation is a core state power that funds essential services, (dis)incentivises behaviour and (re) distributes income and wealth.

Tax avoidance, however, is not a natural phenomenon: it is made possible by political institutions that are built by humans. This article examines one of these institutions: the Dutch ‘tax ruling practice’. The ruling practice is a facility offered by the Dutch tax authority: corporations can ask for a ruling on which tax laws apply to them, and the tax authority thereby offers the taxpayer advance security on taxes to be paid in the future. This is convenient for corporations, for instance, when making an investment. The ruling practice was created in 1945 and became a potent instrument for tax competition in the 1990s, as it allows for a generous interpretation of existing tax laws. In addition, the agreements between applicants and the tax authority are not published. This means that the ruling practice is a discrete and efficient way to practice tax competition.

The ruling practice is one of the four so-called crown jewels¹ of the Dutch corporate tax system, which involve, besides the ruling practice, the participation exemption,² the vast tax treaty network³ and the absence of withholding taxes on interest and royalties.⁴ It is no surprise then that the Dutch government has been accused of harmful tax competition with its ruling practice on numerous occasions. The state aid investigations of the European Commission into the tax benefits of Starbucks⁵ and IKEA⁶ in the Netherlands are recent cases in point. Moreover, up until recently, the instrument gave the Netherlands a reputation as one of the leaders of tax competition (Devereux & Loretz, 2013; van Dijk et al., 2006) and one of the world’s most harmful tax havens (Javers, 2009; Langerock & Hietland, 2019; Torslov et al., 2018). To be precise, the Netherlands functions as a conduit offshore financial centre (conduit-OFC). In the global tax avoidance network, conduit-OFCs enable the transfer of capital from country A to country C at minimal or zero taxation (Vleggeert & Vording, 2019).⁷

The case of the Netherlands is especially relevant because it is a typical case of a small economy in a globalised world (Katzenstein, 1985). The country may not be able to control the terms of the international regulatory order (like a hegemon such as the US, or possibly China and the EU), but it is able to choose its own response to, and its role in, that order. The Netherlands chose to be a conduit-OFC and enable tax avoidance of multinationals through its four crown jewels, and the ruling practice in particular. This begs the question, why a rich country such as the Netherlands would take economic policy decisions that make it a conduit-OFC. To answer this question, I turn to institutional theories.

The constructivist political economy (CPE) literature departs from the power of ideas to explain such economic policy decisions (Berman, 2001; Blyth, 1997, 2002, 2003; Hay, 2001; Matthijs, 2008). In times of economic crisis, when agents are unsure of their interests, ideas shape agents' behaviour and become (slowly) embedded in institutions. As a result of this uncertainty, policy change can be more radical than usual. Yet, these ideas are not apolitical. Coalitions of actors form around them, which means that new institutions tend to favour some social groups over others. The paradigm changes of the 1930s and 1970s are prime examples of this. In the 1930s, labour helped embedding liberalism, whereas in the 1970s, capital aided the disembedding of liberalism. Studying the reforms of the Dutch ruling practice since its inception in 1945, the CPE perspective leads us to expect significant changes in ruling policy during the 1970s and 1980s when monetarist ideas take hold.

Historical institutionalism (HI) on the other hand, departs from the existing institutional order (Hall & Taylor, 1996). It shows how institutional structures condition the policymakers that operate within them. Hence, actors tend to build on prior institutional structures and select their options from an 'institutional toolkit' that is given. Hence, for HI scholars, social causation is path dependent, and the same operative forces yield different results in different places because they are mediated by unique contextual features that are "inherited from the past" (Ibid, p. 9). This means that institutional setups can have 'unintended consequences' that were not foreseen at the outset of the institution in question. The HI perspective suggests that, when studying the reforms of the Dutch ruling practice, we should see policymakers merely incrementally adjusting the ruling practice in line with their preferences.

In short, this article aims to answer the question: *What explains continuity and change of the Dutch ruling policy since 1945?* It does so by studying the reforms of the ruling practice on a microlevel. It shows that the ruling practice has been stable over time and only been reformed five times since 1945. The reforms of 1991, 1995 and 2001 are incremental in nature. The reforms of 2014 and 2019, however, are a clear break away from the policies of the past. These radical changes came after American support for competitive tax policy by small states disappeared. The disappearance of this precondition forced the Netherlands to become cooperative in the international taxation domain and, hence, drastically reform its ruling practice. In sum, the Dutch ruling practice was characterised by institutional stasis until the Americans changed their attitude towards tax havenry.

Moreover, two other findings are particularly counterintuitive. Firstly, the Lubbers governments (1982-1994) that are often described as neoliberal (Oudenampsen, 2020), tightened the ruling policy rather than liberalising it. This happened during a time when the Netherlands underwent major market-oriented reforms and there was ample opportunity to make the ruling practice more competitive. Secondly, contrary to what one might expect from centre-left governments, the governments of Wim Kok made the ruling practice more competitive by promptly responding to American regulation in 1995.

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 sets up the theoretical framework, Section 3 briefly describes the methodology and data collection, Section 4 delves into the stepwise evolution of the Dutch ruling policy, and Section 5 concludes.

2 Theoretical Framework: How to Explain Tax Policy Choices?

CPE has become the dominant approach to explain the long-term evolution of policy choices in the context of globalisation. Hence, it is useful to explain the premises of CPE and how we would expect them to apply to the tax policy choices of a small state like the Netherlands. As CPE developed from a critique of HI, we also return to the premises of HI and re-vindicate them in a globalised political context.

2.1 *What Constructivist Political Economy Tells Us about Policy Change*

Blyth (2002) proposes a punctuated evolution model of policy change that focuses on the influence of ideas in the 1930s and 1970s in Sweden and the US. According to Blyth, during an economic crisis when agents are unsure of what their interests are, ideas become leading. An economic crisis can trigger a paradigm shift, and a new ideology then becomes (slowly) embedded in institutions and determines future policy outcomes. Blyth (2002) demonstrates that certain ideas galvanise specific social groups, with dominant ideas often favouring particular interests over others.

In Blyth's model, ideas are ultimately the variables that determine path dependent trajectories, stability of institutions, and the coalitions that form around them. Ideas have five causal effects at different points in time during crises (Blyth, 2002, p. 35), namely: uncertainty reduction, coalition building, institutional contestation, institutional construction and expectational coordination. Eventually, this five-phase process leads to the embedding of ideas into organisations, patterns of discourse and collective identities (Berman, 2001; Matthijs, 2008). Hence, Blyth shows that politicians' policy options are determined by their perceived possibilities during various points in time. Matthijs (2008) adds that these perceived possibilities also need to be effectively communicated. Policy change only occurs when a leader can effectively 'narrate' a crisis (Ibid). Thus, not all crises cause paradigm changes.

These constructivist analyses focus on the direction of economic policy as a whole. So, corporate taxes are not the only object of study. Yet, they are an important part of what is often called the monetarist/neoliberal policy shift in the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, due to stagflation, governments transitioned from Keynesian demand management to more supply-side-oriented policy reforms. Specifically, regarding corporate taxes, Blyth (2002, pp. 160-170) argues that the inability of Democrats to offer an ideological alternative to supply-side economics and the infamous Laffer Curve is what caused neoliberal ideas about taxation to take hold and be rolled out in the Reagan years. Thus, Republicans created viable policy alternatives by formulating a new ideology (Perlstein, 2020). By focusing on the power of ideas, Blyth and other constructivists show how ideas

can induce radical policy change as a result of economic crises, while also showing that ideas are not simply determined by the material circumstances of policymakers.

Many constructivists present their approach as an advancement over HI (Berman, 2001; Blyth, 1997, 2002, 2003; Hay, 2001; Matthijs, 2008). They argue that while HI may be well-equipped to explain institutional stability and incremental change over time, it struggles with more radical institutional change when it occurs, even though such occasions may be rare. Moreover, Capoccia and Kelemen (2007, p. 343) have argued that HI relies heavily on critical junctures, but it often presents them as a 'deus ex machina', while others have argued that the unintended consequences resulting from these critical junctures are often left unexplained (Lindner & Rittberger, 2003).

Blyth (1997) has argued that in order to solve this predicament and explain critical junctures, HI has made an 'ideational turn' to incorporate ideas as explanatory variables. However, according to Blyth, this effort falls short of fixing HI's inherent weaknesses in explaining both the origins of institutions and radical change when it occurs. Thus, Blyth (2002, p. 231) accuses HI scholars of failing to genuinely investigate what ideas are and what they do, often viewing them as "catch-all concepts that explain variance" only when their own theories fail to do so.

2.2 *Revindicated Historical Institutionalism*

A focus on ideas and radical policy change, however, can cloud out the extent to which historically entrenched institutions condition policy choices, even in the context of dramatically changing ideas. The essential point that HI scholars make is that the choices of actors are better understood as building upon the given institutional structure than as fully rational against a completely clean slate of options. In short, social causation is path dependent (Hall & Taylor, 1996) because of lock-in effects, positive feedback loops and social norms that reproduce existing institutions (Streeck & Thelen, 2005). This means that the same operative forces will not generate the same results everywhere, as historical contingencies are different in each case (Thelen, 2004). Instead, these operative forces are mediated by contextual features that are "inherited from the past" (Hall & Taylor, 1996, p. 9). Furthermore, institutional change is complex, incremental and tends to be characterised by a mix of continuity and change rather than radical change (Streeck & Thelen, 2005). Therefore, institutions are persistent features of a historical landscape while they push social processes forward along a given path (Hall & Taylor, 1996, p. 9) but can also impede change (Thelen, 2004). Policymakers normally respond to new challenges with a toolkit that is institutionally given. These toolkits are never perfect and regularly produce unintended consequences that were not foreseen during institutional construction (Hall & Taylor, 1996).

In complex trajectories, in which history, institutional contexts and individual actors can be causally significant, HI has great analytical merit. In contrast to explanations that solely focus on the material circumstances of decision makers, it takes goals, strategies and preferences of actors as things to be explained rather than exogenously given (Steinmo et al., 1992). Hence, HI shows that institutions constrain and shape politics but that they are never the sole cause of outcomes

(Ibid, p. 3). In addition, HI scholars tend to show that institutions are the result of uneven power distributions between social groups; hence, the interests present at the outset of an institution are key in understanding its path dependent trajectory and the unintended consequences it may yield in the future (Hall & Taylor, 1996). Lastly, individuals, context and rules can all be decisive factors in determining outcomes for HI scholars (Steinmo, 2008, p. 126).

Specifically, regarding corporate tax policies, the strength of path dependence is often overlooked but has been used occasionally. Most notably, Rixen (2011) has used HI to explain the stability of the global tax regime over time. Since its inception in the 1920s, the global tax regime focused on the prevention of double tax avoidance.⁸ This critical juncture had the unintended consequence that as the world globalised, this left room for tax competition through transfer pricing,⁹ hence causing corporate tax competition (Ibid). Reforms that tried to redress harmful tax competition were incomplete, gradual and indirect, as the core of the institutional regime remained stable over time.

In a nutshell, HI allows us to explain the continuity of the Dutch ruling policy by emphasising the importance of institutions, while at the same time acknowledging that actors retain scope for choice.

2.3 American Tolerance as a Precondition of Competitive Tax Policy

As mentioned, HI scholars are often criticised for their treatment of critical junctures. Hall and Taylor (1996) have argued that HI scholars tend to not adequately explain where critical junctures come from and often point to war and/or economic crisis to resolve HI's issues with explaining more radical change.

I argue that, in the case of the Dutch ruling practice, a historical institutionalist approach need not necessarily turn to ideas to account for critical junctures. HI scholars have pointed out that in policy areas heavily affected by globalisation, such as taxation, there is significant pressure for liberalisation and policy convergence between states (Streeck & Thelen, 2005). This pressure arises because states either want to follow successful models or have to follow global norms and international agreements. The countries that are able to shape these norms and agreements are thus important for the shaping of tax institutions in other countries. A historical institutionalist can therefore conceive of critical junctures as essentially exogenous events as they emanate from changes in the global regime or changes by the hegemonic actors that control these structures. These exogenous events enable or even necessitate (national) policymakers to radically change their policy choices.

In the case of corporate taxation, the overarching shadow under which national governments, particularly in the EU but also elsewhere in the world, have been setting their policy is American hegemony in tax matters. When the US cracked down on non-cooperative tax jurisdictions in the 2010s (Grinberg, 2012; Hakelberg, 2015, 2016, 2020), many small European jurisdictions (e.g. Austria, Luxembourg) reformed their competitive tax policies. Showing that critical junctures in the tax policy of small states can occur through interdependence without their governments drastically changing course of their own volition.

This does not mean that the US approach to international tax policy is the sole or most important determinant of the tax policies of small states. Rather, American tolerance of tax havenry is a precondition of small states in global markets making aggressive tax policy. However, when the tolerance of American policymakers disappears, this directly influences the ability of small states to engage in very competitive tax practices. A change in this precondition could therefore be seen as a critical juncture, as it is an exogenous shock to the tax policy autonomy of small states in a globalised world.

The reason the US is so powerful in the taxation domain is that the EU is internally fragmented on taxation. In policy domains where the EU is represented by the Commission and not internally fragmented, it can leverage its internal market and regulatory capacity in negotiations (Wasserfallen, 2014). This way, the EU is able to govern the global commons together with the US in areas such as health and safety, data protection and trade. In essence, the EU “punches above its weight” in these instances in negotiations with China and the US (Bradford, 2020; Kelemen & Vogel, 2010; Meunier & da Conceicao-Heldt, 2015). However, the EU lacks the power and the competences to govern the global commons in the taxation domain. For this reason, it is bound to lag behind the US (Farrell & Newman, 2016, 2019). So, there is an absence of a coherent EU voice on international corporate tax matters. Taxation remains an exclusive member state competence, as implied in Article 4(1) TFEU. As a consequence, the US is the standard setter in tax matters in the global economy, and within the OECD especially.

The US is not just so influential in matters of tax cooperation because of the size of its internal market and the fragmented European approach, but also because of the way its tax system is structured. The US tax system is based on the principle of worldwide taxation. This means that “income is taxed at an equal rate regardless of where profits are earned” (Heinemann & Spengel, 2017, p. 1). As a consequence, US corporations have a disadvantage compared with non-US firms: they cannot choose to pay taxes abroad and not in the US. The check-the-box fiscal rules package of 1996 turned this around. ‘Checking the box’ gave the US firms the choice to label their subsidiaries as so-called disregarded entities. This option was intended to streamline corporate taxation but has effectively allowed internationally operating US firms to select which of their subsidiaries was ‘disregarded’ and should therefore not be liable to tax at home. These disregarded entities can be used to set up high-volume subsidiaries in low-tax jurisdictions, which greatly exacerbated transfer pricing and tax avoidance by US multinationals (Drawbaugh & Sullivan, 2013). Hence, US firms simply kept their money offshore and waited until they are offered a tax holiday to repatriate their cash.¹⁰

In short, a historical institutionalist account of corporate tax policy underlines the continuity in the policies that countries adopt given a specific international context. Major changes (critical junctures) in these policies are not so much triggered by ideas but rather by exogenous changes in that international context, be they structural or produced by the key hegemonic actor(s).¹¹

3 Methodology, Observable Manifestations and Data

To construct a qualitative in-depth case study of the Dutch ruling practice, I employ an outcome-oriented process tracing design (Beach & Pedersen, 2019). This outcome-oriented design allows for nuance in showing why the Netherlands emerged as a tax haven and remained one through the years.

The article traces the origins and continuation of the ruling practice, going back to World War II, and examines what Dutch governments have done since the 1970s to reform it. The 1970s are chosen as a point of departure, as this is prior to the neoliberal paradigm shift of the 1980s and the era of hyperglobalisation. This yields five decades of ruling practice reform and should offer enough room to show the change and continuity of the ruling practice. To substantiate its claims, the article has assessed all five reforms of the Dutch ruling practice since its establishment. As this is a small number of reforms, the article also uses several secondary sources, including official EU, OECD, Dutch policy documents, public speeches by ministers, deliberations in the House of Representatives, and some newspaper reports.

The tax reforms of the ruling practice are organised in four phases. The first phase is the 1970s, in which there were reform pressures but little happened. The second phase is the 1980s, in which the Christian Democrats were in power and they tightened the ruling practice. The third phase is the 1990s and early 2000s, in which tax competition reached its apex, which means Dutch governments used the toolkit offered by the ruling practice. The last phase is the 2010s and early 2020s, which witnessed the disappearance of American tolerance towards tax havenry and subsequent radical policy change.

4 Change and Stability in the Dutch Ruling Policy

As mentioned, the Dutch ruling policy has undergone five reforms since 1945. The first three reforms were relatively minor adjustments that either slightly tightened or liberalised the ruling policy. In contrast, the reforms of 2014 and 2019 mark a clear shift away from past policies. This section proceeds as follows: Section 4.1 explains the foundation of the ruling practice in 1945, Section 4.2. explains its continuity through the years and Section 4.3 highlights its fundamental shift in 2014.

4.1. How Marshall Aid Laid the Foundation for the Dutch Tax Haven

The Dutch government established the ruling practice after World War II to offer foreign investors investment security. After the inflow of Marshall aid, many foreign companies saw opportunities to invest in the Netherlands. However, they were worried about expropriation by the state, as Dutch society was being rebuilt (Vleggeert & Vording, 2019). Hence, a coalition of American investors and the US government convinced the Dutch Ministry of Finance of the need for assurances. Thus, the Dutch Ministry of Finance, together with the tax authority, started to issue rulings in advance to guarantee investors a tax rate upfront before making an

investment.¹² The fact that rulings were issued before taxes were due was a fiscal innovation. In the US, corporations had to pay their taxes, after which the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) would state whether additional taxes were due. Hence, advanced rulings had a strong appeal to US corporations. This brought in investments and aided the Dutch post-war recovery (Romano, 2002).

In the design of the ruling practice, the Ministry of Finance had given the tax authority a significant amount of freedom. This was officially justified by the tax authority's fiscal expertise but was unofficially motivated by the need to keep tax rulings outside the reach of politics, to assure foreign investors that they would not be expropriated (Kroon, 1987; Romano, 2002). This meant that the Ministry of Finance had no authority over tax inspectors when they issued rulings, and the tax authority was not obligated to publish information on advance rulings. In essence, inspectors could apply tax law as they saw fit. This design feature unintentionally provided a unique instrument for engaging in tax competition.

When the tax authority decided in the 1970s that individual corporation tax inspectors could start issuing these rulings, the Ministry of Finance was not able to counteract this decision. Hence, a small number of tax inspectors were qualified to give out rulings, and they were not accountable to the tax authority or the House of Representatives (Smetsers, 2020). Moreover, corporations could obtain rulings from more than one inspector and pay the rate in accordance with the most favourable ruling (Vleggeert & Vording, 2019, pp. 8-10). This was often referred to as 'inspector shopping': obtaining rulings until a company obtained a tax rate that was 'low enough' (Romano, 2002, pp. 22-23). This practice led to a lack of transparency and arbitrary tax rates (Smetsers, 2020).

In short, because of the initial design of the ruling practice, the Dutch House of Representatives, the government and the Ministry of Finance were not able to counteract unwanted decisions by the tax authority. As an unintended consequence, it became an instrument for conducting tax competition.

4.2 *How the Ruling Practice Became a Crown Jewel of the Dutch Tax Haven*

4.2.1 *Den Uyl's Failure to Reform*

Yet, momentum for reforming the ruling practice would pick up. Firstly, in 1973, Social Democrat Joop den Uyl led his first and only government. His cabinet was the most left-wing cabinet in the history of the Netherlands, with wealth and income redistribution as its top priorities, especially during a time of economic crisis.¹³ Hence, it proposed several redistributive corporate tax reforms, along with increases in social security. Secondly, *de Hoge Raad* (the Dutch Supreme Court) issued a decision in which it annulled the ruling that granted two German corporations the application of the participation exemption.¹⁴ This decision by the Supreme Court was controversial, as there had been a legal discussion on the applicability of the participation exemption in cases involving cross-border activities.

This legal wrangling jumpstarted a discussion in the House of Representatives on 'perverse elements' in the tax code (Dekker & Kreling, 2022). The ruling practice and the tax shortcut through the Dutch Antilles were scrutinised in particular. The

discussion on the tax shortcut through the Dutch Antilles did not last long, as the US forced the Netherlands to renegotiate its tax treaty, resulting in offshore activities moving from the Dutch Antilles to other Caribbean islands (van Beurden & Jonker, 2021). The discussion on the ruling practice took considerably longer (Kroon, 1987; Romano, 2002). Driven by its redistributive agenda, the Den Uyl government tried to end the discussion in 1974. In coordination with the tax authority, junior finance minister and Christian Democrat Martin van Rooijen issued a resolution stipulating that, in order to obtain a ruling and apply the participation exemption, the Dutch holding company needed to exercise a so-called essential function.¹⁵ However, as an essential function was not a legally defined concept, the resolution ensured a high level of discretion for the tax authority (Romano, 2002). In doing so, the den Uyl government followed the advice of the tax authority, which desired to retain the influence it had acquired in the original design of the ruling practice. In its plea to the government, the tax authority made use of the fact that (i) it had much more knowledge than the Ministry of Finance in retaining a balance between a competitive and a fair ruling practice and (ii) an overhaul of the ruling practice would be difficult given that the government had not been able to push through much of its tax agenda due to a hung parliament (de Rijk, 1995; Nooteboom, 1990; Ruigrok & Blokzijl, 2012).

So, although redistributive measures were high on the agenda of the den Uyl government and an opportunity for reform was present, the government decided not to pursue a reform of the ruling practice because of its inability to form a coalition around tax reform. The tax authority used this, along with its strong position and expertise, to leave the ruling practice intact. In short, despite economic downturns and ideas for redistributive tax reform, the ruling practice was not reformed.

4.2.2 *The Neoliberal(?) Christian Democrats*

However, the resolution of van Rooijen did not settle the debate in the House of Representatives, and the ruling practice remained on the agenda (Dekker & Kreling, 2022; Smetsers, 2020; Vleggeert & Vording, 2019). In 1979, Ad Nooteboom, junior finance minister in the first van Agt government (comprised of the Christian Democrats and Liberals), proposed the first guideline for issuing rulings (Romano, 2002, p. 27; Smetsers, 2020). While this was merely a soft guideline for the tax authority, Nooteboom's guidelines were later used by junior finance minister, Henk Koning, seven years later in the first Lubbers government (also comprised of the Christian Democrats and Liberals). Koning proposed to centralise the ruling team in Rotterdam.

This came after a "political reflection on the growing role of the Netherlands in international tax planning" near the end of the first Lubbers government (Vleggeert & Vording, 2019). As a consequence, the Dutch Court of Auditors investigated the tax ruling practice and published a critical report.¹⁶ It concluded that inspector shopping was a significant problem, as different inspectors made different decisions, leading to arbitrary tax rates. As mentioned, corporations made use of this by submitting the same request to various inspectors (Smetsers, 2020, p. 13). This 'shopping' was undesirable in the opinion of the Court of Auditors.

In response, Koning published a white paper on tax ruling policy, largely based on Nooteboom's earlier guidelines (Romano, 2002, p. 27). As mentioned, Koning proposed to centralise the ruling team in Rotterdam. By May 1990, the centralised ruling team was fully operational and was enshrined in Dutch law in 1991.¹⁷ The fixing of this loophole made it harder to 'game' the Dutch ruling policy for foreign companies, and tax inspector shopping disappeared as a result (Ibid). However, Koning's successor, van Amelsvoort, later noted that the ruling team maintained a significant degree of discretion to make decisions in the interest of the Dutch fiscal climate.¹⁸ Hence, while centralisation of the ruling team served to tighten the reins, it left the institutional core of the ruling practice intact.

While this was an incremental reform, it was an interesting one. The first and second Lubbers governments decided to tighten the ruling policy in a time of severe stagflation, while at the same time adopting significant burden reductions and corporate tax rate cuts for the private sector (Visser & Hemerijck, 1997). These burden reductions were undertaken to reinstate the profitability of the Dutch market sector, designed by a group of economic advisers often described as inveterate neoliberals (Oudenampsen, 2020). The Lubbers governments are frequently described as neoliberal and very supply-side-oriented (Ibid). Especially when comparing the policies of the 'neoliberal' Christian Democrats with those of the preceding Social Democrats, it stands out that the governments of Lubbers were able, for the first time since World War II, to take some authority away from its tax inspectors. This led to the removal of arbitrary tax rates and an increase in consultations among tax inspectors of the tax ruling team. In short, the Lubbers governments created a more stringent ruling practice than in the preceding years.¹⁹

Lubbers himself stated the following on the tax policies of his first cabinet:

The tax policy of my first cabinet is social but not socialist ... It could happen that outcomes are not social, in which case correction is needed. Sometimes this correction is in line with the distributive wishes of socialists, but it does have a different viewpoint. It is not redistribution as such, but rather banishing poverty and the prevention of glaring income differences. (Brinkel, 2020, p. 163)

All in all, the tightening of the ruling practice under the first Lubbers government was counterintuitive. Lubbers is often described as a classic example of a neoliberal (Oudenampsen, 2020), and his governments are often seen as the Dutch representatives of the 'New Right'. For this reason, it would make sense to see this government actively engaging in international tax competition. Yet, this is not observed when studying its tax policies. The ruling policy remained largely stable and was even reined in rather than liberalised. This happened due to increased tax avoidance and the fact that the government's tax policies aimed at fixing a problem rather than being devotee to a specific ideology.

4.2.3 *The Competitive Reforms of the Kok Governments*

In 1995, shortly after the first reform, the ruling practice was reformed again. This time, the reform was a relaxation of the ruling policy (Romano, 2002; Smetsters,

2020, p. 15). During the first Kok government, Social Democrat Willem Vermeend standardised the ruling practice, loosened the substance requirements for foreign companies to obtain a ruling and increased the speed with which the Dutch tax authority could offer a ruling (i.e. elimination of administrative checks). This bolstered the reputation of the Dutch conduit-OFC considerably; in the words of Vermeend, it “increased the Dutch comparative advantage in tax matters”.²⁰ Vermeend made it possible for the ruling team to tailor rulings to individual cases.²¹

These reforms were consequential, as the Clinton administration introduced the check-the-box package in 1996 with the aim to simplify taxation.²² Inadvertently, this package created the largest loophole in the history of US corporate taxation (Drawbaugh & Sullivan, 2013), allowing US corporations to shift profits unencumbered. Liberalising the ruling practice prior to the creation of this loophole gave US corporations an incentive to funnel money through the Netherlands. Thus, Vermeend’s reforms are an important explanation for why the Netherlands became the favourite conduit of US multinationals (Frederik, 2017).

If Vermeend had not been junior finance minister, it is questionable whether the Netherlands would have been as proactive as it was. His successor, Wouter Bos, was significantly less hawkish on tax competition (Frederik, 2017). Moreover, Vermeend was also driven by his personal convictions: the Netherlands had an accessible tax authority, so why not build on this comparative advantage? Or as Vermeend himself put it: “From an international perspective, the Netherlands has a leading position in the field of providing advance assurance, which, in my opinion, we should build on.”²³ Vermeend was incredibly productive in terms of the quantity of reforms. However, his approach to international enterprises and the ruling policy has often been described as too friendly, arbitrary and unfair to national corporations.²⁴ In response to such criticism, Vermeend acknowledged that he was on a mission to make the Netherlands more fiscally attractive:

Above all, the Netherlands should become more attractive to international corporations. International competition will increase in the future, and I want to be ahead of the curve. My policies ensure that we remain in the driver’s seat. (de Rijk, 1996)

Unfortunately for Vermeend, the responses of the OECD and the EU to his reforms were less enthusiastic. In 1998, in its report “Harmful Tax Competition an Emerging Global Issue”, the OECD qualified the Dutch ruling practice as damaging to other member states (OECD, 1998, p. 28). The report took aim at Vermeend’s reforms, specifically the lack of transparency and the near absence of the arm’s length principle²⁵ in Dutch tax rulings. The European Commission quickly followed suit. Spurred by British junior finance minister, Dawn Primarolo, it characterised the Dutch ruling practice as a harmful tax practice (Council of the European Union, 1999, pp. 34 and 314). Still, the European Commission refused to qualify the ruling practice as state aid, as there was no proof of the ruling practice constituting a selective advantage (ibid).

The Netherlands promptly agreed to redress its ruling practice.²⁶ In November 2000, Vermeend informed the House of Representatives that the ruling

practice would be reformed into a more ‘standard’ and ‘less harmful’ Advance Pricing Agreement/Advance Tax Ruling (APA/ATR) practice, information exchange with other tax authorities would be smoothed and the arm’s length principle would be codified in Dutch tax law.²⁷ In short, the Dutch tax rulings team now had to treat all ruling applications individually. This meant that rulings went from confection to bespoke: each ruling became tailored,²⁸ a direct result of the pressure from the OECD and the EU.²⁹

However, this was largely a symbolic reform, as Vermeend also tried to improve the fiscal climate for corporations in a different way.³⁰ With the same reform, he lowered the net spread for royalty flow-through schemes,³¹ made foreign withholding taxes fully creditable against Dutch corporate income taxes³² and further expedited the ruling process (Pijl & Hählen, 2001). Given these improvements in the fiscal competitiveness of the Netherlands, and the fact that the rates offered in rulings remained competitive, scholars argue that while international pressure was effective, it did not fundamentally change the Dutch ‘fiscal behaviour’ (Romano, 2002, p. 48).

In short, the reforms of Vermeend were largely driven by material circumstances, as the demand for conduit-OFCs increased when the check-the-box regulation freed up large amounts of American corporate capital. In addition, Vermeend’s beliefs about actively engaging in tax competition definitely played a part in his decision to target this corporate capital. Yet, Vermeend merely expanded the institutional toolkit at his disposal. If a competitive ruling practice had not existed prior to Vermeend taking office, he would not have been as successful or as swift in drawing in American multinationals for Dutch conduit services.

4.3 How the Disappearance of American Tax Tolerance Fuelled Reform

After the second reform of Vermeend, the APA/ATR practice was reformed twice. The first reform took place in 2014. The cause for reform was the advent of the first Obama administration. In 2009, Obama branded the Netherlands, Ireland and Bermuda as the world’s most harmful tax havens (Javers, 2009). This was no surprise, as the Netherlands was the favourite conduit of US multinationals (Frederik, 2017; Garcia-Bernardo et al., 2021). The Obama administration accelerated its tax agenda with the establishment of the Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act (FATCA) in 2010.³³ FATCA required financial institutions to act as tax intermediaries: banks and other institutions had to exchange information with the IRS so that they would be able to tax the money of American citizens held in offshore accounts (Grinberg, 2012). Moreover, to make the regulation have its desired effect, the US threatened sanctions to non-cooperative jurisdictions. As a result, the Common Reporting Standard (CRS) and automatic exchange of information (AEI) were established, effectively ending bank secrecy for the IRS (Grinberg, 2012; Hakelberg, 2015, 2016; Hemels, 2022). However, the hegemonic position of the US was confirmed by the fact that it did not reciprocate³⁴ the exchange of information.

FATCA was so successful in repatriating tax revenues that the US decided to push for information exchange in other tax areas as well (Hemels, 2022). This was achieved with BEPS Action Plan 13: Country-by-Country Reporting (CbCR). OECD

member states started sharing information on tax rulings with one another (Ibid). The Dutch reform of 2014, enacted by a right-wing government led by the Liberals, should be seen in this light. The reform paved the way for cooperation with CbCR once it became fully operational in 2016.³⁵

The 2014 reform not only paved the way for CbCR but also increased substance demands and cracked down on shell companies. To be precise, it required companies to have ‘significant economic activity’ in the Netherlands to obtain a ruling.³⁶ The aim of this reform was to make it harder for corporations to get a tax ruling in the Netherlands: a letterbox³⁷ should no longer be enough.

After the 2014 reform, the House of Representatives³⁸ argued that no tax ruling should be extended to corporations that do not have a ‘serious’ intention to establish themselves in the Netherlands (Kerste et al., 2013). In response, junior finance minister, Menno Snel (Liberal Democrats), agreed to further increase substance demands, improve the transparency of the ruling practice for the Dutch House of Representatives and share information on rulings with EU member states. This was done to counteract tax evasion and avoidance, as well as base erosion.³⁹ In November of 2019, the reform was enacted, once again under a right-wing government led by the Liberals.⁴⁰ It established the International College for International Fiscal Security (ICIFS). The reform mandated that the tax authority publishes an anonymous summary of every new international ruling, along with a summary of all cases where a ruling was not issued, along with the reasons for why a ruling was not issued. Regarding substance requirements, these were replaced by a requirement of so-called economic nexus with the Netherlands. This means that in the international allocation of profit, the Netherlands would not agree to a single employee overseeing the disbursement of billions of euros in royalties. A ruling would no longer be issued when (i) the sole or decisive reason for performing the transactions is to save Dutch and/or foreign tax (motive) and/or (ii) the requested advance certainty relates to transactions with entities established in countries appearing on the Dutch blacklist (low-tax and non-cooperative jurisdictions as established by the Council of the European Union, 2022). In short, the establishment of ICIFS was a clear shift away from the aggressive corporate tax policies of the previous decades, thus constituting a groundbreaking reform for the Netherlands.

In short, the Dutch ruling practice was competitive as long as the US accepted tax havenry by small states. When the position of the US regarding international tax cooperation changed, the Netherlands quickly reformed its ruling practice. Without this change in the position of the US, it is unlikely that right-wing governments led by the Liberals would have significantly tightened the ruling practice based on their own preferences.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

As examined above, the Dutch tax ruling practice has been reformed five times since its conception in 1945. An overview of these reforms can be found in Table 1.

Table 1 *The Five Reforms and Their Rationales*

Reform	Direction	Rationale
1991 – Lubbers/ van Amelsvoort (Christian Democrats)	Tightening: – Centralisation	Material circumstances and ideology
1995 – Kok/ Vermeend (Social Democrats)	Liberalisation: – Substance demands – Decision-making speed – Standardisation	Material circumstances and ideology
2001 – Kok/ Vermeend (Social Democrats)	Tightening: – International information exchange	International pressure and ideology
2014 – Rutte/ Weekers (Liberals)	Tightening: – Substance demands – International information exchange (OECD)	International pressure
2019 – Rutte/Snel (Liberals & Liberal Democrats)	Tightening: – Substance demands – Transparency – International information exchange (EU)	International pressure

All these reforms should be seen in the context of American hegemony in tax matters. As long as the US allowed it, Dutch policymakers could align the ruling practice with their needs based on the economic situation and/or their ideological preferences. When American tolerance for competitive tax policies by small states disappeared, the Netherlands quickly reformed its ruling practice under right-wing Liberal-led governments. This shows that countries that are able to shape international norms and agreements also shape tax institutions in other countries.

Yet, when closely examining the timing, sequence and circumstances of the first three ruling practice reforms, two things become clear. Firstly, ideas were not their primary driving force. Secondly, a neoliberal paradigm shift in the 1970s and early 1980s is not evident from the ruling practice reforms since 1945. Rather, the course of the Dutch ruling practice was largely determined by the way it was originally established, with a significant degree of freedom for the tax authority, underlining the importance of path dependence. Moreover, the left-wing government of den Uyl had the opportunity and momentum to tighten the ruling practice but was met with institutional stickiness. In contrast, the centre-right Lubbers governments were able to enact a tightening in 1986 during stagflation and market-oriented reforms. They did so without changing the core of the regime, but it was the first time the power of the tax authority was reined in. The reason it is listed as a partly ideological reform in Table 1 is because the Lubbers government wanted a ‘social’ tax system, and arbitrary tax rates did not fit this description (Brinkel, 2020).

In a completely constructivist world, we would have seen a much more neoliberal tax agenda in the late 1970s and 1980s. This might have involved a focus

on faster rulings, more attraction of foreign capital, and rate reductions. Instead, the Lubbers governments chose to centralise the ruling practice to close loopholes, whereas the den Uyl government ran into institutional unwillingness to alter the core of the ruling regime. If den Uyl had been successful, this might have involved increased transparency of rulings, more and faster international tax cooperation and more stringent democratic oversight.

Hence, the core of the regime has remained stable over time. However, this does not mean that the ideas of individual politicians do not matter, as we have seen in the case of Willem Vermeend. The timing of the American check-the-box regulation coincided with his time in office, giving him the opportunity to liberalise the ruling practice. Regardless of his Social Democratic party affiliation, Vermeend used the institutional toolkit at his disposal; without the ruling practice available it is highly doubtful Vermeend would have succeeded in attracting a lot of conduit-OFC activity.

In short, this article has argued that the corporate tax policy of a conduit-OFC such as the Netherlands is best understood through HI. The Dutch ruling policy has followed a path dependent trajectory since 1945 and was not radically reformed until the US changed its approach to international tax cooperation. Prior to the US changing its approach, the Netherlands was one of the world's worst tax havens and the country was critical in the global tax avoidance industry. This illustrates that the Netherlands and other small European conduits are an important object of study. Microlevel research into the considerations of decision makers in these countries allows one to show that economic policymaking in small, open and advanced economies moves slowly and is often heavily affected by institutional legacies. In doing so, the present analysis seeks to offer much-needed context and nuance in debates on international power relations, ideology, interests, institutional path dependence and sheds light on why a rich country such as the Netherlands funnelled large sums of money abroad at minimal or zero taxation. It shows how the operative forces of globalisation were mediated by Dutch institutional structures inherited from the past.

Notes

- 1 Kamerstukken I 2015/16, 25 087, L, 13.
- 2 The participation exemption gives a parent company the possibility to enjoy the profits of a subsidiary untaxed. This was instated to prevent the double taxation of companies that fall under one corporate umbrella.
- 3 A tax treaty is an agreement between two countries about which country may levy tax on a certain income. The Netherlands has concluded the fourth most tax treaties of any country in the world. This means that when the Dutch tax authority rules that profits should be taxed at an agreed upon percentage over an agreed upon base, many other countries do not have the right to levy additional taxes.
- 4 In contrast to many other countries, the Netherlands did not levy withholding taxes on interests and royalty payments. The recent state aid cases by the European Commission targeted these Dutch tax practices specifically.

- 5 See Competition Policy European Commission SA.38374: <https://ec.europa.eu/competition/e>.
- 6 See Competition Policy European Commission SA.46470: https://ec.europa.eu/competition/elojade/isef/case_details.cfm?proc_code=3_SA_46470.
- 7 So, conduits are in between the origin country (where profits are earned) and the destination country (where profits end up).
- 8 When the economy globalised, corporations did not want to be subject in multiple countries for the same activities. Double tax avoidance means that companies are not subject to taxes over activity X in Country B when they already paid taxes over activity X in Country A.
- 9 Transfer pricing is the practice where divisions of the same company pay each other for goods and services. So, if division Z in Country A possesses the parent company's intellectual property, division Y in Country B pays subsidiary Z a certain amount for the use of the parent company's IP. These transactions should be made at arm's length (see footnote 26).
- 10 A tax holiday is a limited timeframe in which US firms can bring back accrued profits that are held offshore into the US at a large discount or even zero taxation.
- 11 The possible causes of such changes in the international context or in policy of the hegemon are beyond the scope of this analysis.
- 12 Brief van de Staatssecretaris van Financiën van 24 December 1986, Kamerstukken II 1986/87, 19700 IX-B, nr. 36.
- 13 Parlement.com: Kabinet den Uyl (1973-1977).
- 14 Hoge Raad 7 november 1973, No. 17 182, in BNB 1974/2.
- 15 Resolutie van 15 oktober 1974, No. 74/215516, in BNB 1975/11.
- 16 Kamerstukken II 1986/87, 19700 IX B, nr. 71, 3.
- 17 Resolutie van de staatssecretaris van Financiën van 26 April 1990, CA90/3.
- 18 Brief van de Staatssecretaris van Financiën, Kamerstukken II 1992/1993, 22860, nr. 4.
- 19 Resolutie van de staatssecretaris van Financiën van 26 April 1990, CA90/3.
- 20 Kamerstukken II, 1994-1995, 24086, nr. 1: p. 3.
- 21 Kamerstukken II, 1994-1995, 24086, nr. 1.
- 22 The Clinton administration announced the package in 1995.
- 23 Kamerstukken II, 1994-1995, 24086, nr. 1: p. 3.
- 24 Retro.NRC, Kabinet Kok II, W.Vermeend.
- 25 The arm's length principle entails that transactions between divisions of the same company should be priced the same as transactions between unrelated entities.
- 26 Besluit van de staatssecretaris van Financiën van 21 december 2000, RTB2000/3227.
- 27 Kamerstukken II 2000/2001, 27505, nr. 1.
- 28 Persbericht Ministerie van Financiën 30 maart 2001, 2001/093.
- 29 Brief van de staatssecretaris van Financiën van 16 april 2003, Kamerstukken II 2002/03, 27505, nr. 8.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Net spread is a measure for the small amount of money that stays in a conduit. By lowering this, an even larger percentage flows through the Netherlands. See also: <https://www.government.nl/binaries/government/documenten/reports/2021/10/03/the-road-to-acceptable-conduit-activities/Committee+on+Conduit+companies+-+The+road+to+acceptable.pdf>.

- 32 This way foreign withholding taxes could now be deducted from a company's Dutch tax bill, which could mean a net gain if a company pays significant taxes in the Netherlands.
- 33 This shift of the US in global tax matters predates the financial crisis, but is accelerated by it (Hakelberg, 2020).
- 34 Hence, new secrecy jurisdictions for European citizens have been popping up in places like South Carolina and Reno. See, for instance, Bullough (2018).
- 35 Besluit van de staatssecretaris van Financiën van 13 juni 2014, DGB 2014-3099.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Most corporate tax avoidance in the Netherlands happened through shell corporations that were infamous for only owning a letterbox.
- 38 Brief en Nota van de staatssecretaris van Financiën en de minister voor Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking van 30 augustus 2013, Kamerstukken II 2012/13, 25087, nr. 60.
- 39 Brief van de staatssecretaris van Financiën van 23 februari 2018, 25087, nr. 188.
- 40 Brief van de staatssecretaris van Financiën van 22 november 2018, nr. 2018-0000185524.

References

- Beach, D., & Pedersen, R. B. (2019). *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines*. University of Michigan Press.
- Berman, S. (2001). Review: Ideas, Norms, and Culture in Political Analysis. *Comparative Politics*, 33(2), 231-250. <https://doi.org/10.2307/422380>.
- Blyth, M. M. (1997). Any More Bright Ideas? The Ideational Turn of Comparative Political Economy. *Comparative Politics*, 29(2), 229-250. <https://doi.org/10.2307/422082>.
- Blyth, M. M. (2002). *Great Transformations: Economic Ideas and Institutional Change in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge University Press.
- Blyth, M. M. (2003). Structures Do Not Come With an Instruction Sheet: Interests, Ideas, and Progress in Political Science. *Perspectives on Politics*, 1(4), 695-706. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592703000471>.
- Bradford, A. (2020). *The Brussels Effect: How the European Union Rules the World*. Oxford University Press.
- Brinkel, T. (2020). *Haagse Jaren: De Politieke Memoires van Ruud Lubbers*. Ambo | Anthos.
- Bullough, O. (2018). *Moneyland: Why Thieves and Crooks Now Rule the World and How to Take It Back*. Profile Book.
- Capoccia, G., & Kelemen, R. D. (2007). The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism. *World Politics*, 59(3), 341-369. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100020852>.
- Council of the European Union (1999). *Code of Conduct (Business Taxation)*. Retrieved 21 October 2023, from https://ec.europa.eu/taxation_customs/system/files/2016-09/primarolo_en.pdf.
- Council of the European Union (2022). *EU List of Non-Cooperative Jurisdictions for Tax Purposes*. Retrieved 21 October 2023, from <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-list-of-non-cooperative-jurisdictions/#updated>.
- de Rijk, M. (1995, October 5). De Hobbelstrategie. *De Groene Amsterdammer*. Retrieved 21 October 2023, from <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/de-hobbelstrategie>.
- de Rijk, M. (1996). Het Werkt. *De Groene Amsterdammer*. Retrieved 21 October 2023, from <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/het-werkt>.

- Dekker, W., & Kreling, T. (2022, January 28). Hoe werd Nederland een belastingparadijs (en hoe komen we er vanaf)? *de Volkskrant*, 10.
- Devereux, M. P., & Loretz, S. (2013). What Do We Know About Corporate Tax Competition? *National Tax Journal*, 66(3), 745-773. <https://doi.org/10.17310/ntj.2013.3.08>.
- Drawbaugh, K., & Sullivan, A. (2013). Corporations 'Check the Box' to Save Billions in Taxes. *The Fiscal Times*. Retrieved 21 October 2023, from <https://www.thefiscaltimes.com/Articles/2013/05/31/Corporations-Check-the-Box-to-Save-Billions-in-Taxes>.
- Farrell, H., & Newman, A. L. (2016). The New Interdependence Approach: Theoretical Development and Empirical Demonstration. *Review of International Political Economy*, 23(5), 713-736. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2016.1247009>.
- Farrell, H., & Newman, A. L. (2019). Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion. *International Security*, 44(1), 42-79. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00351.
- Frederik, J. (2017, June 1). Zo Werd Nederland het Grootste Belastingparadijs voor Amerikaanse Multinationals. *De Correspondent*. Retrieved 21 October 2023, from <https://decorrespondent.nl/6825/zo-werd-nederland-het-grootste-belastingparadijs-voor-amerikaanse-multinationals/410600865675-af3e00af>.
- Garcia-Bernardo, J., Janský, P., & Torslov, T. (2021). Multinational Corporations and Tax Havens: Evidence from Country-by-Country Reporting. *International Tax and Public Finance*, 28(6), 1519-1561. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10797-020-09639-w>.
- Grinberg, I. (2012). Beyond FATCA: An Evolutionary Moment for the International Tax System. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1996752> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1996752>.
- Hakelberg, L. P. (2015). The Power Politics of International Tax Cooperation: Luxembourg, Austria and the Automatic Exchange of Information. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 22(3), 409-428. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2014.941380>.
- Hakelberg, L. P. (2016). Coercion in International Tax Cooperation: Identifying the Prerequisites for Sanction Threats by a Great Power. *Review of International Political Economy*, 23(3), 511-541. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2015.1127269>.
- Hakelberg, L. P. (2020). *The Hypocritical Hegemon: How the United States Shapes Global Rules Against Tax Evasion and Avoidance*. Cornell University Press.
- Hall, P. A., & Taylor, R. C. R. (1996). Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms. *Political Studies*, 44(5), 936-957. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.1996.tb00343.x>.
- Hay, C. (2001). The 'Crisis' of Keynesianism and the Rise of Neoliberalism in Britain. In J. L. Campbell & O. K. Pedersen (Eds.), *The Rise of Neoliberalism and Institutional Analysis* (pp. 193-218). Princeton University Press.
- Heinemann, F., & Spengel, C. (2017). Analysis of US Corporate Tax Reform Proposals and their Effects for Europe and Germany. *Zentrum für Europäische Wirtschaftsforschung (ZEW) GmbH*. Policy Paper. https://ftp.zew.de/pub/zew-docs/gutachten/US_Tax_Reform_2018.pdf?_gl=1*13op42*_ga*MTIzNTgxODM3Mi4xNzA1NTkzOTcx*_ga_KFD4G5CY27*MTcwNTU5Mzk3MC4xLjAuMTcwNTU5Mzk3MC4wLjAuMA.
- Hemels, S. (2022, January 2). Informatie-uitwisseling moet wel wat opleveren. *Het Financieele Dagblad*. Retrieved 21 October 2023, from <https://fd.nl/opinie/1425362/informatie-uitwisseling-moet-wel-wat-opleveren-r4c2cakshHQW>.
- Javers, E. (2009, May 5). Obama Targets Offshore Havens. *Politico*. Retrieved 21 October 2023, from <https://www.politico.com/story/2009/05/obama-targets-offshore-havens-022094>.

- Katzenstein, P. J. (1985). *Small States in World Markets: Industrial Policy in Europe*. Cornell University Press.
- Kelemen, D. R., & Vogel, D. (2010). Trading Places: The Role of the United States and the European Union in International Environmental Politics. *Comparative Political Studies*, 43(4), 427-456. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414009355265>.
- Kerste, M., Baarsma, B., Weda, J., Rosenboom, N., Rougoor, W., & Risseeuw, P. (2013). Uit De Schaduw van het Bankwezen: Feiten en cijfers over bijzondere financiële instellingen en het schaduwbankwezen. *Stichting Economisch Onderzoek* (Rapport nr.2013-31). Holland Financial Centre.
- Kroon, P. G. (1987). Het Nederlandse Rulingbeleid. *Maandblad Belasting Beschouwingen*, 6, 141-147.
- Langerock, J., & Hietland, M. (2019, November 6). How the Netherlands Built One of the World's Worst Tax Havens. *Foreign Affairs*. Retrieved 21 October 2023, from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/bermuda/2019-11-06/how-netherlands-built-one-worlds-worst-tax-havens>.
- Lindner, J., & Rittberger, B. (2003). The Creation, Interpretation and Contestation of Institutions – Revisiting Historical Institutionalism. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 41(3), 445-473. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00430>.
- Matthijs, M. M. (2008). *The Political Economy of Crisis Making: The United Kingdom from Attlee to Blair (1945-2005)*. Johns Hopkins University.
- Meunier, S., & da Conceicao-Heldt, E. (2015). *Speaking With a Single Voice: The EU as an Effective Actor in Global Governance?* Routledge.
- Nooteboom, A. (1990). Advance Rulings in the Netherlands. OECD.
- OECD. (1998). *Harmful Tax Competition: An Emerging Global Issue*. OECD Publishing.
- Effectively, Taking into Account Transparency and Substance, Action 5 – 2015 Final Report. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264241190-en>.
- Oudenampsen, M. (2020). Between Conflict and Consensus: The Dutch Depoliticized Paradigm Shift of the 1980s. *Comparative European Politics*, 18, 771-792. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-020-00208-3>.
- Perlstein, E. R. (2020). *Reaganland: America's Right Turn 1976-1980*. Simon & Schuster.
- Pijl, H., & Hählen, W. (2001). The New Advance Pricing Agreement and Advance Tax Ruling Practice in the Netherlands. *Bulletin for International Fiscal Documentation*, 55(1212), 614-629.
- Rixen, T. (2011). From Double Tax Avoidance to Tax Competition: Explaining the Institutional Trajectory of International Tax Governance. *Review of International Political Economy*, 18(2), 197-227. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2010.481921>.
- Rodrik, D. (2011). *The Globalization Paradox: Why Global Markets, States, and Democracy Can't Coexist*. Oxford University Press.
- Romano, C. (2002). *Advance Tax Rulings and Principles of Law: Towards a European Tax Rulings System?* International Bureau of Fiscal Documentation.
- Ruigrok, P., & Blokzijl, M. (2012). Kabinet in Crisis. *Andere Tijden*. Retrieved 21 October 2023, from <https://anderetijden.nl/aflevering/119/Kabinet-in-crisis>.
- Smetsters, N. A. Th. (2020). *De Nederlandse Rulingpraktijk*. Wolters Kluwer.
- Steinmo, S. (2008). Historical Institutionalism. In D. della Porta & M. Keating (Eds.), *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences: A Pluralist Perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
- Steinmo, S., Thelen, K., & Longstreth, F. (1992). *Structuring Politics: Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Analysis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Streeck, W., & Thelen, K. (2005). *Beyond Continuity: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies*. Oxford University Press.

- Thelen, K. (2004). *How Institutions Evolve: The Political Economy of Skills in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Japan*. Cambridge University Press.
- Torslov, T., Wier, L., & Zucman, G. (2018). The Missing Profits of Nations. NBER Working Paper No. 24701. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w24701>.
- van Beurden, T., & Jonker, J. (2021). A Perfect Symbiosis: Curaçao, the Netherlands and Financial Offshore Services, 1951-2013. *Financial History Review*, 28(1), 67-95. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S096856502000013X>.
- van Dijk, M., Weyzig, F., & Murphy, R. (2006). *The Netherlands: A Tax Haven? Vol. 5*. SOMO.
- Vleggeert, J., & Vording, H. (2019). How The Netherlands Became a Tax Haven for Multinationals. Available at SSRN: <http://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3317629>.
- Visser, J., & Hemerijck, A. (1997). *A Dutch Miracle: Job Growth, Welfare Reform and Corporatism in the Netherlands*. Amsterdam University Press.
- Wasserfallen, F. (2014). Political and Economic Integration in the EU: The Case of Failed Tax Harmonization. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 52(2), 420-435. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12099>.

Instrument of Institutional Empowerment? An Explorative Study of the Local Council Chair in Flanders*

Raf Reuse & Tom Verhelst**

Abstract

Since 2007, Flemish local councils have been entitled to appoint their own chair, ending the mandatory combination of mayoralty and council chairmanship. The Flemish government initiated this reform to encourage the appointment of non-executive councillors as chairs, aiming to strengthen the council's overall position. Through an explorative study of five types of council chairs, our article examines whether and how chairs can empower the council and whether chairs without an executive office succeed better in doing so. Based on a new typology of the office, we consider the chair's role along three dimensions: (1) inside empowerment of the council, (2) partisanship and (3) outside empowerment of the office to the community. We find that while all types of chairs strive to empower the council within government, the non-executive chairs act less partisan and emerge as the council's spokesperson. These findings suggest that a non-executive chair offers more guarantees to advance the council's position.

Keywords: council chair, local politics, local government, institutional reform, Flanders.

1 Introduction

Since 2007, Flemish local councils have been entitled to appoint their own council chair. As one of the most eye-catching reforms of the 2005 Local Government Act (*Gemeentedecreet*), the introduction of this new institution put an end to the automatic combination of council chairmanship and mayoralty. This twofold position consolidated substantial power in the hands of the mayor, being the leader of the executive under scrutiny and the head of the council at the same time. As such, the mayor's double hat contributed to the situation at that time whereby "[r]

* This research is partly based on the unpublished master dissertation of Raf Reuse, for which he was runner-up in the 'Scriptieprijs Guido Decoster' 2021 – an award for the best thesis on local democracy issued by the Domestic Affairs Agency of the Flemish Government. Furthermore, we thank our colleagues at the Department of Political Science of Ghent University as well as the anonymous reviewers for their valuable insights and feedback. Finally, we thank student-assistant Matthias Vandevooort for transcribing the interviews.

** Raf Reuse, PhD researcher, Department of Political Science, Ghent University. Tom Verhelst, Professor, Department of Political Science, Ghent University.

rather than the executive being subordinate to the municipal council, the real situation is the other way around: the municipal council follows the dictates of the executive” (Steen & Wille, 2005, p. 456). Although the disentanglement of both offices did not prohibit mayors and aldermen from being appointed as council chairs,¹ the Flemish government clearly wished to foster the appointment of non-executive councillors in order to strengthen the council vis-à-vis the executive board (i.e. the Board of Mayor and Aldermen – BMA). Indeed, the latter has been an explicit ambition of the Flemish government for some decades now (Verhelst, 2013; Verhelst et al., 2019; Vlaams Parlement, 2005).²

Despite the fact that the number of council chairs without an executive office – who we will call ‘non-executive chairs’ – has been steadily increasing ever since (Karsten et al., 2017), we still have little knowledge of whether this has also materialised in a stronger position of the council and its councillors within the local polity. Early assessments were published 10 years ago as part of a general evaluation of the new Local Government Act (Hennau & Ackaert, 2013; Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010; Olislagers et al., 2008, 2013).³ These quantitative studies pointed to a positive but modest effect, depending on the dimension of council empowerment and the local political actor under study. However, bearing in mind the evident time effect of such reform, the researchers called for follow-up research to validate their findings (Olislagers et al., 2013). Furthermore, we still have little evidence of how council chairs exercise their office and how this can contribute to empowering the council more generally. Our article addresses this issue by presenting an exploratory analysis of the contemporary Office of the Local Council Chair in Flanders. We examine if and how council chairs empower the council and whether non-executive chairs succeed better at this.

Through a comparative case study, we assess five different types of council chair: a mayor, an alderman, an alderman-to-be,⁴ a majority councillor and an opposition councillor. The analysis considers additional variance with regard to municipal size, sex⁵ and the intraparty status of the chair. We compare the different council chairs along three theoretical dimensions of the office: (1) their role in the emancipation of the council and the councillors (inside empowerment), (2) their partisanship in the exercise of the office and (3) the representation of their office towards the community at large (outside empowerment). To interpret our findings, we combine these dimensions into a typology of ideal-typical chairs, which can also be used to categorise the office in other local government systems and political arenas. Consequently, this article furthers our understanding of this understudied institution, both theoretically and empirically.

In addition to this academic relevance, our article contributes to the current political debate on the future of the office of the council chair. The mandatory separation between an executive office and the council chairmanship might return to the political agenda after a failed attempt during the formation of the Flemish government in 2014 (Karsten et al., 2017). In the conclusion of the article, we propose some specific suggestions to institutionalise the office to this end and, accordingly, realise the ambitions that underpinned the reform.

The article continues with a brief contextual overview of the challenges and reforms of the local council in Flanders. Afterwards, we theorise the role of the

council chair, which leads to the proposition of a typology of council chairs. Section 4 sets out the data and research methods, before we analyse the different types of council chairs in Section 5. General conclusions and discussions are presented in the final part of the article.

2 The Context: Strengthening the Council Under Pressure

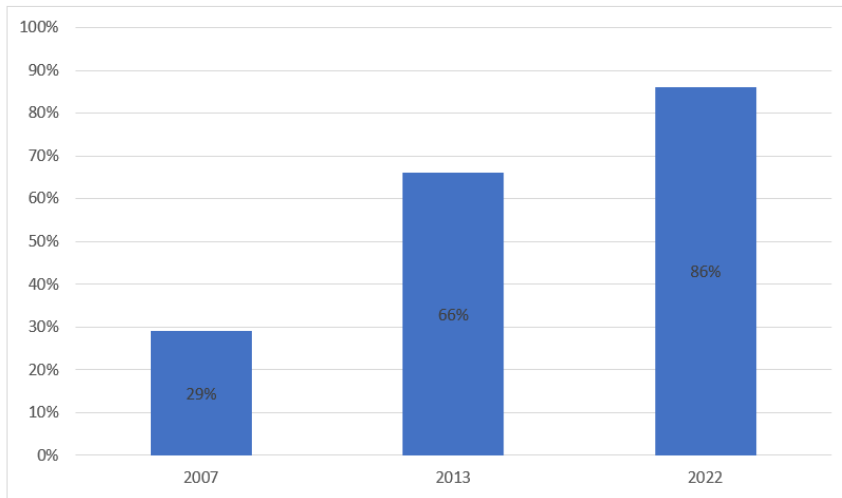
As its only directly elected institution, the council is formally considered the highest decision-making body of local government in Flanders (Steen & Wille, 2005; Verhelst, 2013; Verhelst et al., 2019). It serves as the arena for political debate and has a broad competence to regulate general policies and all matters of interest for the local community. To do so, the council passes regulations, imposes taxes and adopts a multiannual financial framework (*meerjarenplan*) (Reynaert & Dobbelaere, 2018). Councils can also establish committees to prepare council meetings in detail. Councillors form the direct link between citizens and the government within this system. They translate the needs and preferences of citizens into political action, define policy and scrutinise government (Verhelst et al., 2011). In other words, councillors are entrusted with the traditional role set of representation, legislation and control (Denters, 2005). To fulfil this role set, councillors have several instruments at their disposal, such as agenda-setting, debates, field visits and information and interpellation rights (Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010).

However, local government works quite differently in practice (Steen & Wille, 2005; Verhelst et al., 2011, 2019). The real power is found to rest with the executive board and especially the mayor as the leading political figure of the municipality. While councillors are still laymen lacking sufficient stature and support, they ought to oversee the increasingly professionalised BMA and the administration. All this happens in a very demanding policy environment in terms of complexity and workload (e.g. when dealing with a myriad of inter-municipal co-operations, municipal companies and different types of network governance). The strong party discipline (*partitocracy*) and the dominance of the political majority over the opposition further limit the power and autonomy of the councillors and the council as a whole. These pressures add to the intrinsic challenge of the office in having to reconcile diverging demands as governor and representative (Tops & Zouridis, 2002). Meanwhile, a growing group of citizens no longer feel represented by the representative assembly and look for new ways to address their policy needs directly in the political arena (Wauters & Kern, 2020). It is hardly surprising that under these conditions, councils become somehow marginalised and councillors drop out before the end of the legislative term (see Van berlaer, 2021, for recent figures of Flemish local government).

The Flemish government acknowledged the growing marginalisation of the council. One of the explicit ambitions of the new Local Government Act issued in 2005, therefore, was to strengthen the position of the latter (Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010; Vlaams Parlement, 2005).⁶ Through the possibility of delegating competencies to the BMA, it was believed that councils could focus primarily on setting the

strategic goals of municipal policy. Some existing council instruments were formally codified, and extended reporting duties were imposed on the BMA and the leaders of the administration. A third remarkable element was the introduction of a separate council chair. Since 2007, any elected councillor having Belgian nationality was allowed to assume this position. Under the new rules, council chairs are appointed by a formal nomination document submitted at the start of the council term, which requires the signatures of an absolute majority of councillors (Warnez, 2019). Before, the mayor automatically presided over the council. As the most influential actor and political leader in local government (Steyvers, 2007), this system concentrated substantial power in the mayor's hands. Heading the executive under scrutiny while promoting the representative, legislative and oversight functions of the council is a potentially conflicting set of roles. Therefore, disentangling the mayoralty and the council chairmanship had a clear purpose. The Flemish government assumed that a non-executive chair would stimulate debate and facilitate the council's oversight role. At the same time, it would enhance the profile of the council as a separate institution, increase its independence from the BMA and clarify the distinction between policymaking and administration in municipal government. Mayors, in turn, would also profit from the reform, as having a non-executive chair would allow them to focus on defending their policy in the council (Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010; Verbeek, 2014; Verhelst et al., 2019; Vlaams Parlement, 2005).⁷

Figure 1 *The Share of Non-Executive Council Chairs in Flanders*



Today, the picture of the Flemish council chair is mixed. On the one hand, appointing a non-executive councillor as chair has become a common practice. As Figure 1 demonstrates, this number has been on the rise consistently, going from 29% after the introduction in 2007 up to 86% in 2022. Only a minority of councils

are still presided over by mayors or aldermen nowadays (Karsten et al., 2017; Pinakes, 2022). On the other hand, the fact that the appointment of an executive council chair is still allowed suggests that the Flemish government was hesitant to strengthen the position of the council in an uncompromising fashion.⁸ In the same line of thought, the Advisory Board for Internal Affairs already criticised the new institution back in 2005 for its lack of a clear profile, additional competencies and support (Olslagers & Ackaert, 2010). In addition, it is striking that the non-executive council chairs are predominantly chosen from the party groups in the governing majority. At the start of the current legislative term, only one municipality appointed a chair from within the opposition ranks.⁹ Hence, the chairmanship is usually part of the wider coalition negotiations, serving as a kind of bargaining chip in the distribution of executive offices among the ruling parties.

Underneath these figures lies a complex political reality. The increased use of the non-executive council chair could have been driven by the sincere belief in the necessity of the reform. Opposed to such a 'logic of appropriateness', a 'logic of consequence' would suggest that the practice mainly follows from goal-oriented calculations of the political parties (Cole & McAllister, 2015). In this vein, the chairmanship is deemed an additional office to distribute among the coalition parties in the government formation.¹⁰ This might explain why, in the beginning, the non-executive chairmanship was more popular in municipalities ruled by coalitions. Equally, the reform was implemented to a larger extent by new mayors. Incumbent mayors who were used to preside over the council for many years were somewhat less eager to abandon their twofold role (Olslagers et al., 2008). Although these correlations with coalition government and government discontinuity have faded over time (Hennau & Ackaert, 2013) – hinting at a stronger internalisation of the non-executive office as such – awarding it to an opposition member still seems a bridge too far in most cases.

In the early days after the reform, general evaluations of the new Local Government Act did not suggest a drastic change in local government provoked by the non-executive council chair. Olslagers and Ackaert (2010) conducted a survey among mayors, aldermen and councillors two years after the reform's introduction. They found an acclaimed positive impact on council scrutiny but not on the quality of political debate and strategic policy development. Another survey established that local politicians from councils with a non-executive chair held slightly more positive views of the empowerment of their council, but the municipal CEOs did not perceive that effect (Olslagers et al., 2013). The association of Flemish municipalities (VVSG) interviewed several council chairs to assess their role in shaping the relationship between the council and the executive (Verbeek, 2014; Verbeek & Van Bouwel, 2010).¹¹ It seemed that the chairs had not always succeeded (yet) in strengthening the independence of the council. Many still relied heavily on the assistance of the BMA and the administration. Some non-executive chairs stated that by acting as neutral chairs, they at least tried to bridge the political gap between the governing majority and the opposition within the council. However, at the same time, they struggle to reconcile the neutrality of the office with party membership and actively contributing to the council debate. The pioneers also noticed ample room to increase the outside profile of the office. In the next section,

we theorise the Office of the Council Chair more profoundly in order to evaluate how chairs can empower the council in practice.

3 The Council Chair: Functions and Responsibilities

The parliamentary literature conceives chairmanship as one of the designated causes of a performant legislature, especially when it comes to the basic task of scrutinising government (Rockman, 1984; Saalfeld, 2000). Importantly, proper chairmanship involves a fundamentally non-political element: “In every polity there is a need to bridge divisions and to make decisions in procedural if not substantive matters in a neutral and undisputed way” (Jenny & Müller, 1995, p. 327). Across political systems, the chair relies on a wide range of possible functions to enable this task. They include agenda-setting, assigning legislative work to committees, choosing voting procedures, voting power, government formation, disciplinary powers to maintain order (for the purpose of time management and preventing improper behaviour), adjourning debates, convening parliamentary sessions, and internal administration (Jenny & Müller, 1995, pp. 331-335).

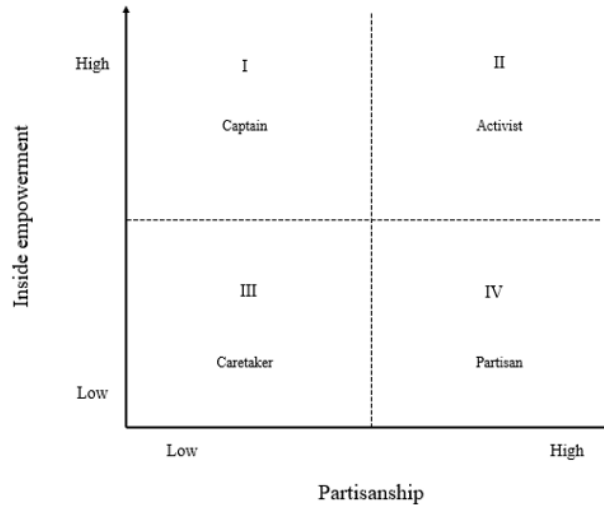
Functionally, Karsten et al. (2014) distinguish between the formal competencies (*functions*) of the office and the practical competencies that go along with it (*responsibilities*). Regarding the former, the Flemish Local Government Act sets out a few formal competencies of the council chair. Chairs convene the council (at least 10 times per year) and define the agenda of the meeting. This implies that they can determine the order of the topics, add items to the agenda and ensure that the agenda is communicated in a comprehensible and timely manner to the councillors. During the council meeting, chairs organise the session and the voting procedures and open, preside and close the debate. They also maintain public order, sign council documents and regulations and chair the public welfare council (Suykens, 2010; Warnez, 2019). Apart from these legal functions, council chairs may assume additional responsibilities, such as acting as spokespersons of the council and fostering the operation of the council as a whole (Warnez, 2019). In this regard, the Flemish government expected council chairs to stimulate debate and oversight activities, enhance the council’s profile, increase its independence from the BMA and separate the roles in the policy cycle (e.g. allowing mayors and aldermen to defend their policies vis-à-vis the council as scrutiny agent). To fulfil these responsibilities, chairs can facilitate and stimulate the use of the regular council instruments (e.g. consultation, information, field visits, questions), establishment of council committees, communication from the BMA towards the council, and the agreement upon proper internal rules of procedure. The council’s mandatory internal regulation stipulates how chairs approach their competencies and responsibilities in light of the council’s operation. Nonetheless, these regulations are often considered as an instrument of the chair to regulate council business and, hence, may reflect, rather than guide, the chair’s behaviour.

4 Operationalisation of the Office: Dimensions and Typology

Our study aims to explore how council chairs fulfil these functions and responsibilities in practice. To structure our analysis, we draw on the work of Jenny and Müller (1995). These authors proposed two basic dimensions to typify the legislative assembly's chair. The first dimension refers to the power of the chair in terms of functions and responsibilities alongside their accountability towards the assembly. For the purpose of our research, we accommodate this role to the specific power to strengthen the council as an institution vis-à-vis the executive board and to support the councillors in their individual capacity. This 'inside empowerment' ranges on a continuum between the chair barely fulfilling the minimal legal functions to secure the operation of the council and the chair proactively taking extra measures to empower the council and improve its position in relation to the BMA.

The second dimension of the office is partisanship (Jenny & Müller, 1995). It refers to the extent to which the chair acts in favour of every councillor or whether the chair favours their own party group (or, the coalition at large). In the case of the latter, we speak of a politicised office (Bach, 1999). According to Jenny and Müller (1995), the chance of partisanship decreases when there is a challenging selection process, the candidate is not part of the government and the candidate is recruited from the party backbenches.¹² In line with our research objective, we operationalise partisanship slightly differently considering two basic elements of the office in the Flemish local government context. The first refers to the degree of politicisation with which the chair exercises their office (i.e. treating every party group equally or acting in favour of the government or the own party group). On the other hand, the dimension also relates to how the chair behaves personally as a fellow councillor. Combining both elements, a highly partisan position implies that the chair takes sides with their own group and participates as a regular politician in the council business. The opposite position is more procedural, meaning that the chair acts in a strictly neutral way while refraining from the debate and party politics in the council.

The combination of both dimensions allows us to develop a typology of ideal-typical council chairs that helps summarise and interpret our findings in a succinct way (see Figure 2).¹³ Type I represents what we call the *captain*. Such a chair proactively defends the rights of their fellow councillors and tries to do this in an impartial way, refraining from an active role in council work. Type II is more of an *activist*. For this type, council empowerment goes hand in hand with a more politicised style of action, which entails participating in the debates and/or pursuing party political objectives. The latter occurs, for instance, when a chair from an opposition party strives to compete against the powerful BMA. Quadrants III and IV are comprised of council chairs who are less keen on (or capable of) incentivising their institution and its members. We label Type III as the *caretaker*. This chair adopts a more passive style and is mainly concerned with managing the council business by the books. Type IV stands for the *partisan*. Less concerned with strengthening the institution, this type also acts less neutrally and fulfils a political role in the council as a chair or as a common politician (e.g. participating in debates).

Figure 2 *Ideal-Typical Council Chairs*

Next to this two-dimensional typology, we also want to explore the way in which the council chair represents their position and institution to the larger community. To some extent, a clear and distinct profile of the chair supports the image of the separation of powers presented to the outside world (cf. Jenny & Müller, 1995). Although this dimension does not impact the internal functioning of the council in a direct manner and is therefore not included in the typology, enhancing the councils' profile was one of the additional responsibilities attributed to the chair in the Flemish institutional reform of 2005. One could thus argue that presenting oneself as council chair to the outside world enhances the standing of the council as a type of 'external empowerment'. Again, several options are plausible in that regard, ranging from seeking to obtain high visibility as a chair to giving preference to the other office (e.g. as mayor or alderman) or consciously keeping a low profile.

5 Data and Methods

In order to examine the multidimensional nature of the office of the local council chair in Flanders, we developed a qualitative research design. More specifically, we conducted a comparative case study using elite interviews with councillors, chairs and municipal CEOs that targeted internal validity, exploration and contextual factors as much as possible (Mortelmans, 2018). The latter is of particular importance, as Flemish municipalities each have their distinctive political culture, actors and interparty relations (De Rynck, 2000). Other approaches, such as analysing the council minutes, were not considered, because these only encompass the chair's behaviour during official debates. Elite interviews, on the other hand,

allow us to provide a more complete picture of the chairmanship, which includes the external empowerment dimension and the internal empowerment beyond the official proceedings.

We selected five municipalities on the basis of several criteria. To verify if non-executive chairs act differently from executive chairs, we used the ‘chair type’ as the central selection criterion. We selected one municipality from the following basic categories of council chairs: a mayor, an alderman, an alderman-to-be, a majority councillor and an opposition councillor. The first two categories represent the executive chairs. The difference between a mayor and an alderman incorporates a basic difference in terms of functions and power in Flemish local government – whereby the mayor acts as the most powerful actor within the municipal government (Steyvers, 2007). The last two categories represent the non-executive chairs. We selected a non-executive chair from the majority and opposition, as the gap between these groups is one of the most prominent features of Belgian local government (Verhelst et al., 2011; for a general assessment, see Jenny & Müller, 1995). Finally, the alderman-to-be constitutes an in-between type. Formally, this type falls under the non-executive councillors. However, informally, the provision that they will become a member of the BMA in time can give this type more traits of an executive chair.

In addition to this central selection criterion, we take into consideration the intraparty status of the chair. Indeed, Jenny and Müller (1995) argued that backbenchers have a higher chance of acting less partisan as chair. In our design, we distinguish between party leaders, frontbenchers and backbenchers. The leader is a politician who occupies the most visible and powerful position in their party. Depending on the party’s position inside the government, this can be the mayor, an alderman, the first candidate on the ballot, or the party group leader in the council. Frontbenchers do not lead their party but take a prominent position in the organisation, on the ballot, in the BMA or in the council. Backbenchers, in turn, are less prominent councillors who had a lower place on the party list or did not occupy a key position in their party and in government. In our design, the mayor clearly represents the party leader position (cf. Rodenbach, 2017). In addition, we selected a council chaired by an alderman who qualifies as a frontbencher, because he ranks second in the BMA after the mayor of his own party. The two non-executive chairs in the sample are backbenchers. As the fifth type, we chose an alderman-to-be who leads one of the parties in the coalition. Thus, our sample contains two party leaders – one frontbencher and two backbenchers.

Finally, we include the variables ‘sex’ and ‘municipal size’ (based on the number of inhabitants) as additional selection criteria to refine and diversify our population. Our sample includes three male and two female chairs. With regard to municipal size, our sample ranges from a very small municipality (less than 10,000 inhabitants) to a big city (with more than 100,000 inhabitants). Due to the sensitive nature of the inquiry and the data agreement with our respondents, we anonymised our cases naming them after toponyms from the *Game of Thrones* series (see Table 1).

The first case in our study is *Winterfell*, a medium-sized municipality where the mayor, who has extensive experience (and status) in national politics, chairs the

council. The locality is governed by a coalition of three parties. *Meereen* is the second case. The council of this rather small locality is led by a chair who is not the leader of his party but occupies an important intraparty position as an alderman. The executive is composed of two parties, one of which has actually an absolute majority in the council. The third case of *Oldtown* is a large city run by a coalition of three parties. The chair is the political leader of the smallest party in the coalition, while it was formally agreed upon that they would be appointed as an alderman from September 2023. *King's Landing* is the fourth municipality in the sample. It is a very large city that is governed by a coalition of four parties. The council is presided over by a majority councillor from the backbenches. She is assisted by a vice-chair, which is a self-created office in King's Landing. The fifth case of *Braavos* is a very small municipality that is governed by one party with overall control of the council. Remarkably, the council chairmanship has been awarded to a councillor from the opposition. He is a former mayor and opposition leader who preferred a low-profile political existence in the current council.

Data were gathered through semi-structured individual elite interviews with four actor types per case: (1) council chair, (2) majority councillor, (3) opposition councillor and (3) CEO of the municipal administration.¹⁴ To allow for historical and contextual interpretation, only respondents who were also active in the previous council term were selected. The random sample included male and female respondents per case. Interviews were conducted in two waves (April – May 2021 and August – September 2022) and lasted 40 minutes on average. The questions covered the appointment of the chair, the perception of the functions of the office, and a self-assessment (whereby chairs addressed their own functioning, and the other respondents reflected upon the proper chairmanship they advocated). To operationalise the three dimensions of the office, we asked questions about (1) the organisation of council or committee meetings, the organisation of council debates (the quantity and quality, and the role of the chair), the contribution to the classic council functions (representation, legislation, control), and the general relation with the BMA; (2) the behaviour of the chair towards the different party groups and their involvement in council work; and (3) the profile of the chair as spokesperson of the council outside local government. In the next section, we discuss our findings along these three basic dimensions. Respondents' claims were systematically compared. When opinions differed, we specifically mention interviewees' diverging perceptions.

Table 1 *The Five Cases in Our Study*

	Winterfell	Meereen	Oldtown	King's Landing	Braavos
Position	Executive	Executive	Non-executive (formally)	Non-executive	Non-executive
Chair type	Mayor	Alderman	Alderman-to-be	Majority councillor	Opposition councillor
Intraparty status	Leader	Frontbencher	Leader	Backbencher	Backbencher
Municipal size	Medium (20,000–40,000)	Small (10,000–20,000)	Large (40,000–100,000)	Very large (100,000+)	Very small (–10,000)
Sex	Female	Male	Male	Female	Male

6 Results

6.1 Inside Empowerment of the Council

We start our analysis by exploring the chairs' role in the emancipation of the council and the councillors. First, we look into the legal functions of convening the meetings and setting the agenda (organisational component). Formally, chairs ought to convene the council at least 10 times per year while composing and distributing a clear agenda for the meeting. The interviews reveal that all chairs comply with these minimum requirements of their office. This is also the case in *Meereen*, where the formal provision on the quota was not always respected in the past. We found additional variance in the frequency of council meetings. This variance, however, is mainly due to the size of the municipality and not the council chairmanship. For example, the monthly council meeting in the large city of *King's Landing* is spread over two evening sessions (and also regularly in *Oldtown*), while the agenda is dealt with in a single monthly session in the other cases. In the very small municipality of *Braavos*, there is only one additional council committee which gathers twice a year, whereas in *King's Landing* and *Winterfell*, six standing committees are in place.

The general picture becomes more diverse when we look at additional initiatives with respect to the organisation of council meetings. Some chairs have taken structural measures in that regard. In *King's Landing*, the chair organises additional select or subcommittees to focus on specific policy issues (*thema commissies*) and on neighbourhood policy – the latter are held on location. In *Winterfell*, where the council is presided over by the mayor, several extra committees have also been established at the request of both the majority and the opposition. However, councillors do not receive remuneration for these meetings in order to avoid extra costs. The chair of *Oldtown* does not organise extra meetings but has significantly improved the agenda instead. On his initiative, committees started to discuss additional policy issues, including policies of inter-municipal cooperation and municipal companies. Extra meetings can also be held on an ad hoc basis. In *Braavos*, the opposition chair granted the request from the opposition to organise an additional meeting after the mayor got involved in a scandal. Although he was personally not inclined to do so – since the meeting was organised in the summer holidays when many councillors were on leave – legal stipulations left him with no choice. In *Meereen*, no extra initiatives were taken.

Next to these legal functions, council chairs have additional responsibilities to empower the council and its councillors as representatives, policymakers and scrutinisers and to strengthen the council's position in relation to the BMA (political component). Arguably, facilitating the political debate is one of the most important and visible elements thereof. The five chairs all stressed the importance of having sufficient time and equal opportunities for fundamental political debate. Yet, our interviews demonstrate that there are different ways to achieve this goal. In *Oldtown*, the chair introduced a strict system to organise questions and interpellations in a neutral way (both in terms of time and word length). The chair of *Braavos* introduced templates for the submission of oral questions. In the other councils, speaking time is, to a large extent, unlimited, and flexibility is seen as a

concession to the councillors. This involves not only applying flexible deadlines to submit questions beforehand but also granting room for improvisation during the debate. The chair of *Meereen* exemplified this as follows:

Sometimes it occurs that a councillor says: “We have a pressing question, but we were unable to submit it. May I ask the question?” I always allow them to ask.

In this case, the chair deviated from the council’s internal regulations to facilitate the debate. To improve the quality of debate, the *King’s Landing* chair examined the introduction of debate training for councillors. The mayor-chair in *Winterfell* regularly calls upon the coalition parties to also engage in the council debate. Holding in-person meetings during the COVID-19 crisis was considered a democratic safeguard in *Meereen*, while maintaining the livestream of council meetings after the pandemic was seen as an extra incentive to improve the accountability and the quality of debate in *Winterfell*.

The council roles are further facilitated by a range of extra initiatives the council chair takes. To foster input from the locality in council debates (representative role), the *Oldtown* chair introduced speaking rights for citizens. He also organised additional field visits for the council. In *King’s Landing*, the coalition agreement even included a new competence for the chair to bring local decision-making closer to the citizens. For example, she made existing participation instruments better known and accessible. Besides representation, councillors’ legislative and scrutiny roles rely heavily on the quality of information (Verhelst & Peters, 2023). On that point, the chair of *King’s Landing* ensured that the BMA’s main policy plans were debated in the committee twice, which should enable councillors to steer, monitor and evaluate the policy process. The *Oldtown* chair insists on having complete policy documents that should be distributed among the councillors well in time. To process information, then, facility support comes in handy. Councillors from *Winterfell* received a laptop, which was mainly motivated by the ambition to help councillors scrutinise policy documents from the BMA. The *Braavos* chair also considered additional IT support for the council. An opposite trend, however, was noted in the case of *Meereen*, where the quality of the information on inter-municipal cooperation has receded. According to an opposition councillor, the administration and the executive board also wait to hand over information on sensitive policy issues until the deadline for submitting oral questions has passed.

Finally, we address the chair’s role in maintaining a productive relationship between the council and the executive board, which includes constructive cooperation in addition to a sufficient degree of independence. While the former is secured by the double hat of the chair in the cases of *Winterfell* and *Meereen*, interviews reveal a similar constructive relationship in *King’s Landing*, *Oldtown* and *Braavos*. The chair of *Braavos* not only felt sufficiently supported by the BMA, but he also attended the meetings of the executive board to prepare and fine-tune the agenda of the council.¹⁵ In *Oldtown*, the chair also joins BMA meetings on a systematic basis, be it mainly in his capacity as alderman-to-be. Institutionalising

the Office of the Council Chair, on the other hand, might also help to secure an independent position of the council as a whole. This occurred most explicitly in *King's Landing* as the result of the chair's own proactive behaviour:

At the beginning of my first year as chair, I visited Germany and the Netherlands to see how things are done in our neighbouring countries. I got a lot of inspiration there, such as requesting a personal employee. (King's Landing chair)

Having an assistant funded by the BMA allowed the chair to initiate different reforms, such as strengthening citizen participation, and to prepare the council meetings better.

Table 2 summarises the results of the first dimension of our analysis. It shows that each type of council chair has made some minimal efforts to empower the council on the organisational and political levels. Moreover, additional variance in terms of extra initiatives to organise meetings, set the agenda and facilitate the council roles cannot simply be attributed to the type of chairmanship (even if one executive chair is more passive in that regard). In terms of optimising the relationship with the BMA, no systematic difference between executive and non-executive chairs is found either (although one non-executive chair takes more initiative to secure the council's independence from the BMA). Rather, the results show that especially municipal size affects this dimension, as it makes structural support and additional resources more likely in larger municipalities. Hence, we cannot straightforwardly conclude that non-executive chairs empower councils and councillors to a larger extent than executive ones. Sex and intraparty status did not seem to play a role either.

6.2 *Partisanship of the Council Chair*

The second dimension in our study is the partisanship of the council chair. Partisanship encompasses two elements in our design: (1) involvement in council work and (2) politicisation in chairing the council. Regarding the former, we analyse the chair's participation in the council debates. On this point, we find a clear distinction between the executive and non-executive chairs. The chairs of *Winterfell* and *Meereen* are obviously forced to actively participate in political discussions when their portfolio as mayor and alderman is discussed. Yet, as they make political statements and defend their actions by answering council questions, they also remain in charge of the council proceedings as chair. Moreover, this involvement regularly outstretches the chair's own policy portfolio in the case of *Meereen*. An opposition councillor claimed:

When his own policy fields are debated, he [the chair] always says: "I will answer the question because it is part of my competences".... But if the debate involves a policy domain of the other members of the executive board, he actually responds as well.

Table 2 Inside Empowerment of the Council Chairs

Municipality	Functions (Organisational)			Responsibilities (Political)		
	Organise Meetings and Agendas			Facilitate Council Roles		
	Minimal	Extra	Debate	Extra	Cooperation	Independence
<i>Executive chair</i>						
Winterfell (<i>mayor</i>)	+	+	+	+	+	–
Meereen (<i>alderman</i>)	+	–	+	–	+	–
<i>Non-executive chair</i>						
Oldtown (<i>alderman-to-be</i>)	+	+	+	+	+	–
King's Landing (<i>majority</i>)	+	+	+	+	+	+
Braavos (<i>opposition</i>)	+	±	+	+	+	–

Note: '+' structural initiative; '±' ad hoc initiative; '–', no initiative.

This perception was endorsed by a majority councillor: "... he [the chair] regularly expresses his own opinion as a BMA member before he actually gives the floor to the other aldermen." As such, the position of council chair seems to facilitate circumventing the ordinary rules of debate. In *Winterfell*, an opposition councillor also felt that this practice impedes the quality of debate: "At certain times, she [the chair] turns the council meeting into a one-woman show." This situation is completely different in *King's Landing*, *Oldtown* and *Braavos*, where chairs participate substantially less in the ordinary council debates and limit their political contributions as much as possible. Sometimes, this is part of a socialisation process. For example, the chair of the *Oldtown* council was reprimanded by the opposition for his active contribution to the council debates in his first months in office. This disappeared afterwards. When chairs do want to realise some personal political objectives in the council, they have to act outside the council meeting (e.g. in the party ranks or through informal networks).

The second element of partisanship is the politicisation of the office. Council chairs can act in a very procedural way by strictly adhering to the formal rules and stipulations. On the opposite side, they can be very political and treat councillors and party groups differently based on their party affiliation and the dynamic between majority and opposition. We find clear differences between our cases regarding the style of chairing council debates, despite the official equal distribution of speaking time in each of them. These differences relate to the type of council chair. It is mainly in councils chaired by members of the BMA that the impartiality of the chair is being questioned. In *Winterfell*, there is a sense of missing a neutral referee for the opposition, as the chair tends to interrupt councillors too often. In *Meereen*, councillors even feel to be treated very harshly by the chair, who is unable to separate his office from the one as a member of the BMA. While the respective chairs do not perceive the situation as problematic themselves, councillors thus seem to challenge the desirability of their double role. We could not observe such critical opinions of the politicisation of the office in the councils with a non-executive chair. The case of *Oldtown* is situated in between. Although the chair is generally applauded for his procedural style of guiding the debates, opposition councillors still feel slightly disadvantaged in being awarded speaking time. On a rare occasion, the chair did not intervene when an alderman launched a personal attack on a member from the opposition either.

Finally, in some interviews, we encountered another indicator of the politicisation of the office that was not identified in our theoretical framework. Indeed, impartiality is also reflected in the collectivisation of the Office of the Council Chair as such. In a sphere of shared responsibility, for example, where different representatives from different party groups manage council affairs collectively in a kind of collegiate board, the council is enabled and encouraged to bridge the divide between the majority and the opposition. This system was installed in *Braavos*, where the municipal CEO testified:

What is very valuable is that once a year, we meet with the chair, the mayor and the party group leaders to deal with various topics ... it was actually also

initiated by the chair. That is something that used to happen far less in the past.

In *King's Landing*, this cross-party deliberation is even institutionalised in the council's Bureau, a monthly meeting of the chair, the vice-chair, the leaders of the party groups and the mayor. Next to this gathering, the committee chairs are represented in the Extended Bureau (*Uitgebreid Bureau*). In *Oldtown*, the chair also convenes meetings with the party group leaders to discuss improvements in council business. The interviews reveal that these formal or informal collective meetings receive support from all political actors. When the chairmanship is not exercised collectively in any way, on the other hand, the institution is considered more partisan. This is the case in *Winterfell*, where the opposition complained about the lack of consultation on organising council business.

Taking these elements together (see Table 3), we may conclude that non-executive council chairs act less politically than executive chairs. The *Oldtown*, *King's Landing* and *Braavos* cases are characterised by more objective and procedural chairmanship in combination with low levels of personal involvement in council debates. These non-executive chairs act in a strictly neutral way while refraining from party politics in the council. Their approach is epitomised by (a form of) collectivisation of the office and the installation of cross-party initiatives to stimulate nonpartisan working. This finding applies to non-executive chairs from the majority and the opposition. The chairs in *Winterfell* and *Meereen*, on the contrary, are highly involved in council debates due to their double hat as chair and member of the executive board. Their office is also strongly politicised, as it is believed that they do not treat every party group equally. Again, these differences seemed unaffected by the sex and intraparty status of the council chair.

Table 3 *Partisanship of the Council Chairs*

Municipality	Involvement	Politicisation	
	Contribution to Debate	Impartiality	Collectivisation
<i>Executive Chair</i>			
Winterfell (<i>mayor</i>)	+	–	–
Meereen (<i>alderman</i>)	+	–	–
<i>Non-executive chair</i>			
Oldtown (<i>alderman-to-be</i>)	–	±	+
King's Landing (<i>majority</i>)	–	+	+
Braavos (<i>opposition</i>)	–	+	+

Note: '+', high; '±', medium; '–', low.

6.3 *Outside Empowerment of the Council*

The third and final dimension of our analysis concerns the representation of the council as an institution towards the locality at large. As Table 4 demonstrates, this

dimension indeed clearly differs across the different types of council chairs. In *Winterfell* and *Meereen*, the chairs do not present themselves to the larger community in their capacity as council chairs. The CEO of *Meereen* stated, for example: “In fact, I can cite virtually no examples over the past three years where he [the chair] has exclusively come to the fore as council chair.” In their own perception, but also in the eyes of their citizens, the chairs from *Winterfell* and *Meereen* are first and foremost mayor and alderman, respectively. From their point of view, being a chair does not add an additional layer to the existing, already (very) exclusive, political profile. The case of *Oldtown* is more ambiguous in this regard. On the one hand, the chair actively communicates about his office via social media. On the other hand, at public events, where he regularly takes the stage, he tends to represent the BMA rather than the council. To some extent, he is therefore regarded as the ‘tenth alderman’ of the city.

In *Braavos* and *King’s Landing*, the chairs do not purposively speak out on a regular basis as council chairs either; nor do they (claim to) proactively seek media attention for that purpose. In the case of *Braavos*, this reluctance stems from the chair’s own choice to move to a backbench position after having been in leadership positions for several years. Nevertheless, both non-executive chairs have generated attention for the council, at least in a reactive way. The chair of *Braavos* talked to the press about the organisation of council meetings during the COVID-19 crisis and the additional meeting about the scandal in which the mayor was involved. Through this communication, the role of the chair as the monitor of the democratic process in the municipality was underlined. He also attended official visits of the provincial deputy and a twin city on behalf of the council. In *King’s Landing*, a page of the local authority’s official magazine, which is distributed among all inhabitants, was devoted to the council and the chair as its representative. The chair also communicates with news media about her initiatives to bring politics closer to the citizens. Moreover, there were plans to invite her as a guest lecturer in schools and universities to teach young people about the values and organisation of local democracy. These initiatives do seem to hint at a more proactive role in local government’s public representation towards the local community.

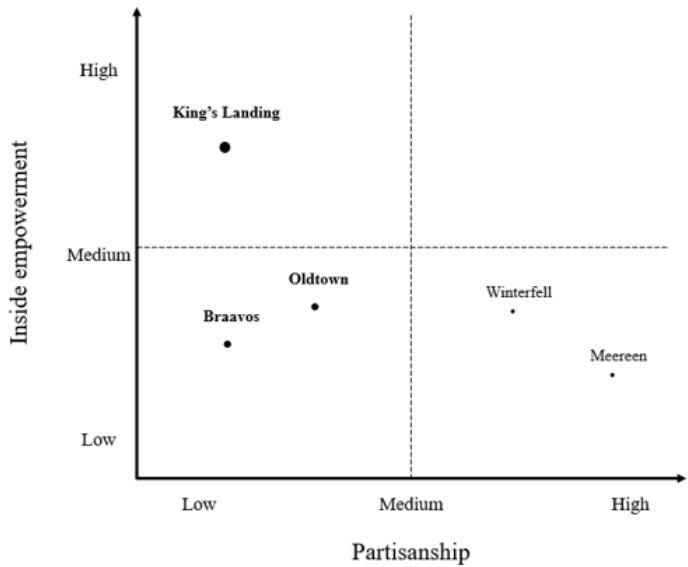
In summary, our results indicate that regardless of the majority/opposition divide, a non-executive position provides more incentives, or at least political space and opportunity, to develop the council chair’s office into a more substantial political role outside local government. As the Flemish government has claimed, this could consolidate the institutional and societal position of the council as a whole. As was the case with inside empowerment and partisanship, sex and intraparty status do not display substantial variation on this dimension.

Table 4 *Outside Empowerment of the Council Chairs*

Municipality	Representation of the Council Towards the Locality		
	Not Present	Reactively	Proactively
<i>Executive chair</i>			
Winterfell (<i>mayor</i>)	+		
Meereen (<i>alderman</i>)	+		
<i>Non-executive chair</i>			
Oldtown (<i>alderman-to-be</i>)		+	±
King's Landing (<i>majority</i>)		+	+
Braavos (<i>opposition</i>)		+	±

Note: '+', applicable; '±', partly applicable.

Figure 3 *Types of Council Chair in Our Study*



6.4 Case Summary

As we have obtained a three-dimensional picture of the council chair in the five cases, we can now connect our empirical insights back to the theoretical framework. More specifically, we relate the five council chairs under study to the different ideal types set out in the theory section. Figure 3 shows the results of this exercise, whereby the non-executive chairs are printed in bold. The chairs of *Winterfell* and *Meereen* are placed in the lower right quadrant and can be classified as an example

of the *partisan* (Type IV). The chairmanship in both municipalities is characterised by high levels of politicisation and involvement in council debates. However, *Meereen* scored lower than *Winterfell* with regard to the inside empowerment of the council, because no additional measures were taken to strengthen the council's position.

As opposed to these cases, the chairs of *Oldtown* and *Braavos* are placed in the lower left quadrant, which represents the ideal type of *caretaker*. While these chairs are acting in a strictly neutral way and take some additional initiatives to empower the council, they do this in a less pronounced fashion than the chair in *King's Landing*, who is the only case in our study representing Type I, the *captain*. The latter combines proactive attempts to activate and emancipate the council and its councillors with a non-politicised work ethic as chair. In addition, the extent to which the chairs represent their office and institution to the outside world is expressed by the size of the dots. Here, too, non-executive chairs occupy a more prominent position in the scheme.

Finally, it is worth highlighting that not a single case comes close to Type II, the *activist*. This is not surprising in the Flemish local government setting, in which executives remain part of the council and there is usually a strict party and coalition discipline. Under such a monistic system, it is very unlikely that a chair can instrumentalise council empowerment as a partisan weapon against the BMA. In *Braavos*, the majority did offer the chairmanship to an opposition councillor, but they only did so because they knew the chair would not actively use his position to the BMA's disadvantage.

7 Conclusion

In this article, we sought to explore how Flemish local council chairs exercise their office. More specifically, we assessed whether a non-executive local council chair succeeds better in empowering the council as purported by the Flemish government in its 2005 institutional reform. In fact, having acknowledged the problematic role and position of the council and its councillors, the Flemish government introduced the possibility to appoint a non-executive local council chair as one way to reinstate the legislative branch. It was believed that the latter would strengthen the council vis-à-vis the executive, preside in a nonpartisan way and represent the council in the locality at large (Oliislagers & Ackaert, 2010; Verbeek, 2014; Verhelst et al., 2019; Vlaams Parlement, 2005).

Based on semi-structured elite interviews with local political actors, we have studied the council chairmanship in five municipalities with a different type of chair: a mayor, an alderman, an alderman-to-be, a majority councillor and an opposition councillor. Concerning the inside empowerment of the council, we found that all chairs make efforts to a certain degree to enhance the council's position. They try to facilitate the debate in the council meetings, are flexible with deadlines for oral questions, organise extra sessions and committees and provide laptops, among other things. Hence, on this dimension, we could not establish that non-executive chairs are systematically more inclined to strengthen the council

than the chairs who combine their office with a position in the Board of Mayor and Aldermen. In our study, personal style, municipal context and size seem more important to interpret the chairs' contribution to the inside empowerment of the council in organisational terms and in taking measures to secure the council's independence in the political arena. As Verbeek and Van Bouwel (2010) have argued, our research also showed the non-executive chairmanship does not really succeed in resolving the strong reliance of the council upon the BMA and their administration, even if the relations are generally marked as cooperative.

Yet, the comparison between the five cases showed more differences between the types of chair with regard to the other two dimensions, that is, partisanship and outside empowerment. The non-executive chairs are particularly characterised by their neutrality and potential to act as the council's spokesperson. Contrarily, the chairs who are part of the BMA very actively participate in council debates, have difficulty distinguishing between their roles and do not represent their office in the locality. These results are in line with our expectations, that is, the premises of the 2005 Local Government Act. It indicates that it does matter whether executive or non-executive councillors are in charge of the council. The ideal-typical council *captain*, or the more passive *caretaker*, are more likely to be found in the latter group. Double-hatted chairs, on the other hand, tend more towards the *partisan* type of chair. Whether the non-executive councillors then belong to the council's majority or opposition does not seem to play a determining role, as the *activist* type of chair is very unlikely to survive in Flemish local government, marked by its partitocracy and strong executive dominance. The intraparty status and sex of the chairs did not seem to be decisive either for that matter.

In summary, our comparative case study suggests that a non-executive local council chair can be an additional asset to local democracy. In our article, non-executive chairs are substantially less partisan and step forward more often as the council's spokesperson. This result confirms earlier research in which local politicians self-reported that the council proceedings, in general, and council scrutiny, in particular, were strengthened in councils that were not presided over by a mayor (Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010; Olislagers et al., 2013). Some extra measures, however, could further facilitate the success of the reform. As suggested by the literature (e.g. Jenny & Müller, 1995), a more neutral appointment procedure would enhance the impartiality of the office. This could involve an election within the council after a genuine selection process and investiture debate instead of incorporating the designation of the chair into the general government formation process. Meanwhile, our study suggests that granting the office more support on the administrative, personal and institutional levels might also improve council management. In that regard, equipping the council with a council clerk, improving the stature of the chair or institutionalising a cross-party bureau could help to realise the just ambition that drove the reform in the first place.

Nonetheless, follow-up research is needed to examine the generalisability of our findings. Our comparative design was exploratory in nature and only comprised five typical cases. Using the analytical dimensions and corresponding ideal types developed in this article, assessments through quantitative measurements should verify our results on a larger scale. Furthermore, future research can also build on

our work to investigate the head of the legislature in different settings (e.g. in other local government systems, or levels of government). At the same time, it can inspire the debate about introducing a non-executive council chair in the Netherlands, which still lacks solid empirical support (Boogers et al., 2021; Karsten & van Zuydam, 2019). Having the non-political mayor as council chair seems to provide a guarantee of having at least a *caretaker* chair, who organises the council business in a neutral way. Replacing this office with a non-executive councillor might risk ending up with a *partisan* or *activist* chair, who instrumentalises the office for party political gains. If the mayor is to be replaced by a *captain*, however, who acts as an ambitious and neutral chair and is supported by a collective bureau, the emancipation of the council could get an extra boost.

Notes

- 1 Members of the executive board are prohibited, however, from chairing council committees.
- 2 The explanatory part of the Local Government Act stated the following: “The possibility to appoint a councillor who is not part of the board as the chair of the council can strengthen the council’s oversight role with respect to the executive officers. A non-executive chair can also more strongly emphasize the functioning of the council by giving it a more independent position relative to the board. If the municipality seeks a far-reaching separation between policy and management, the councillors might prefer as chair a councillor without an executive mandate” (Vlaams Parlement, 2005, p. 13).
- 3 Research on the office in the Netherlands is equally scarce (see Karsten et al., 2014 and Boogers et al., 2021, for general evaluations of the mayoral office; see Karsten & van Zuydam, 2019, for a quantitative study of the vice-chair of the council).
- 4 In many municipalities, there is a formal (or informal) agreement on the succession of a member of the executive board after a certain period during the council term.
- 5 Based on an observation of biological characteristics we determined chairs’ *sex*. We did not explicitly ask them about their *gender* identity.
- 6 Other objectives of the new act were directed towards the municipal administration (e.g. enforcing its role in the policy cycle, improving cooperation with the political actors and modernising financial management) (Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010).
- 7 The reform exemplifies how Flanders and the Netherlands chose ‘different solutions’ to tackle ‘similar problems’ with the council (Steen & Wille, 2005). In the Netherlands, dualism was a more drastic response to the need to re-empower the council. Dualism did not abandon the double hat of the mayor, however, who chairs the executive board and the council as neutral and unelected broker by default (Karsten et al., 2014; Karsten & van Zuydam, 2019). The office of the vice-chair, assumed by a non-executive councillor to replace absent or indisposed mayors, is seen as an extra guard for the council and as a steppingstone towards a stronger identity of the institution as a whole (Karsten & van Zuydam, 2019).
- 8 Academic reports published in preparation of the new Local Government Act proposed much more drastic reforms, such as the introduction of a dualistic system, the mandatory appointment of a non-executive council chair, a constructive motion of no confi-

- dence (which has been introduced recently), the abolishment of multiple office holding, and the direct election of the mayor (Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010).
- 9 However, a few chairs became opposition councillors during the legislative term, as they left their party or the governing majority.
 - 10 In municipalities that are governed by one party the discussion about the distribution of offices, including the council chairmanship, takes place within that party.
 - 11 Especially the collaboration with the CEO was deemed key (Verbeek, 2014; Verbeek & Van Bouwel, 2010).
 - 12 When the chair is nominated from the strongest party, and this party is not part of the government, the authors reckon this to be a sign of non-partisanship. Appointing a council chair from the strongest opposition party is less common in practice, however.
 - 13 The original typology developed by Jenny and Müller (1995, p. 328) was designed to distinguish between government systems. They discerned four types: speaker of the house, neutral chairman, party asset and minor party position. For our research, we tailored this typology to the context of Flemish local government and the particular objective that the chair would act as instrument of council empowerment.
 - 14 This differed to some extent for the *Braavos* case, as we opted for an alderman to replace the majority councillor and we did not find an opposition councillor willing to cooperate. For *Winterfell*, we did not succeed in interviewing the CEO.
 - 15 Since the COVID-19 pandemic and a change in his professional life, however, he no longer systematically joins the meetings.

References

- Bach, S. (1999). The Office of Speaker in Comparative Perspective. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 5(3-4), 209-254. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13572339908420603>.
- Boogers, M., Peters, K., Vollaard, H., Denters, B., & Boogaard, G. (2021). *Teveel van het goede? De staat van het burgemeestersambt anno 2020*. Eindrapport, Universiteit Twente.
- Cole, M., & McAllister, L. (2015). Evaluating and Theorising Committee Scrutiny: A UK Comparative Perspective. *Local Government Studies*, 41(2), 220-239. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2014.904226>.
- Denters, B. (2005). Squandering away Thorbecke's Legacy? Some Considerations on Recent Reforms of Dutch Local Government. In H. Reynaert (Ed.), *Revolution or Renovation? Reforming Local Politics in Europe* (pp. 441-444). Vanden Broele.
- De Rynck, F. (2000). Het krachtenveld in de gemeente. In F. De Rynck & G. Bouckaert (Eds.), *Praktisch handboek voor gemeentebeleid* (pp. 3-23). Die Keure.
- Hennau, S., & Ackaert, J. (2013). *De implementatie van het Gemeentedecreet anno 2012*. Rapport, SBOV.
- Jenny, M., & Müller, W. (1995). Presidents of Parliament: Neutral Chairmen or Assets of the Majority? In H. Döring (Ed.), *Parliaments and Majority Rule in Western Europe* (pp. 326-364). St. Martin's Press.
- Karsten, N., De Ceuninck, K., & Reynaert, H. (2017). Burgemeester (m/v) in de Lage Landen: Zelfde job? Zelfde rol? Zelfde vragen? *Res Publica: Politiek-wetenschappelijk tijdschrift van de Lage Landen*, 59(3), 307-330.

- Karsten, N., Schaap, L., Hendriks, F., van Zuydam, S., & Leenknecht, G. J. (2014). *Majesteitelijk en magistraatelijk. De Nederlandse burgemeester en de staat van het ambt*. Onderzoeksrapport, Tilburg University.
- Karsten, N., & van Zuydam, S. (2019). Hoeder van de raad of functie zonder inhoud? Een beschouwing op het vicevoorzitterschap van de gemeenteraad. *Bestuurswetenschappen*, 73(3), 9-30.
- Mortelmans, D. (2018). *Handboek kwalitatieve onderzoeksmethoden*. Acco.
- Olislagers, E., & Ackaert, J. (2010). De versterkte gemeenteraad: meer dan een holle slogan? Lokale politici over de positie van de gemeenteraad na het gemeentedecreet. In H. Reynaert, K. Steyvers & T. Verhelst (Eds.), *De gemeente- en provincieraad: meer dan ritueel mopperen en legitimeren?* (pp. 71-116). Vanden Broele.
- Olislagers, E., Ackaert, J., De Rynck, F., & Reynaert, H. (2008). *Het gemeentedecreet: een eerste stand van zaken*. Rapport, SBOV.
- Olislagers, E., Hennau, S., Ackaert, J., De Rynck, F., & Reynaert, H. (2013). *Implementatie van het gemeentedecreet: onvoltooide symfonie. Multivariate analyses*. SBOV.
- Pinakes (2022). Viewed online on 11 April 2022 on <https://www.pinakes.be/>.
- Reynaert, H., & Dobbelaere, B. (2018). *Wegwijs in uw gemeente*. Vanden Broele.
- Rockman, B. A. (1984). Legislative-Executive Relations and Legislative Oversight. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 9(3), 387-440. <https://doi.org/10.2307/439490>.
- Rodenbach, J. (2017). *Van spelverdeler tot spits?: over de presidentialisering van het burgemeestersambt in Vlaanderen*. Universiteit Gent.
- Saalfeld, T. (2000). Members of Parliament and Governments in Western Europe: Agency Relations and Problems of Oversight. *European Journal of Political Research*, 37, 353-376. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1007077106053>.
- Steen, T., & Wille, A. (2005). Strengthening Local Government in the Netherlands and Flanders: Similar Problems, Different Solutions? In H. Reynaert, K. Steyvers, P. Delwit & J. B. Pilet (Eds.), *Revolution or Renovation? Reforming Local Politics in Europe* (pp. 445-469). Vanden Broele.
- Steyvers, K. (2007). De burgemeester: van regent tot eerste gemeentebestuurder. In H. Reynaert (Ed.), *De kerktoerenpolitiek voorbij? Lokale politiek in Vlaanderen* (pp. 149-162). Vanden Broele.
- Suykens, M. (2010). De rol van de gemeenteraadsvoorzitter: een versterking van de gemeenteraad. In H. Reynaert, K. Steyvers & T. Verhelst (Eds.), *De gemeente- en provincieraad: meer dan ritueel mopperen en legitimeren?* (pp. 117-131). Vanden Broele.
- Tops, P., & Zouridis, S. (2002). De binnenkant van politiek. Atlas.
- Van berlaer, T. (2021). *Gemeenteraadslid: het nieuwe knelpuntberoep? 'Je moet keuzes maken, of kraken'*. Viewed online on 7 March 2022 on <https://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/gemeenteraadslid-het-nieuwe-knelpuntberoep-je-moet-keuzes-maken-of-kraken/article-longread-1791411.html>.
- Verbeek, M. (2014). Van de eerste tot de laatste minuut de aandacht erbij. *Lokaal*, januari 2014, 24-27. Viewed online on [please add date] on <https://issuu.com/vvsg/docs/2014lokaal01>.
- Verbeek, M., & Van Bouwel, M. (2010). Zoektocht tussen college en raad. *Lokaal*, 16 januari 2010, 19-21.
- Verhelst, T. (2013). *Foundation or Fragment of Local Democracy? Analyzing the Role and Position of Local Councillors in Belgium*. Universiteit Gent.
- Verhelst, T., De Ceuninck, K., & Peters, K. (2019). De gemeenteraad in Vlaanderen: evoluties en toekomstscenario's. In H. Reynaert (Ed.), *Verrekijkers voor lokale besturen. Een lange(re) termijnvisie?!* (pp. 105-131). Vanden Broele.

- Verhelst, T., & Peters, K. (2023). Scrutinising Council Scrutiny: From Theoretical Black Box to Analytical Toolbox. *Local Government Studies*, 50(1), 128-149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2023.2185227>.
- Verhelst, T., Reynaert, H., & Steyvers, K. (2011). Foundation or Fragment of Local Democracy? Empirically Assessing the Roles of Local Councillors in Belgian Governance. *Lex Localis-Journal of Local Self-Government*, 9(2), 103-122. [https://doi.org/10.4335/9.2.103-122\(2011\)](https://doi.org/10.4335/9.2.103-122(2011)).
- Vlaams Parlement (2005). *Memorie van Toelichting bij het Ontwerp van Gemeentedecreet*. Stuk 347 (2004-2005) – Nr. 1.
- Warnez, B. (2019). *Gemeentelijk Zakboekje Bestuur 2020*. Wolters Kluwer.
- Wauters, B., & Kern, A. (2020). *Burger en bestuur*. Acco.

From Divergence to Convergence: Degrees of Formality in the Connections Between Two Flemish Progressive Political Parties and Organised Civil Society

Nick Martin*

Abstract

How do political parties and civil society organisations (CSOs) navigate their relationships in the context of the profound change affecting party systems and civil society in recent decades? To answer this question, I develop a typology of party-CSO connections and undertake a comparative case study of the connections between two progressive parties and a cross-section of CSOs in the region of Flanders. I find that these connections have converged on a very similar pattern and explain this convergence in terms of the politicisation of public policymaking in Flanders and the pragmatic approach of mainstream civil society to representing the claims of their constituencies. My study suggests that to fully understand the patterns of connection between political parties and organised civil society, researchers need to consider the influence of policymaking institutions and the strategies of both parties and civic groups in pursuing their goals within those institutions.

Keywords: political parties, civil society, Flanders, policy system, institutions.

1 Introduction

The connections between political parties and civil society are central to ensuring that the concerns and preferences of ordinary citizens are reflected in the decisions of their governments (Panebianco, 1988; White & Ypi, 2016). Connections matter to both parties and CSOs. For parties, their connections to organised civil society provide pathways to large numbers of voters, sources of policy advice and expertise, and sounding boards during discussions about coalition formation (Allern et al., 2021a; Romeijn, 2020). And for CSOs, parties are ‘gatekeepers’ to public office, providing channels for CSOs to influence policymaking and realise the policy goals of their members (Berkhout, 2013).

For much of the 20th century, analysis of connections between political parties and civil society focused on the relationships between parties with large memberships and CSOs representing economic interests (Bartolini, 2000; Bartolini & Mair, 1990). Most connections between parties and CSOs were formalised in

* Nick Martin, Post-doctoral researcher, Cevipol, Université libre de Bruxelles.

statutes of political parties or through individual membership of linked organisations (Allern & Verge, 2017; Poguntke, 2002).

In recent decades, party systems in Western Europe have undergone extensive changes. The weakening of traditional cleavages that structured party systems around class, religion and geography, and the emergence of new cleavages around sociocultural dimensions, (Bornschieer, 2009; Ford & Jennings, 2020) have fragmented party systems. The number of parties contesting elections has increased, and elections have become increasingly volatile (Emanuele, 2015). And the increased salience to European electorates of issues, such as the environment and immigration, and the emergence of radical populist parties have resulted in greater polarisation of party systems (Borbáth et al., 2023).

At the same time, civil society has undergone extensive changes. On the one hand, there has been an increase in the prominence of professionally run and state-funded CSOs in place of membership-based organisations (Maloney, 2012). On the other hand, recent decades have witnessed the mobilisation by new social movements that articulate a wide range of new claims in areas such as environment, globalisation and identity politics (Fuchs & Rucht, 2018) and an increased polarisation of civil society as new conflicts are politicised by radical actors (Grande, 2022).

These changes have sparked a revival of scholarly interest in the relationship between political parties and organised civil society, suggesting that they have changed in form and structure. While formal connections have declined (Allern & Verge, 2017), a wide range of informal contacts between parties and CSOs have developed that vary widely in their degree of routine or regularity (Allern, 2010; Allern, et al., 2021b). Other studies have compared the different approaches to renewing links of parties within the same party family (Lisi, 2013) or have analysed party strategies for establishing connections in a new democracy (Verge, 2012).

However, less is known about how parties and CSOs from diverging historical and organisational traditions have navigated their relationships in a time of change. A shift from more formal and exclusive to informal and nonexclusive connections may not mean that connections have become less relevant for important political outcomes such as the openness and legitimacy of public policymaking and the responsiveness of political elites to new ideas and inputs from civil society. The study of how parties and CSOs shape connections in a changing context can, therefore, help us understand how patterns of interest representation are evolving and throw light on challenges to their legitimacy.

To explore this question, I draw on the growing literature in this field to propose a comprehensive *typology of connections* between parties and CSOs comprising *formal* connections and *informal* connections. My case study considers patterns of connection from the perspective of both parties and CSOs. I focus on two progressive political parties in the Belgian region of Flanders: (1) *Vooruit*, a party with extensive government experience and a history of ties to pillarised structures of interest representation (Van Haute & Wauters, 2019) and (2) *Groen*, a challenger party that emerged from new social movements. And I consider the perspectives and strategies of a wide range of Flemish CSOs on the form and evolution of their connections with both these parties and other parties in the

Flemish party system. I combine data from a novel dataset, party statutes and semi-structured interviews with political and civil actors in Flanders.

My study of how patterns of connection between parties and CSOs have been shaped at the system level is guided by two general expectations. The first is that changes in the Flemish political system and civil society will have shaped a pattern of connections dominated by informal rather than formal types of connection. The second is that organisations from the region's traditional 'pillar' structures will retain stronger formal connections than organisations that have emerged outside these structures, reflecting path dependencies rooted in ideology and origins (e.g. Gunther, 2005; Rasmussen & Lindeboom, 2013).

The findings are supportive of the first expectation, and there is also some support for the second expectation. Departing from patterns of connection shaped by different organisational and ideological traditions, the two parties and CSOs have converged on a very similar structure of relationships, even though this structure retains legacies of the regions' system of pillarisation. The contemporary structure of relationships between parties and civil society is dominated by non-exclusive informal contacts of varying degrees of regularity that are initiated by both civil and political actors. I explain this convergence in terms of the politicisation of public policymaking in Flanders and the pragmatic approach of mainstream civil society to representing the claims of their constituencies.

This article makes an important contribution to our understanding of how parties and CSOs navigate their interactions in a time of change, identifying two important factors that play a significant part in shaping relationships: (1) the influence of policymaking institutions and (2) the strategies of both parties and civic groups in pursuing their goals within those institutions. And by identifying a full typology of connections between parties and CSOs and exploring the pattern they take at the level of a political system, this article provides a framework for further comparative research into how patterns of connection may be shaped in political systems characterised by different histories and structures of interest representation.

This article is structured as follows. In the first section, I review theoretical contributions on the subject of this article and propose a full typology of formal and informal connections between parties and CSOs. In the second section, I detail the research design, introduce the Flemish case and describe the methods and data used to explore the research question. The results of the study are presented in the third section, and the final section discusses conclusions and identifies areas for future research.

2 Theory and Literature

The theoretical discussion of connections between political parties and CSOs has, until recently, been framed by classical cleavage theory and, in particular, by how connections reflected the shared interests of organisations representing opposing sides of prevailing cleavages of social class (Kitschelt, 1994) and religion (Duncan, 2015). The vertically structured mass party which emerged in the early 20th

century was particularly well suited to the function of integrating and mobilising constituencies represented by organised civil society (Mudge, 2018). In the era of the mass party, the connections between parties were membership based and formal in nature, and party statutes defined relationships between parties and a wide range of ‘ancillary’ organisations (Poguntke, 2002). In countries such as Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands, whose political and sociocultural life was structured by pillarisation, parties and associated CSOs were key to the creation of ideational sub-cultures (Van Haute & Wauters, 2019).

The transformation of the socioeconomic structure of Western European democracies provided the backdrop for the evolution of cleavage theory (Bornschieer, 2009). De-industrialisation, the rise of the service sector and the expansion of higher education weakened traditional cleavages centred around class, religion and geography and led to the emergence of new cleavages centred around sociocultural issues and dimensions (Bornschieer, 2009; Ford & Jennings, 2020). A rise in issue-based voting further complicated the task faced by parties in connecting to and representing social groups; for example, by weakening voting based on economic interests (Kayser & Wlezien, 2011). In traditionally pillarised countries, political and social changes were instrumental to a process of ‘de-pillarisation’ in which institutions and parties associated with different pillars lost influence and electoral support (Hellemans, 2020).

In the last two decades, the study of connections between parties and CSOs has mirrored the evolution of cleavage theory. Socioeconomic changes in Western Europe not only weakened the structural basis to these connections but also led to change in the organisations that constituted connections. Trade union membership fell throughout Western Europe (Kelly, 2015), party membership also declined (Van Biezen et al., 2012) and there was a growth in the number of CSOs representing an increasingly diverse range of interests and claims (Beyers et al., 2008). The scholarly focus shifted to the analysis and explanation of informal connections (Allern, 2010; Allern et al., 2021b), ‘movement’ parties that fuse the identities and action repertoires of parties and social movements (Della Porta et al., 2017), and the strategies of particular party families in constructing links to civil society (Blings, 2020; Lisi, 2013).

The historical origins and traditions of different party families influenced the form and intensity of their connections to CSOs. Socialist parties in Western Europe were founded in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to represent the interests of a growing industrial working class (Bartolini, 2000). For parties in the socialist party family, connections closely resembled the close, formal and membership based patterns typical of the mass party (Mudge, 2018). In contrast, while parties in the Green party family emerged from the 1970s to give political expression to the claims of environmental and antinuclear movements, these movements remained comparatively distant from Green parties (Rootes, 2000).

On the basis of this growing literature, I propose that the connections between political parties and CSOs can be grouped into two principal categories: *formal* connections and *informal* connections. *Formal* connections are comprised of relationships defined by individual membership and affiliation of linked organisations and by party statutes. In contrast, *informal* connections are not

customarily codified in party documents or written agreements between parties and CSOs but are expressed in patterns of interaction between officials and shared forms of political action.

2.1 Formal Connections

Formal connections are made up of three types: *statutory links* and *organisational density*, which are strongly associated with the ‘thick’ organisation characteristic of the mass party (Gunther & Diamond, 2003), and *multispeed memberships*, a newer type of connection that is evolving in response to changes in party organisation and changing patterns of communication between parties and sympathisers (Scarrow, 2019).

The first type of *formal* connection between parties and civil society is *statutory links*. Party statutes are “constituting documents that present an account of who parties are and how they operate” (Scarrow et al., 2023). *Statutory links* comprise the definition in party statutes of formal relationships between a party and external organisations such as trade unions that share a party’s goals, and internal sub-groups that represent important social demographic constituencies of parties such as young people and women (Allern & Verge, 2017). By specifying substantive rights for such organisations over internal party matters such as the nomination of delegates to decision-making bodies, *statutory links* bring representatives of organised social groups into the heart of party deliberation on questions of strategy and policy formation (Lisi, 2013; Poguntke, 2002). Because they are formally codified in party documents, statutory links are durable and show great stability over time (Poguntke, 2002).

A second type of *formal* connection is *organisational density* (Bartolini & Mair, 1990), which describes the extent to which groups of voters are linked to parties by organisational membership and other “agencies of electoral mobilisation” (1990, p. 214). In Bartolini and Mair’s formulation, *organisational density* is based on two types of individual membership – of trade unions and of political parties – and measured as a composite index of the ratio of party membership to the electorate and trade union density (1990, p. 255). The principal function of *organisational density* is to strengthen the partisan attachment of social groups and secure their electoral loyalty.

In the period to the late 1980s, studies suggested that both these types of formal connection played a part in constraining electoral volatility; stronger statutory links by extending the organisational reach of party elites and facilitating communication between parties and large groups of voters (Poguntke, 2002), and organisational density by strengthening the partisan attachment of large groups of voters (Bartolini & Mair, 1990). More recent studies (e.g. Martin, et al., 2022a) have suggested that while trade union membership still stabilises party vote shares, party membership has declined to such an extent that it no longer performs this function.

The third form of *formal* connection – *multispeed membership* – is a response to this decline of party membership in Western Europe (Van Biezen et al., 2012). The *multispeed membership* organisation combines expanded participation and decision-making rights for members with new forms of affiliation for party

supporters (Scarrow, 2019). Multispeed membership takes a wide range of forms in Western European parties, including the establishment of friends' and supporters' networks that encourage the participation of non-members in party activity (Gauja, 2015), and the opportunity for non-members to register with a party and take an immediate part in the election of leaders and selection of party election candidates (Scarrow, 2014). The main functions of the *multispeed organisation* include attracting additional organisational resources and connecting to new groups of supporters, but the extent to which it enhances connection to organised civil society is unclear (Kosiara-Pedersen, et al., forthcoming).

Informal connections are comprised of three types: (1) *regular contacts*, (2) *connective density* and (3) *shared action repertoires*. *Regular contacts* take many forms, from joint commissions on policy issues to various forms of unofficial contact between individual representatives, some of which are routine in nature (Allern, 2010; Allern et al., 2021b). They perform two main functions, the exchange of information and resources of benefit to both parties and CSOs (Otjes & Rasmussen, 2017) and the development of public policy (Allern et al., 2021a). While influenced by shared policy preferences, regular contacts are not exclusive – CSOs initiate contacts with a wide range of parties, especially when policy issues are highly salient to the public (Statsch & Berkhout, 2020). Widespread *regular contacts* between parties and organised civil society have been documented in country specific studies (Allern, 2010; Verge, 2012) and extensive cross-country surveys of CSOs and parties (e.g. Otjes & Rasmussen, 2017). Contacts intensify during election periods when CSOs provide information to their members on party programmes (Blings, 2020) and during coalition formation discussions, when parties and CSOs engage in close dialogue over policy trade-offs (Romeijn, 2020).

The candidates that parties select for elections constitute the core of parties' elites, forming the pool from which members of parliament and government are drawn (Rahat, 2007). Connections between party elites and membership CSOs are conceptualised as parties' *connective density* (Martin et al., 2022a) and measured as party election candidates' membership of CSOs using data from the Comparative Candidates Survey (CCS, 2016, 2019).¹ The main functions of *connective density* are securing programmatic alignment between parties and membership based CSOs and the stabilisation of party support at elections. *Connective density* stabilises the vote share of parties of all ideologies and origins (Martin et al., 2022a) and is highest in parties with government experience and in parties with a left-wing ideology (Martin et al., 2022b).

The third form of *informal* connection sees the identity, roles and action repertoires of parties and CSOs as distinct agents of democratic representation, replaced by a *shared action repertoire* (Della Porta et al., 2017). Action repertoires comprise conventional initiatives to promote legislative change within representative institutions, conventional forms of protest, such as demonstrations or boycotts, and less conventional forms of interest aggregation, such as citizen policy forums or 'solidarity' initiatives (Della Porta et al., 2017). A shared action repertoire exists when parties and CSOs jointly conceive, plan and implement joint political actions in diverse settings, such as the joint mobilisation of social and professional groups in opposition to austerity measures in Southern Europe in the

2010s (Della Porta et al., 2017). The main functions of the *shared action repertoire* are amplification of the shared voice of parties and CSOs and the mobilisation of unrepresented social claims (Sitrin & Azzellini, 2014).

2.2 *Expectations*

My study is guided by two general expectations. The first is that extensive change in the political system and society of Flanders will have shaped a pattern of connections in which informal connections predominate. Second, I expect to find evidence of path dependency in the extent of formal connections to CSOs, with the social democratic *Vooruit* retaining more extensive statutory links and higher organisational density than *Groen* because of *Vooruit's* origins and traditional links to the region's pillars.

Table 1 presents a schematic summary of *formal* and *informal* forms of connection between political parties and CSOs.

Table 1 *Degrees of Formality: A Typology of Connections Between Parties and CSOs*

Type	Sub-types	Functions
Formal	Organisational density	Strengthening partisan attachment of social groups; securing voter loyalty
	Statutory links	Granting substantive organisational rights to linked groups
	Multispeed membership	Attracting additional resources and connecting to new groups of supporters
Informal	Regular contacts	Exchange of information and resources beneficial to parties and CSOs; development of public policy
	Elite connections – connective density	Programmatic alignment between parties and membership based CSOs; stabilisation of party support at elections
	Shared action repertoires	Amplification of shared voice of parties and CSOs; the mobilisation of unrepresented social claims

3 **Research Design and Case Description**

To explore the research question, I conduct a comparative case study of two progressive political parties in the region of Flanders and consider the perspectives of a wide range of Flemish CSOs on the form and evolution of their connections with these and other parties in Flanders. Flanders represents an interesting context for the study of patterns of connection between parties and organised civil society for several reasons. First, the region represents a good example of a corporatist system in which larger organisations cooperate with each other and with public authorities to make and implement public policy (Lehmbruch, 1979). A key feature of the region's corporatism are extensive *consociational practices* of policy formation

and interest representation designed to contain and accommodate conflicts based around social, religious and linguistic cleavages (Andeweg, 2019).

Second, the region has a history of strong formal links between parties in the Christian, Liberal and Socialist party families and institutions in civil society. For decades, Flanders' political and civic life has been structured by *pillarisation* – institutions of political parties and networks of civic associations – that integrates Belgian citizens into ideational subcultures (Van Haute & Wauters, 2019). Each of the three main 'pillars' – socialist, Christian and liberal – has associated trade unions in both parts of the country, and, until the 1980s, pillarised parties dominated the country's elections.²

I focus on two progressive parties within the Flemish party system: *Vooruit* and *Groen*. These parties make an interesting comparison because they share a similar ideological profile and compete largely for the same subgroup of progressive Flemish voters³ (Walgrave et al., 2020). Both parties have shared experience, between 1999 and 2003 and since 2019, as members of coalition governments at the federal level.⁴ However, the two parties differ substantively in respect of their organisational traditions and historical relationship to civil society. *Vooruit* is the recently re-branded Flemish Socialist party that was founded in 1978 on the dissolution of the Belgian Socialist Party (BSP) into separate regional organisations. Historically, the party was firmly based in the socialist pillar with strong relationships with pillar institutions in civil society, but it has distanced itself from traditional allies in recent decades (Martin, 2023). *Groen* emerged in the 1980s from new social movements outside the pillarised system of interest representation. While *Vooruit* owes its origins to older cleavages based on social class, *Groen* is an example of a younger party giving expression to newer social cleavages centred on sociocultural dimensions (Ford & Jennings, 2020). The two parties are thus a most likely case for finding patterns of 'path dependency', which would generate differences between them in their respective patterns of connection to civil society.

3.1 Data Collection

The principal aim of this article is to describe the contemporary pattern of connections between political parties and CSOs at the level of the political system and to understand how that pattern has been shaped by political and civil actors navigating extensive change. To this end, I employ a mixed-methods approach to data collection and combine data from a novel dataset, party statutes and semi-structured interviews with political and civil actors in Flanders.

First, I operationalise *statutory links* as the number of formal links or associations between parties and either internal subgroups or external organisations defined in party statutes (Scarrow et al., 2023). To collect this information for *Vooruit* and *Groen*, I analysed key documentation, particularly current party statutes and party websites, for both parties – *Groen* last updated its party statutes in 2019 (Groen, 2019) and *Vooruit* in 2022.

Second, to calculate estimates for *organisational density* and *connective density*, I draw from a novel dataset developed specifically for my research. The dataset comprises information on 152 political parties contesting 30 elections in 14 West European countries between 2005 and 2017. The dataset has a total of 36 variables

at the level of political parties and 19 variables at the country-election level and draws extensively on a wide range of comparative datasets and statistical sources.

I operationalise *organisational density* as an additive measure of two separate variables. First, *party-trade union support* measuring the percentage of a party's election vote from trade union members sourced from the European Social Survey (ESS, 2020), and second, the *party membership ratio* expressing party membership as a percentage of each party's electorate at each election. Measures for both variables were standardised to have a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1 and then added to form a composite measure. The mean value of *organisational density* for all parties in the dataset is 0.06 with a minimum of -2.08 and a maximum of 6.04.

I operationalise *connective density* as the average number of CSO memberships of election candidates aggregated to the party level. I calculate the measure with data on candidates' memberships of CSOs from the Comparative Candidates Survey (CCS, 2016, 2019). Equal weight in the measure was given to CSOs such as trade unions historically associated with left-wing parties and CSOs such as business associations historically associated with right-wing parties. The measure for *connective density* is a count variable with values ranging from 0 to 4. Parties exhibited considerable variation on the measure – the mean value for connective density was 1.09, and the maximum value for any party was 2.09.

Next I operationalise *multispeed memberships* as evidence, in party documents and practices, of parties providing different formal means, such as membership and registered supporter status, for individuals to participate in the internal organisational life of the party. To collect information on this type of connection, I analysed party statutes and websites and drew on semi-structured interviews with party officials.

Finally, I operationalise *shared action repertoires* as the joint deployment by parties and CSOs of forms of political action such as legislative activity within formal political institutions and both conventional and unconventional actions such as protests and policy forums that take place outside such institutions. My principal source of information on the presence of shared action repertoires was material from semi-structured interviews with political and civil actors in Flanders, supported by analyses in primary and secondary publications.

3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

To reach a full answer to my research question, I collected rich data by means of semi-structured interviews. I sought a representative balance of current and former officials of both parties; of representatives of a diverse range of CSOs, including those linked to each party; and of country experts and commentators. I identified interviewees initially by means of information in the literature on country experts and on the websites of the two political parties. This initial sample was supplemented by snowball sampling and the identification of additional respondents through secondary research material. Interviewees were contacted by means of an email communication, describing the aims of the study, indicating the likely length of an interview and confirming anonymity and confidentiality of data collected in the interview. Interviews were conducted in English and lasted for

between 30 and 90 minutes. Because of restrictions related to COVID-19, most interviews, 22, were conducted online. An anonymised list of the interviewees is produced in Appendix A.

In Appendix D to the manuscript, I provide summary information on the number of people contacted, the response rate achieved and the composition of the final sample. I worked with a standard set of core questions but customised interview schedules to capture data on the specific experience and perspective of participants. In Appendix D, I reproduce schedules for interviews conducted with respectively party officials and representatives of CSOs.

3.3 Analysis of Qualitative Data

The interview transcripts ran to over 23,000 words, and, to structure my analysis of this qualitative data, I used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thematic analysis is well suited to this task because it helps capture the essence of rich interview data bringing out both commonalities and differences among participants. I conducted a two-stage coding of my interview data. First, I coded interview transcripts inductively identifying over 150 initial codes. Second, I reviewed all the initial codes and searched for themes that would help address my research question. A codebook reporting, describing and illustrating the themes is provided in online Appendix B.

3.4 Triangulation

I triangulated the data from interviews with a comprehensive review of literature and other secondary documentation. The review included scholarly literature, articles and commentary in newspapers and blog sites, party and CSO documents and websites, and other political commentary. Details and examples of sources used to triangulate my interview data are provided in online Appendix E.

3.5 Timeframes

The timeframes covered by data sources for different types of connection are not completely coterminous. For example, data on *statutory links* between parties and CSOs are sourced from the most recently updated statutes of Vooruit and Groen, and measurements for both *organisational density* and *connective density* are calculated are based on data for the Belgian general elections of 2007, 2010 and 2014. Respondents who were interviewed for the study were invited to describe the contemporary pattern of connections between Flemish parties and CSOs, to compare them with dominant patterns in the past and to explain how contemporary forms of connection evolved in response to change.

4 Results and Case Analysis

I first present the results of a mapping of the two parties' *statutory links*, *organisational density* and *connective density*. I then present my findings on evidence of *multispeed party membership* and *shared action repertoires*. I complete this section

of the article with a detailed thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews.

4.1 Statutory Links

The scale and scope of the *statutory links* of both parties are similar and higher than the average for their respective party families (Allern & Verge, 2017). *Vooruit* has *statutory links* with three sub-organisations (women, young people and senior citizens) and *Groen* has statutory links with two (young people and senior citizens, but not women). Until November 2022, when it revised party statutes, *Vooruit* guaranteed representation for the socialist trade union the ABVV and mutual insurance provider *Solaris* on its central party board.⁵ *Vooruit* also funds an international solidarity organisation with partners from the socialist pillar and has two ‘sister’ organisations in the cultural field. These data are consistent with expectations (see Allern & Verge, 2017) that social democratic parties retain more statutory links while newer parties, including Green parties, have less frequent statutory links and, in particular, fewer links with women’s sub-organisations.

4.2 Organisational Density

Table 2 summarises data for *organisational density* and shows that *Vooruit*’s *organisational density* remained very stable and above the mean for all parties in the dataset throughout this period, reflecting a continuing high level of support from individual members of trade unions. By contrast, the *organisational density* of *Groen* fell across each election to a level substantially below that of the mean for all parties in the dataset.

Table 2 *Organisational Density: Vooruit and Groen 2007-2014*

Party	2007	2010	2014
Vooruit	1.16	1.10	1.20
Groen	0.60	0.10	-0.58

Note: Organisational density has a mean value of 0.064 for all parties in the dataset.

4.3 Connective Density

Table 3 summarises data for *connective density* and shows that at the elections of 2007 and 2010 both parties had nearly identical levels of *connective density*. However, their connective density fell sharply by the 2014 election, by a third in the case of *Vooruit* and by more than half in the case of *Groen*. Analysis of the types of organisation that make up connective density (Appendix C) indicates that the fall in connective density for *Vooruit* was entirely due to falling connections to socioeconomic groups, as the party distanced itself from traditional allies (Martin, 2023), while *Groen* experienced falling connections to all categories of CSO.

Table 3 *Connective Density: Vooruit and Groen 2007-2014*

Party	2007	2010	2014
Vooruit	1.04	0.98	0.65
Groen	1.05	1.07	0.47

Note: Connective density is a count measure with values ranging from 0 to 4. The mean value of connective density is 1.09 for all parties in the dataset.

In sum, I find that *Vooruit* has stronger formal connections to CSOs than *Groen* reflecting its origins in the socialist pillar. However, it exhibits a low level of connective density, its elites having progressively withdrawn from membership of socioeconomic organisations. While *Groen* maintains substantial statutory links, it too has a low level of connective density reflecting the steady withdrawal of its candidates from organised civil society.

4.4 Multispeed Membership and Shared Action Repertoires

My analysis of primary and secondary source material provided limited evidence that either party has developed forms of *multispeed membership*. *Vooruit* offers the option of becoming an ‘Online Ambassador’, though this confers no organisational status and is limited to receiving digital communications from the party. Similarly for *Groen*, recent changes have been confined to expanding members’ voting rights in elections for party President to include online participation alongside members voting in person at the party Congress. While studies suggest that new social movements in Belgium have drawn large numbers of new participants into the protest arena, these actions have not taken the form of *shared repertoires* (e.g. Wouters et al., 2022). Neither party directly co-organises protests with CSOs nor participates in citizens’ forums or solidarity initiatives.

4.5 Thematic Analysis

In this section, I present the detailed thematic analysis of material collected through semi-structured interviews. I present five specific themes that illustrate different elements of the typology of parties’ connections to CSOs introduced in this article. In particular, the focus is on the form and substance of informal contacts, strategies guiding relationships between civil and political actors, and mechanisms shaping an evolved pattern of connection between parties and CSOs in Flanders.

The first theme – *older and new social movements* – describes the impact that the emergence of new social movements (NSM) from the 1980s had on the connections between parties and CSOs. For the founders of NSMs in Flanders, traditional CSOs that were closely linked to pillar structures were perceived as “too close to the parties ... and only interested in power, they were conservative and did what the parties wanted them to do” (In. 11). Newer civic and multicultural associations introduced a new dynamic into the relationship between CSOs and parties. Accustomed to a tradition of “incorporating CSOs into exclusive relationships” (In. 8), Flemish political parties faced the challenge of establishing relationships with more openly critical and independent civic groups.

In respect of retaining connections to traditional pillar institutions, both parties were cautious and wary. For *Vooruit*, its associations with traditional pillar organisations were partly responsible for the party's electoral decline, prompting it to distance itself from traditional allies. The party is ambivalent about a continuing association with trade unions, with its attitude depending, as one senior trade union official put it, "... on who you talk to within *Vooruit*. Some want strong connections, but others have a third way perspective and attach blame to trade unions" (In. 15). For *Groen*, while the party has edged towards a closer relationship to trade unions, the relationship is characterised by mutual wariness. For the party, there is an enduring sense that unions are "focused on keeping their traditional power base" (In. 11), while for unions, the perception is that *Groen's* closeness to unions' positions varies with their government status (In. 15). Notwithstanding these tensions, one trade union official observed that "More trade unionists are joining and active in the Greens giving us a de facto link and influence over their programme" (In. 28).

The emergence of regionally based social movements pressing new claims (Willems et al., 2021) has prompted the two parties to adopt a more open attitude towards engagement with CSOs and to deploy fewer exclusive channels of interaction. While this may have been a relatively straightforward task for *Groen* because, as one former official put it, "We are ourselves a product of de-pillarisation and have never expected exclusive relationships, and recognise that CSOs will talk to other parties" (In. 8), *Vooruit* have followed suit. As one *Vooruit* official indicated, "In developing policy we try to be open and participative ... we try to reach new groups and not just CSOs that are formally constructed" (In. 1). There has been a change in the party's style of engagement with CSOs from structured formal ties to a more discretionary approach to contacts with local CSOs aimed at "stimulating issue-based engagement on common areas" and, in doing so, "outside the old structure of local party committees for fear of driving them [local CSOs] away" (In. 19).

Respondents reported a very wide range of informal contacts, including exchanges of research reports (In. 10, 14) and policy proposals (In. 2, 5 and 13), invitations to events and conferences (In. 2 and 8) and meetings to draft legislation and parliamentary motions (In. 6 and 10). Exchanges were initiated by both parties and CSOs and centred largely on policy issues. During election periods, these contacts shift to advocacy and information exchange focused on "exploring and influencing party positions and influencing party manifestos" (In. 6). During the 2019 general election, one large CSO organised *Facebook live* events at which Party Presidents were invited to "talk about their election programmes ... with the aim of getting our members and followers to know about their positions" (In. 6). These processes continue post-election into negotiations over coalition formation with CSOs "writing lobby letters" on behalf of their members (In. 10) and working directly with party officials to get "proposals adopted and included in the coalition agreement" (In. 5). Personal relationships and policy alignment are perceived as important by both parties and CSOs. For the official of a CSO working on migration policy, general political alignment with *Groen* and *Vooruit* means, "we are in more

of a real working relationship with these parties, where we are working to strengthen each other” (In. 10).

For several decades, representatives of economic interests in Flanders enjoyed privileged status as social partners in government policymaking. More recently, CSOs who emerged out of NSMs have become important players in policymaking institutions, and the second theme – *policy structures and competences* – describes how the two parties and mainstream CSOs are now closely connected through the framework of government policymaking. The focus of mainstream CSOs on advocacy and lobbying directed at ministerial *cabinets* has become key to their connections with parties: “We mainly start with a report or policy letter or summary with our positioning that is directed to cabinets, responsible ministers and their vice-chairs” (In. 13). CSOs follow up on these initiatives by “meeting with Cabinet staff” (In. 12) and “talking to them extensively online” (In. 5). The government status and ministerial responsibilities of parties clearly influence the frequency and substance of connections. As one CSO official described it, “Being in government is important for contacts as there is a clear hierarchy of cabinets, parliament and administration” (In.13).

The entry of new civic actors into policymaking institutions has strengthened the tendency of the two parties to seek connections beyond those organisations with whom they were traditionally close. This has presented both parties with challenging trade-offs. For *Groen*, frequent institutional interaction with mainstream environmental CSOs risks alienating more radical environmental movements that may see the party as “not natural translators of their demands” (In. 8). For *Vooruit*, new relationships within policymaking institutions have accelerated “its withdrawal from the social partners, the party preferring instead consultation with external experts” (In. 28). This has made *Vooruit* vulnerable to the charge, levelled, for example, by a senior national figure in the party, that in substantive terms, it “no longer connects to its base in civil society ... its officials moving in social circles that don’t connect with ordinary people” (In. 21). Established CSOs also acknowledge that their ‘institutionalisation’ may also mean that, as one trade union official put it, “We have missed the boat on the issues they [new protest movements] bring forward” (In. 28).

A third theme – *pragmatism and independence* – summarises the approach that contemporary civil society takes to connecting with all Flemish political parties. Officials of CSOs stressed that their approach to connections with parties was to remain independent. Despite policy closeness, an official with a leading environmental CSO commented:

This does not mean we will align our message exclusively with Groen but also with other parties when they have similar positions to us ... on nature conservation for example we are active in talking to the [nationalist] N-VA. (In. 6)

One consequence is that established CSOs will almost never engage in joint protests or campaigns with a single party despite having shared interests. As one officer in

an environmental CSO put it, “We would never work with a political party on a shared campaign as we don’t want an automatic link” (In. 6).

The approach of CSOs to seeking policy influence through connections with parties is highly pragmatic. As agents of policy influence, CSOs regard themselves as “not serious if we don’t engage with the Liberals and Conservatives who hold ministerial positions” (In. 13). Connections are guided by the goal of making an impact through “parties accepting concrete proposals. We applaud small steps in the right direction” (In. 10). The two parties have accepted and accommodated CSOs’ desire to remain independent of any single party. When it comes to cooperation on campaigns and communication with CSOs, for example, *Vooruit* acknowledge that CSOs want to keep their identity hidden. As one *Vooruit* official commented, “they [the CSO] will want to keep their logo out of the material, they want to keep their distance” (In. 1). And similarly, for *Groen*, a party official observed:

It is a habit for Groen politicians to have regular meetings with CSOs and to organise events to which CSOs are invited and speak. CSOs know that Groen’s doors are always open. But the relationship is not an exclusive one. (In. 8)

The inclusive approach of CSOs to relationships with parties does not, however, extend to radical challenger parties. All CSO interviewees confirmed that contacts with political parties explicitly excluded the radical right *Vlaams Belang*. While a cordon sanitaire did not apply to the radical left *PVDA*, CSO officials were wary of getting too close to the party because “they reject compromise and this rules out progress” (In. 13).

The approach of the two parties to connections with civil society constitutes the fourth theme – *party strategies*. The declared strategy of *Vooruit* is to “bypass older CSOs to enable smaller CSOs and voters to participate in party decision-making” (In. 16). A key tool in this strategy is the party’s *Big Shift*, a campaign combining open online voting to determine key programmatic issues and ‘hackathons’ to explore the detail of chosen themes. For many CSO actors, the party’s strategy is ambiguous reflecting the aim of the party’s President Conner Rousseau to ‘cover all the bases’ (In. 6). A strong digital focus promoting “brand Conner in comparison to the unpopular brand socialist” (In. 18) is contrasted with the work of M.P.’s on policy dossiers who “are interested in our themes but are working on their own initiative rather than with party backing” (In. 14).

For both parties, the challenge of balancing commitments to coalition government with centre-right parties and the progressive aspirations of civil actors impacts the closeness of their connections. For *Vooruit*, while the party is very “proud of being a government party focused on good policy that benefits everyone” (In. 27), being in government has necessitated making “a lot of agreements that it has to defend even if they would be critical if outside government” (In. 28). For *Groen*, these challenges are particularly acute. The party has, for example, taken responsibility for government decisions to reverse plans to close nuclear plants, drawing intense criticism from CSOs. As one former Groen government minister put it, “My focus was on building the party in government, but we forgot what the

movements were thinking.... We had become wrapped up in the institutions” (In. 9).

With some exceptions, for example, the occasional use of *Vooruit* Party President Conner Rousseau’s popular Instagram account to promote posts by CSOs (In. 1), and the recent extension of voting rights for the election of *Groen* co-Presidents to members voting online (In. 3), I found limited evidence that either party used multispeed memberships and digital activity as part of a strategy of connecting to organised civil society as opposed to simply as a communication tool.

Alongside stressing independence in its relationships with the two parties, an increasingly diverse civil society has also evidenced a trend over the last decade for interest representation to be channelled through umbrella organisations. This constitutes a fifth theme – *coalitions of representation*. These coalitions endeavour to increase collaboration and unity between established and newer CSOs.

We gather in organisations from many sectors of civil society. On a series of topics, where there has not been alignment ... the coalition is trying to forge joint positions and a joint memorandum. (In. 6)

Umbrella organisations not only represent CSOs directly to political parties but also seek to resource and enhance the efforts of their members to influence parties locally and at the federal level. “We want to be a voice for the people ... connecting grassroots organisations who did not know about each other so that they can be a strong force together” (In. 12).

Many umbrella coalitions have a broad organisational membership, and the goal of attaining greater balance and credibility in the representation of members’ interests was stated explicitly: “Our new organisation means we are more independent than in the past when we were dominated by the unions” (In. 14). The broad base of umbrella coalitions combined with their independence – “We would definitely never make recommendations to our members and supporters about who to vote for” (In. 6) – makes it easier for the parties to maintain connections with them (also In. 5 and 14).

Table 4 summarises my analysis of the pattern of connections between parties and CSOs in the region of Flanders. I find that despite some differences between the two parties in respect of connections to CSOs that reflects a legacy of the region’s system of pillarisation, *Vooruit* and *Groen* have navigated change by converging on similar patterns of, and perspectives on, connections to CSOs. For both parties, connections are based predominantly on *informal contacts* focused on policymaking and information exchange, and both parties accept the nonexclusive basis of these connections. Similarly, while established CSOs are often closer to the two parties in terms of values and policy positioning, they adopt a standard playbook in pursuing objectives within the politicised system of institutional policymaking. The strategy of CSOs is instrumental and focused on securing marginal policy gains. And the power status of *Vooruit* and *Groen* as government partners with a strong presence in the region’s institutions of public policymaking

strengthens the parties' connections with organised civil society at all points of the electoral cycle.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

I ask how parties and CSOs navigate their relationships in the context of profound change in party systems and civil society. To answer this question, I develop a typology of formal and informal party-societal connections and undertake a comparative case study of the connections between two progressive parties in Flanders and a cross-section of CSOs. I find that these connections have converged on a very similar structure of relationships with organised civil society and explain this convergence in terms of the politicisation of public policymaking in Flanders and the pragmatic approach of mainstream civil society to representing the claims of their constituencies.

Table 4 Patterns of Connection Between Parties and CSOs in Flanders

Type	Data Source	Main Findings
<i>Formal</i>		
Parties' statutory links	Party statutes; party websites	Extensive for both <i>Vooruit</i> and <i>Groen</i> ; exhibit the legacy of the region's history of pillarisation
Organisational density	Comparative Candidates Survey; novel dataset	High and above average for <i>Vooruit</i> ; declining and below average for <i>Groen</i>
Multispeed membership	Party documents and websites; semi-structured interviews	No evidence of development beyond the use of digital tools for communication and election of party President (<i>Groen</i>)
<i>Informal</i>		
Regular contacts	Semi-structured interviews	Extensive nonexclusive informal contacts between CSOs and parties within policymaking institutions and at bilateral level; accentuated by expanding <i>coalitions of representation</i> ; excludes radical civil and political actors
Connective density	Comparative Candidates Survey; novel dataset	Below average and declining for both <i>Vooruit</i> and <i>Groen</i>
Shared action repertoire	Semi-structured interviews; secondary documentation	No evidence that mainstream civil and political actors share action repertoires

I find that while both parties retain substantial *statutory links* and *Vooruit* has a legacy of relatively high *organisational density*, for both parties connections to CSOs have become dominated by *informal contacts* of varying degrees of regularity. In substantive terms, these contacts facilitate the exchange of information and resources that are beneficial to both parties and CSOs. Through regular contacts, both types of actors exchange research information and policy ideas and information on each other's positions and aspirations that helps align parties with members of CSOs.

These informal connections occur both within the highly politicised institutions of policymaking and in the form of direct bilateral interaction. Contacts are initiated by both civil and political actors and are nonexclusive – CSOs seek contacts with all mainstream parties and are highly pragmatic in their aims. Institutional structures of interaction between Flemish political parties and CSOs have adapted over recent decades to incorporate both newer social movements in the field of the environment and migration and new political competitors from green and nationalist party families. However, new protest-based social movements and challenger parties of the radical right and left largely fall outside this framework.

Vooruit and *Groen* are both governing parties, and my study confirms findings (Martin et al., 2022b) that power status influences the intensity of their connections to CSOs in a number of ways. The extensive presence within public policymaking institutions of ministers and advisers from both parties incentivises mainstream CSOs to maintain routine and regular communication with party elites on the policy concerns of their members. The entry of new parties and CSOs into policymaking institutions in recent years has, however, weakened the traditionally privileged position of social partners and contributed to the non-exclusive nature of contacts between parties and CSOs. I found ample evidence from semi-structured interviews that CSOs make pragmatic decisions to connect to ministers from liberal, conservative and nationalist parties. It is sometimes also the case that the two parties' responsibilities to coalition partners drawn from the centre and centre-right result in strains in the parties' relationships with those CSOs to whom they are closely aligned programmatically.

The central roles played by informal contacts and institutionalised relationships and the determination of CSOs to remain independent of any single party are responsible for the near absence of any *shared repertoires* of action and the comparatively weak and declining ties (*connective density*) of party elites to civil society. I found limited evidence that, despite very high levels of social media expenditure,⁶ the parties deploy different forms of *multispeed membership* to connect with organised civil society.

This article makes an important contribution to our understanding of how parties and CSOs navigate their interactions in a time of change and has a number of important implications. First, by providing insights on the mechanisms that have shaped the pattern of connections at the level of the regional political system. The weakening of structures and cleavages associated with pillarisation and industrialisation; the emergence of new, and often regionally based, social movements; and the incorporation of new social and civic actors within policymaking institutions have each contributed to a pattern of relationships structured around regular and informal interactions. And this article has identified two additional factors that play a significant part in the pattern of connections observed: - the influence of policymaking institutions and the strategies of both parties and civic groups in pursuing their goals within those institutions.

Second, by identifying and mapping a full typology of connections at the level of the Flemish political system, my study provides a framework for further comparative research into how patterns of connection may be shaped in political systems characterised by different histories and structures of interest

representation. This typology of connections is also helpful for understanding the form and resilience of interest representation in a political system. I found a vibrant pattern of informal contacts between parties and CSOs that faced upwards to institutions of policymaking and downwards to grassroots CSOs that are integrated into representative structures through coalitions of interest representation. Respondents from both parties and CSOs were positive about the outcomes of this system and its capacity to respond to emerging social claims.

Third, my study suggests that the evolution of pragmatic, informal and institutionally focused connections by mainstream actors while integrating many social actors into policymaking processes has also created ‘outsiders’ – new protest-driven CSOs and challenger parties of the radical right and left. The exclusion of the growing constituencies of these parties and radical social movements from structures of policy formation raises interesting questions about these structures’ legitimacy and stability. Further it suggests that the challenges of forming government coalitions based on compromise between political actors – a compromise that underpins the instrumental value of institutional structures to mainstream actors – are likely to intensify.

My study has a number of limitations. First, my study focuses on just one political sub-system with a highly specific set of institutional structures built on a history of pillarised interests and consociational conflict resolution (Andeweg, 2019). While other countries share some of the features of the Flemish system, features such as strong parliaments, pluralist systems of interest representation and unitary state governance are more common in Western European countries. Second, while my interviews with CSOs demonstrated their engagement with all mainstream parties, my detailed analysis focused on the role of just two progressive parties with a history of closeness to social movements of different types. This may have resulted in a skewed picture of the pattern of connections I was able to describe.

I can begin to address these limitations by suggesting some topics for future research. First, the utility of the typology of connections should be extended, for example, by research into patterns of connection in systems with pluralist systems of interest representation and strong roles for parliaments in legislative policymaking. Exploratory case studies could also consider the pattern of connections through the lens of parties of the centre-right and the developing action repertoires of parties that have emerged from social movements in the last decade, bringing to light other forms of connection prevalent in specific political systems.

Second, I observed that the comparative absence of some forms of connection in Flanders, such as *shared action repertoires*, are a consequence of the prevalence of other forms of connection between both mainstream political and civil actors. This suggests that adopting an *ecological* approach to the study of patterns of connections could be instructive. An ecological approach would explicitly consider ways in which different combinations of relationship act on, and interact with, each other to create a dynamic pattern of connections within a political system. Describing and comparing the *ecology of connections* in different political systems could lead to

new theoretical insights on the form and resilience of interest representation in modern democracies.

Third, my study of the Flemish case describes patterns of connection that are largely well adapted to traditions of compromise between political interests and to the goal of incremental policy change. However, mainstream political and civic actors in Western Europe face increasingly strong challenges from radical actors who express impatience with incremental change and intensify conflict around issues that are less embedded in the agenda of institutional insiders. How do challenger parties with growing constituencies that reject, or are rejected by, mainstream actors develop their organisation and strategy to represent parts of civil society and mobilise emerging interests? And how best can mainstream actors respond to these challenges to ensure that systems of interest representation adapt to emerging issues and political claims, and retain legitimacy with citizens?

The form of party cartelisation described by Mair (2013) is one in which the goals of parties become self-referential as they retreat into the state while citizens head “for the exits of the national political arena” (2013, p. 43). In contrast, my study of the Flemish political subsystem points to extensive contacts and relationships between parties and organised civil society that channel representative claims from both regional and grassroots CSOs and ensure that the policy system responds, at least partially, to new claims. To retain their relevance and legitimacy in the face of persistent economic, political and environmental challenges, systems of representation will need to find new ways to adapt and respond. I suggest that the study of the diverse patterns of connection between parties and CSOs within political systems has the potential to generate many new insights on how both sets of actors contribute to meeting these challenges.

Notes

- 1 More details on the operationalisation and measurement of connective density are provided in the following section and in Appendix C.
- 2 A process of *de-pillarisation* has weakened the link between membership of pillar organisations and voting behaviour (Hellemans, 2020). Between 1985 and 2019, the combined vote share of socialist and Christian parties halved – from 58% to 29%.
- 3 Vooruit and Groen also contest elections in the predominantly French-speaking Brussels-Capital region.
- 4 Between 1999 and 2004, Vooruit shared office at the regional level with Groen, the latter under its original party name, Agalev.
- 5 The change was made because of a fear that infiltration of the ABVV and Solaris by militants from the radical left Partij van der Arbeid (PVDA) would result in members of the PVDA sitting on the Vooruit central board (De Tijd, 22 November 2022).
- 6 In 2021, Belgian parties spent €4.71 million on Facebook advertising. Excluding parties contesting general elections in other countries in 2021, three Flemish parties – N-VA, VB and PVDA – spent more on Facebook adverts than any other party in the EU (<https://adlens-be.medium.com/>).

References

- Allern, E. H. (2010). *Political Parties and Interest Groups in Norway*. ECPR Press.
- Allern, E. H., Kluver, H., Marshal, D., Otjes, S., Rasmussen, A., & Witko, C. (2021a). Policy Positions, Power and Interest Group-Party Lobby Routines. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 29(7), 1029-1048. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1912148>.
- Allern, E. H., Otjes, S. P., Poguntke, T., Hansen, V., Saurigger, S., & Marshall, D. (2021b). Conceptualising and Measuring Party-Interest Group Relationships. *Party Politics*, 27(6), 1254-1267. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068820949393>.
- Allern, E. H., & Verge, T. (2017). Still Connecting with Society? Political Parties Formal Links with Social Groups in the Twenty-First Century. In S. E. Scarrow, P. Webb & T. Poguntke (Eds.), *Organising Political Parties: Representation, Participation and Power* (pp. 106-135). Oxford University Press.
- Andeweg, R. B. (2019). Consociationalism in the Low Countries: Comparing the Dutch and Belgian Experience. *Swiss Political Science Review*, 25(4), 408-425. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12361>.
- Bartolini, S. (2000). *The Class Cleavage: The Political Mobilisation of the European Left 1860-1980*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bartolini, S., & Mair, P. (1990). *Identity, Competition and Electoral Availability: The Stabilisation of European Electorates 1885-1985*. ECPR Press.
- Berkhout, J. (2013). Why Interest Organizations Do What They Do: Assessing the Explanatory Potential of 'Exchange' Approaches. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, 2, 227-250. <https://doi.org/10.1057/iga.2013.6>.
- Beyers, J., Eising, R., & Maloney, W. (2008). Researching Interest Group Politics in Europe and Elsewhere: Much We Study, Little We Know? *West European Politics*, 31(6), 1103-1128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402380802370443>.
- Blings, S. (2020). Niche Parties and Social Movements: Mechanisms of Programmatic Alignment and Party Success. *Government and Opposition*, 55, 220-240. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2018.18#>.
- Borbáth, E., Hutter, S., & Leininger, A. (2023). Cleavage Politics, Polarization, and Participation in Western Europe. *West European Politics*, 46(4), 631-651. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2022.2161786>.
- Bornschier, S. (2009). Cleavage Politics in Old and New Democracies. *Living Reviews in Democracy*, 2009, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-26412>.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. Sage Publications.
- Comparative Candidates Survey (2016). *Comparative Candidates Survey Wave I - 2005-2013* [Dataset - Cumulative File]. FORS. <https://doi.org/10.23662/FORS-DS-620-3>.
- Comparative Candidates Survey (2019). *Comparative Candidates Survey Wave II - 2013-2018* [Dataset - Cumulative File]. FORS. <https://doi.org/10.23662/FORS-DS-886-3>.
- Della Porta, D., Fernandez, J., Kouki, H., & Mosca, M. (2017). *Movement Parties against Austerity*. Polity Press.
- Duncan, F. (2015). Preaching to the Converted? Christian Democratic Voting in Six West European Countries. *Party Politics*, 21(4), 577-590. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068813487118>.
- Emanuele, V. (2015). *Dataset of Electoral Volatility and Its Internal Components in Western Europe (1945-2015)*. Italian Center for Electoral Studies. <http://doi.org/10.7802/1112>.
- European Social Survey Cumulative File, ESS 1-9 (2020). Data file Edition 1.0. Sikt - Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, Norway, Norway -

- Data Archive and distributor of ESS data for ESS ERIC. www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/?round=9.
- Ford, R., & Jennings, W. (2020). The Changing Cleavage Politics of Western Europe. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 23, 295-314. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-052217-104957#>.
- Fuchs, D., & Rucht, D. (2018). Support for New Social Movements in Five Western European Countries. In C. Rootes & H. Davis (Eds.), *Social Change and Political Transformation* (pp. 86-111). Routledge.
- Gauja, A. (2015). The Construction of Party Membership. *European Journal of Political Research*, 54(2), 232-248. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12078>.
- Grande, E. (2022). Civil Society, Cleavage Structures and Democracy in Germany. *German Politics*, 32(3), 420-439. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2022.2120610>.
- Groen (2019). *Statuten*. www.groen.be/partijstatuten.
- Gunther, R. (2005). Parties and Electoral Behaviour in Southern Europe. *Comparative Politics*, 37(3), 253-275. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20072889>.
- Gunther, R., & Diamond, L. (2003). Species of Political Parties: A New Typology. *Party Politics*, 9(2), 167-199. <https://doi.org/10.1177/135406880300920>.
- Hellemans, S. (2020). Pillarization ('Verzuling'). On Organised 'Self-Contained' Worlds in the Modern World. *The American Sociologist*, 51, 124-147. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12108-020-09449-x>.
- Kayser, M. A., & Wlezien, C. (2011). Performance Pressure: Patterns of Partisanship and the Economic Vote. *European Journal of Political Research*, 50(3), 365-394. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2010.01934.x>.
- Kelly, J. (2015). Trade Union Membership and Power in Comparative Perspective. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*, 26(4), 526-544. <https://doi.org/10.1177/103530461561444>.
- Kitschelt, H. (1994). Austrian and Swedish Social Democrats in Crisis: Party Strategy and Organization in Corporatist Regimes. *Comparative Political Studies*, 27(1), 3-39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414094027001001>.
- Kosiara-Pedersen, K., van Haute, E., & Scarrow, S. E. (forthcoming). Multispeed in Practice: Generating Linkage through Membership and Social Media Following.
- Lehmbruch, G. (1979). Liberal Corporatism and Party Government. In P. Schmitter & G. Lehmbruch (Eds.), *Trends Towards Corporatism Intermediation*. (pp. 147-184) Sage Contemporary Political Sociology.
- Lisi, M. (2013). Rediscovering Civil Society? Renewal and Continuity in the Portuguese Radical Left. *South European Society and Politics*, 18(1), 21-39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2012.757450>.
- Mair, P. (2013). *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*. Verso.
- Maloney, W. A. (2012). The Democratic Contribution of Professionalized Representation. In J. W. van Deth & W. A. Maloney (Eds.), *New Participatory Dimensions in Civil Society: Professionalization and Individualized Collective Action*. (pp.84-96) Routledge.
- Martin, N., De Lange, S.L., & van der Brug, W. (2022a). Holding on to voters in volatile times: Bonding voters through party links with civil society. *Party Politics*, 28(2), 354-364. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068820980304>
- Martin, N., De Lange, S.L., & van der Brug, W. (2022b). Staying connected: explaining parties' enduring connections to civil society. *West European Politics*, 45(7), 1385-1406. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2021.1986784>
- Martin, N. (2023). Remaining close or drifting apart? Explaining the divergent paths taken by Belgium's socialist parties in connecting to civil society. *Acta Politica*, 59, 289-319. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41269-023-00293-8>

- Mudge, S. (2018). *Leftism Reinvented: Western Parties from Socialism to Neoliberalism*. Harvard University Press.
- Otjes, S., & Rasmussen, A. (2017). The Collaboration between Interest Groups and Political Parties in Multi-Party Democracies: Party System Dynamics and the Effect of Power and Ideology. *Party Politics*, 23(2), 96-109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068814568046>.
- Panbianco, A. (1988). *Political Parties: Organisation and Power*. Cambridge University Press.
- Poguntke, T. (2002). Parties without Firm Social Roots? Party Organisational Linkage. In K. R. Luther (Ed.), *Political Parties in the New Europe* (pp. 43-62). Oxford University Press.
- Rahat, G. (2007). Candidate Selection: The Choice Before the Choice. *Journal of Democracy*, 18(1), 157-170. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2007.0014>.
- Rasmussen, A., & Lindeboom, G.-J. (2013). Interest Group-party Linkage in the Twenty-first Century: Evidence from Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. *European Journal of Political Research*, 52, 264-289. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2012.02069.x>.
- Romeijn, J. (2020). Lobbying during Government Formations: Do Policy Advocates Attain Their Preferences in Coalition Agreements? *West European Politics*, 44(4), 264-289. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2020.1755515>.
- Rootes, C. A. (2000). Environmental Movements and Green Parties in Western and Eastern Europe. In M. Redclift & G. Woodgate (Eds.), *The International Handbook of Environmental Sociology* (pp. 319-348). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Scarrow, S. E. (2014). *Beyond Party Members. Changing Approaches to Partisan Mobilization*. OUP.
- Scarrow, S. E. (2019). Multi-Speed Parties and Representation: The Evolution of Party Affiliation in Germany. *German Politics*, 28(2), 162-182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2018.1496239>.
- Scarrow, S. E., Wright, J. M., & Gauja, A. (2023). Party Statutes and Party Institutionalization. *Party Politics*, 29(2), 217-228. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688211071066>.
- Sitrin, M., & Azzellini, D. (2014). *They Can't Represent Us! Reinventing Democracy from Greece to Occupy*. Verso.
- Statsch, P., & Berkhout, J. (2020). Lobbying and Policy Conflict: Explaining Interest Groups Promiscuous Relationships to Political Parties. *Interest Groups and Advocacy*, 9(1)#, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41309-019-00072-x>.
- Van Biezen, I., Mair, P., & Poguntke, T. (2012). Going, Going...Gone? The Decline of Party Membership in Contemporary Europe. *European Journal of Political Research*, 51(1), 24-56. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2011.01995.x>.
- Van Haute, E., & Wauters, B. (2019). Do Characteristics of Consociational Democracies Still Apply to Belgian Parties? *Politics of the Low Countries*, 1, 6-26. <https://doi.org/10.5553/PLC/258999292019001001002>.
- Verge, T. (2012). Party Strategies towards Civil Society in New Democracies: The Spanish Case. *Party Politics*, 18(1), 45-60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068811422648>.
- Walgrave, S., van Erkel, P., Jennart, I., Lefevre, J., & Baudewyns, P. (2020). How Issue Salience Pushes Voters to the Left or to the Right. *Politics of the Low Countries*, 2(3), 319-352. <https://doi.org/10.5553/PLC/258999292020002003005>.
- White, J., & Ypi, L. (2016). *The Meaning of Partisanship*. OUP.
- Willems, E., Beyers, J., & Heylen, F. (2021). Interest Representation in Belgium. Mapping the Size and Diversity of an Interest Group Population in a Multi-layered

Nick Martin

Neo-Corporatist Polity. *Politics of the Low Countries*, 3(1), 32-72. <https://doi.org/10.5553/PLC/.000006>.

Wouters, R., De Vydt, M., & Staes, L. (2022). Truly Exceptional? Participation in the Belgian 2019 Youth for Climate Protest Wave. *Politics of the Low Countries*, 3, 229-249. <https://doi.org/10.5553/PLC/.000029>.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A Lower Voting Age in the Low Countries? Potential Effects of Voting Age at 16 for the Low Countries*

Kevin Meyvaert**

1 Introduction

Is lowering the voting age to 16 years a genuine breakthrough in reigniting the youth's enthusiasm for traditional politics in the long run? This remains a matter of uncertainty and, as such, forms the central inquiry of this exploration into the potential implications of extending voting rights to non-adults for Belgium and the Netherlands. The democratic landscape of the Low Countries stands at a transformative juncture, with Belgium marking a historic milestone by granting voting rights to non-adults for the first time in its political history. On the 9th of June 2024, adolescents aged 16 and 17, residing in Belgium and holding one of the EU nationalities, have the privilege to participate in the European elections. In the Netherlands, adolescents are not eligible to vote in the forthcoming EU elections. Nevertheless, the discourse surrounding the reduction of the voting age gained momentum leading up to the Dutch national elections

in November 2023. These electoral reforms and on-going discussions represent pivotal moments for democracy in the Low Countries, holding particular relevance within the broader European and Western contexts characterised by a discernible decline in traditional political interest and participation among young adults (Dalton, 2007; Mindich, 2005; Wattenberg, 2020). Subsequently, political representatives and institutions, among others in the Low Countries, have been engaged in constant reflection, seeking remedies to counteract or prevent the emergence of political disenchantment among the upcoming generations. The Belgian legal text that lowered the voting age for the European elections explicitly states that the aim of the electoral reform is to reverse the trend of disengagement from democratic processes (Calvo & Defossé, 2021). On a similar note, the Dutch *Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur* (Council of Public Administration) also claims that lowering the voting age to 16 years can be an important factor to counter the problematic decline in political interest among younger people in the country (ROB, 2019).

In this literature exploration on the plausible long-term impacts of extending voting rights to non-adults in the Low Countries, the analysis is struc-

* Funding statement: This article was supported by the European Union's Horizon-Europe program (REDIRECT: The REpresentative DIconnect: diagnosis and strategies for RECTification; Call: HORIZON-CL2-2022-DEMOCRACY-01; Grant # 101095142).

** Kevin Meyvaert, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Political Science Department, DFUTURE.

tured across several key sections. Section 2 delves into the political participation of young people in the Low Countries and other European states with a lower voting age, assessing whether such reforms effectively translate into increased, sustained political engagement among young people aged 16 and 17. Section 3 scrutinises the political maturity and knowledge a lower voting age is potentially providing to young people, examining the role of civic education in shaping the informed participation of the youth. Section 4 examines the benefits associated with a lower voting age, considering disparities in political involvement and the potential perpetuation of existing social inequalities. Finally, Section 5 analyses the possible repercussions of a lower voting age for the party landscape in the Low Countries.

2 A Lower Voting Age and Youth Political Interest and Participation

In examining youth political participation in the Low Countries, we observe a disparity in political interest between the youth in the Netherlands and those in Flanders. According to the European Social Survey, 54.7% of Dutch youth exhibit genuine political interest, whereas only 31.3% of young people in Flanders demonstrate a similar level of interest in politics (Spruyt et al., 2024). However, no discernible difference is found with regard to conventional political activities among the overall Low Countries' youth. Only 22.3% of Belgian youth engage in institutional political activities, such as joining a political party or attending local council committees (Waeterloos et al., 2021).

This figure is just slightly higher in the Netherlands, where 26.4% of Dutch young adults participate in traditional political action (Schmeets, 2017).

With regard to the electoral voting motivation in both countries, one might observe a downward trend and a potential for perpetuated lower participation in elections. In Belgium, despite the country's mandatory voting rule and high voter turnout rates, only half of Belgians express a willingness to cast a vote if the obligation were to be lifted (Reuchamps et al., 2015). In the last federal elections of 2019, 15 % – or 1 out of 6 Belgians – of the eligible voters in Belgium did not vote or voted blank or invalid (Meeusen & Abts, 2024). With regard to youth, a recent study showed that 5.8% of the young Flemings between 18 and 25 indicated they would not vote in the European, national and regional elections on the 9th of June 2024. More importantly, 33.35% of these young Flemish adults remain undecided whether to cast a ballot or not (Spruyt et al., 2024). In the latest Dutch parliamentary elections, the voter turnout among young people aged 18 to 35 decreased by 7%, reaching 73%, compared to the 80% turnout in the previous parliamentary elections of 2021 (NOS, 2023). In essence, the Low Countries' youth also bear a propensity for decreased electoral participation.

The political advocates of voting at 16 years across the Low Countries view a lower voting age as a potential solution to address the overall decline in participation rates observed in their respective nation's elections. This expectation is based on the rationale that early initiation of voting habits during one's formative years contributes positively to the cultivation of enduring and constructive voting practices

throughout the subsequent stages of one's life (Dinas, 2012; Plutzer, 2002). The Belgian federal legal text that lowered the voting age to 16 for the European elections states that:

many studies show that citizens are losing confidence in politics and are turning away from the democratic process. Granting the right to vote to young people from the age of 16 can counterbalance this phenomenon and ensure that the youth will be more engaged in politics, including in the long term (Calvo & Defossé, 2021, p. 9).

In the Netherlands, a 2019 report by the *Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur* indicates a problematic decline in political interest among young people and recommends addressing this growing disinterest by lowering the voting age to 16 years (ROB, 2019). It is crucial to note, however, that addressing declining election participation rates among the youngest eligible voters – for instance, through an increased interest in traditional politics – requires more than simply lowering the voting age as demonstrated in the Austrian case below.

2.1 *The Imperative of Comprehensive Civic Education for Sustained Youth Political Participation*

In 2007, Austria lowered the voting age from 18 to 16 years for all elections in the country as part of a broader electoral reform (Karlhofer, 2007). Antecedently, in 2003, four federal provinces, including Vienna, had already undertaken this electoral transformation. Subsequent to this nationwide policy change, Austrian elections featuring 16- and 17-year-old voters have yielded

noteworthy outcomes. The voter turnout among the non-adult voters seems to align quite well or to be just slightly lower than the overall voter turnout in the general population of electors. For instance, during the regional elections in Vienna in 2005, 59% of new young voters between 16 and 18 participated in the electoral process, while the general voter turnout stood at 61% (Kozeluh et al., 2005). Similarly, in the national elections of 2008, immediately following the nationwide implementation of the electoral reform to lower the voting age to 16 years, 77% of voters aged 16 and 17 engaged in the election process, representing a mere 1.8 percentage point deviation from the overall turnout of 78.8% (Schwarzer et al., 2009). This trend persisted in subsequent regional elections, such as those in Vienna in 2010 and Krems in 2012 (Zeglovits & Aichholzer, 2014). In other words, since the 16- and 17-year-olds obtained the right to vote, there is no evident disproportionate reduction in voter turnout among this group; rather, they exhibit a notable alignment with the overall turnout and voting motivation in Austrian elections.

A more intriguing phenomenon in these different elections emerges among the older adult first-time voters. Young people aged 18 to 21, experiencing their first voting opportunity, displayed a markedly lower election participation. For instance, during the regional elections in Vienna, 56.3% of eligible voters between 18 and 20 years old cast their votes, in contrast to the average overall turnout of 67.6% (Figure 1). Similarly, in Krems, only 46.3% of this age group participated in the electoral/voting process, as opposed to the national turnout of 62.6% (Figure 2). In essence, Austria witnessed a

'first-time voter boost' within the age group of 16- to 17-year-olds. However, this effect diminishes significantly once first-time voters surpass the age of 18. Comparable observations have been documented for voter turnout between the 18 to 19 and 20 to 21 age groups in Germany and Denmark. The 20-21 age group notably displays a substantially lower voter turnout rate during their first voting opportunity (Bhatti & Hansen 2012; Konzelmann et al., 2012). This underscores the inverse relationship between the age of first-time voters and the likelihood of voting at one's first elections, with older first-time voters displaying a lower probability of engaging in the electoral process. Thus, experiencing the first chance to vote during adolescence appears to boost the probability of participation in one's first elections.

A potential cause for these age discrepancies may concern the civic education courses at school. In Austria, for instance, this electoral reform did not happen in a policy vacuum but was part of a comprehensive electoral restructuring characterised by various initiatives specifically targeting 16- and 17-year-olds. These initiatives, implemented both at schools and through dedicated communication campaigns, sought to inform and motivate adolescents to actively participate in the electoral process. For example, during the initial elections with the lowered voting age in the federal province of Vienna, collaborative efforts between the city of Vienna and school authorities resulted in numerous projects. These initiatives included organising mock elections within schools and providing opportunities for politicians to engage with young people who would soon be exercising their voting rights. Additionally,

extensive awareness campaigns were implemented (Karlhofer, 2007). Also at the national level, in preparation for the federal elections in 2008, the state authorities aimed to intensify their efforts, building on the successes observed in the regional elections of the four pioneer federal provinces. Therefore, they decided to introduce a genuine civic and citizenship education into all school programmes and made it mandatory in 2015 (BMUKK & BMWF, 2007).

Therefore, the older first-time voters in Austria during the years 2010 and 2012, by way of illustration, did not experience the complete civic education courses as did the adolescent first-time voters by the time. At that moment, the nationwide civics education curriculum was just starting to grow in the Austrian secondary schools (BMUKK & BMWF, 2007). Consequently, they were not exposed to the requisite prolonged educational stimuli necessary to generate a 'first-time voter boost' after one's school period. This is further supported by the fact that younger adolescents who left formal education earlier than the standard school track also displayed a lower voting propensity than young people who fully completed their secondary education, notwithstanding their social background (Kritzinger & Zeglovits, 2013). This highlights that, in the case of non-adult youth exiting formal education without the benefit of an extensive civic education programme tailored to enhance electoral participation, the time period preceding their first ballot-casting opportunity is positively correlated with a diminished likelihood of their voting at elections as full-fledged adult first-time voters.

Figure 1 *Turnout rate by age in Vienna using the maximum turnout estimator, relative to average turnout (67.6%). (Zeglovitis & Aichholzer, 2014, p. 357)*

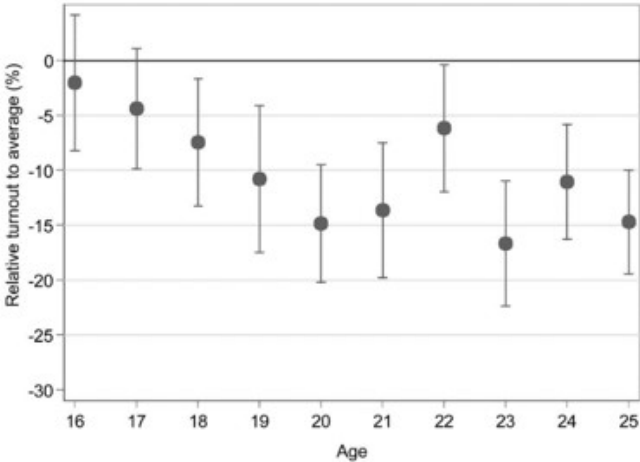
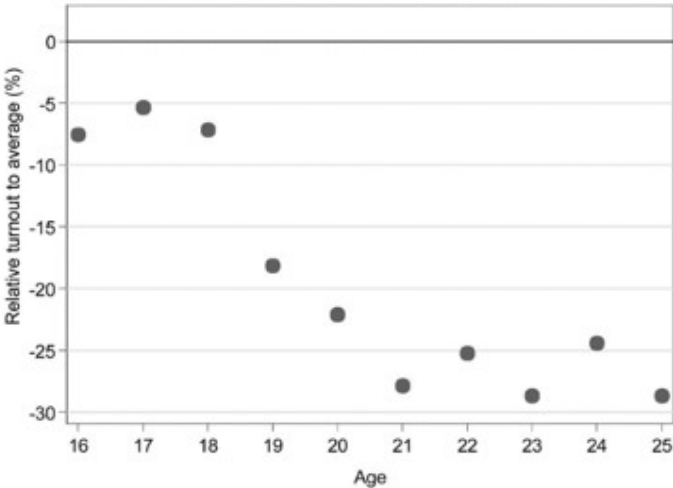


Figure 2 *Turnout rate by age in Krems using the maximum turnout estimator, relative to average turnout (62.6%). (Zeglovitis & Aichholzer, 2014, p. 357)*



2.2 Youth Political Participation after Civics Education

Are political literacy education programmes also sustaining the political participation after the school period? Adolescents who had benefitted from the civics education policies demonstrated a propensity to increase the voter turnout in the +20 years category in subsequent elections. The voting-age gap between older adolescents and young adults in Austria began to decrease over the years. The young adults – who were the older adolescents of the years before – seemed to be closing the gap at every new election. In the legislative elections of 2013, the gap decreased to only 5%, and to 4.2% in the regional elections of Vienna in 2015 (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2020). It was found that an overall higher voter turnout prevailed among both groups, at 70.2% among the youngest voters and 66% among the young adult voters in comparison with previous elections. The trajectory of diminishing voting-age gaps over successive elections underscores the enduring impact of political education on the sustained voting motivation of young people. This suggests that, at least for some years after leaving school, political education is still having an impact on young adults' voting motivation. This observation is also noted in the Scottish study conducted within the age cohort of individuals aged 16 to 31 (Eichhorn & Hübner, 2021). The authors found that political literacy courses had a lasting positive impact on those who completed their schooling several years ago, particularly within the younger segments of that age range:

Those who had taken classes in school in which political issues

were discussed, were more likely to vote in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections, more likely to engage with political issues in ways other than voting, and more likely to use different information sources to keep up to date with political issues (p. 17).

However, the study acknowledges that this positive impact is less pronounced among the older cohorts within the same age group, nevertheless still significant. Consequently, it could be argued that while the effect remains robust, its long-term implications are still open to question.

From this perspective, the reduction of the voting age to 16 years primarily centres on extending the opportunity for young people to vote at elections at an earlier life stage than would be feasible with a voting age set at 18. In contexts where a country's political mandate spans five years, certain people may only engage in voting activities at the age of 23 – a full five years after their exit from formal education. Conversely, lowering the voting age to 16 years could potentially enable younger individuals – in the most extreme cases – to cast their first votes at the age of 20, a mere two years post-schooling. The significance of the timing of young people's first voting experience should not be underestimated. Each year that passes without voting after leaving education decreases the likelihood that an individual will participate in their first election. This delay also results in a missed opportunity to cultivate a consistent voting habit (Plutzer, 2002). When coupled with robust and a comprehensive civic education curriculum focusing on political matters and electoral processes, a

lower voting age holds the promise of serving as a catalyst for heightened voter turnout among the younger generations. Furthermore, this increase in civic engagement could even extend well beyond the years of mandatory education.

3 Voting Coherence, Political Knowledge and Late Adolescents

Political knowledge relates to various types of information concerning political affairs, policy issues, government structures and political life. In other words, political knowledge constitutes “the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory” (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1997, p. 10). Notably, political knowledge is intricately linked to voter turnout, as an increase in political knowledge is associated with higher participation rates in elections, constituting a primary effect (Dow, 2011). Additionally, political knowledge demonstrates a clear positive correlation with political participation (Galston, 2004). Therefore, assessing whether a lower voting age also leads to more longstanding political curiosity and information-seeking becomes of utmost relevance if the ultimate policy goal of such an electoral reform is to increase the voting motivation of younger generations for the rest of their lifetime.

A study by Hooghe and Dassonneville (2011) in the Belgian French and Dutch school systems revealed that a small majority of school-attending youth, aged around 15 to 16 years, demonstrated limited knowledge or provided incorrect answers to questions concerning the names of Belgian Prime Minister, the European Commis-

sion President, and the Minister of Justice, and similar topics. In another study with Belgian adolescents with very similar questions, 52% of participants correctly answered the questions (Verhaegen & Boonen, 2018). In addition, a longitudinal comparative study between Canadian and Dutch young adults shows that the knowledge gap between the younger and older generations has widened over 20 years between the 1970s and 1990s. The younger generations appear to be increasingly less politically knowledgeable, and, through cohort effects, lower political knowledge is shifting to older generations aged above 30 years (Howe, 2006). This suggests that political knowledge is not necessarily acquired with age and that developing a sustained political curiosity among the younger generations is deemed necessary for them to boost their political knowledge over the years.

3.1 Civics Education and Sustained Political Knowledge

The academic debate concerning the impact of a lower voting age on political knowledge primarily centres on the potential effects before the actual act of voting. In other words, the central question is whether extending the voting right to 16- and 17-year-olds will enhance their political knowledge before elections, enabling them to cast an ‘informed and coherent vote’ for the years to come. The existing literature reveals a debate between proponents who believe that individuals under 18 can make well-informed voting decisions and sceptics who harbour reservations about the voting capacities of non-adults. Drawing on a UK study based on nationally representative surveys from 1991 and 2001, Chan and

Clayton (2006) vehemently oppose lowering the voting age to 16 years. They argue that 16-year-olds in the UK exhibit lower political maturity and interest and possess less political knowledge than their 18-year-old counterparts. According to their perspective, it is entirely justifiable for a society to abstain from conferring voting rights upon late adolescents, as they are perceived as lacking the requisite competence to exercise suffrage and potentially exert a negative influence on the lives of eligible voters.

Wagner et al. (2012), on the contrary, state that older adolescents are perfectly able to cast a well-thought-of vote. Their empirical work on the 2009 European elections in Austria does not show a drastically lower knowledge level prior to the elections among people under the age of 18 years. In fact, they assert that regarding voting abilities the age group of 18- to 21-year-olds poses more challenges. This is comparable to the lower turnout rates also observed among older adults in the country prior to or at the beginning of the electoral and educational reforms. In other words, the young voters in Austria would be more ‘politically mature’ than their British counterparts of the same age. Wagner et al. (2012) posit that this notable difference can be explained for an important part by the fact that Austrian 16- and 17-year-olds are aware of their voting rights, fostering a higher inclination to inform themselves about political affairs compared to their British counterparts. Important to note here, the authors omit to take into account the civic educational reforms targeted at adolescents prior to the elections in Austria. This is an important difference with the UK, where no similar well-developed meas-

ures were taken for secondary school pupils. Plutzer (2002) already underscored the importance to develop a political habit as soon as possible in his work “Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adults”. He argues that the establishment of a political routine early in life engenders a lasting predisposition towards seeking out political information throughout one’s lifespan. In the context of fostering an enduring and sustained political engagement among future generations, the electoral and educational reforms in Austria also emerge as notable catalysts for augmenting long-term political interest and knowledge.

With regard to this debate, the local elections of 2018 in Ghent provided an insight into the voting coherence of late adolescents in a context without extensive supportive civics education measures in secondary schools. All the young people in the age range of 16 to 17 years were invited through a formal and official letter of invitation by the city administration to cast their vote on the same date as the real elections for adults. Although it was emphasised that their votes wouldn’t impact the official results, the conditions mimicked a real voting experience. Stiers et al. (2020) examined the political maturity of the adolescents who participated in the mock election through voting coherence, comparing it to that of their parents. This is in a context in which Flanders (the education policy in Belgium lies with the regional authorities) did not have a well-developed civic education policy aimed at bringing as much young people as possible to the polling stations. While these results may provide additional support for proponents of lowering the voting age to 16, it’s

crucial to consider several significant reservations very well detailed by the authors. Firstly, the turnout rate was notably low, with only 17.77% of eligible adolescents participating. Secondly, it is therefore quite plausible that primarily those adolescents with pre-existing interest in politics participated in the mock election. The participants tended to lean slightly more left-wing and predominantly came from financially well-off families. Lastly, the schools in Ghent actively promoted and disseminated information about the mock election, potentially influencing the motivation of adolescents who decided to vote. This may have had an influence on the enthusiasm to inform oneself among these young voters. In other words, this experiment does not provide a strong argument to state that solely lowering the voting age to 16 years – without accompanying educational measures – genuinely and naturally increases the propensity for younger voters to look for information and increase their political knowledge in the long run.

4 A Lower Voting Age and Lasting Social Inequalities

Lowering the voting age entails potential risks concerning the sustainment and reinforcement of longstanding societal and social inequalities. Specifically, a considerable risk emerges wherein a significant segment of eligible adolescents may exhibit diminished voting motivation or be inadequately targeted by governmental policies aimed at facilitating their exercise of voting rights at the age of 16 or 17. This could result in an even greater social gap in political participation in the future. These in-

stances underscore a notable concern for policymakers and governments contemplating the implementation of a lower voting age. In the Ghent mock elections, participation was predominantly observed among adolescents from well-off families (Stiers et al., 2020). Van der Meer and Dekker (2011) also illustrate a clear disparity in political participation based on education and income levels in the Netherlands. People with higher education and better income show a significantly greater inclination towards different forms of political participation in comparison to their more modestly educated and lower-income counterparts. This can be highly problematic according to the authors since “an unequal level of political participation easily leads to a systematic distortion (bias) in the preferences of policymakers and, consequently, in government policy” (p. 214). Furthermore, on a gender level, lowering the voting age to 16 years could reinforce a gender gap in terms of less popular elections. Young women in Europe display a more or less equal participation rate in first-order elections. In some countries, they even seem to possess a higher voting motivation than men (Deželan, 2023). Nevertheless, when it comes to second-order elections, women still tend to be less motivated and show a lower propensity to look for information prior to voting (Kostelka et al., 2019).

In the Austrian example, young people 16 to 17 years old who left school earlier to start their working career were discernibly less influenced by the educational efforts of the Austrian authorities (Kozeluh et al., 2005; Perlot & Zandonella, 2009; Schwarzer & Zeglövits, 2013). This resulted in a noticeable discrepancy in voting motivation

between adolescents still enrolled in formal education and those who had prematurely left school. The enfranchised adolescents still attending school at the age of 16 to 18 years, however, demonstrated a higher propensity to vote and showed higher levels of political interest regardless of their families' social class background (Kritzing & Zeglovits, 2013; Zeglovits & Zandonella, 2013). In the same vein, the Scottish results on voting motivation among different social classes and between gender are very insightful. Since the Scottish independence referendum of 2014, 16- and 17-year-olds have been granted the right to vote in all Scottish elections, including Scottish parliament elections and the second-order, that is, local council elections. Similar to the findings in Austria, Scottish adolescents, regardless of their social class and gender, exhibited a 'first-time voting boost'. They participated more actively in elections than their older mid-20s counterparts (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2020; Reid et al., 2019). Especially since the independence referendum – and therefore the first-time non-adults were allowed to vote – Scotland undertook important educational efforts to increase the political literacy of pupils at school. However, the nature and extent of civic education varied across different schools and authorities in Scotland. This diversity in efforts resulted in unequal educational preparation for elections, with some individuals benefiting from better and more comprehensive civic education. Consequently, those who received enhanced civic education demonstrated a higher voting participation and engaged more readily in political activities (Eichhorn & Hübner, 2021). Recognising this, the Scottish parliamentary committee of

'Devolution' demanded qualitative and extensive education for political literacy for all Scottish pupils: "you will be aware that in our evidence to the committee, we put forward the proposal to develop national guidance for political education and literacy" (Devolution (Further Powers) Committee, 2015, p. 11). Nevertheless, despite these differences in educational efforts on a nationwide scale, positive effects of civic education can still be seen among the Scottish youth. Since the lowering of the voting age during the Scottish independence referendum, the socioeconomic disparities and the gender gap in voting motivation among 16- and 17-year-olds have been notably lower than those in the broader population of the UK. The discrepancies in voting motivation, political participation and information-seeking behaviour observed between different social classes and between genders in the broader society are not seen among older adolescents attending school in Scotland (Eichhorn & Hübner, 2021; Huebner & Eichhorn, 2022).

As a consequence, Scotland and, again, Austria serve as compelling examples, illustrating the potential of educational efforts, even when not perfectly aligned nationally alike the Scottish case, which can still significantly mitigate political participation inequalities. Investing in well-developed political literacy education can, at least in the short term, benefit the most vulnerable young individuals, stimulating and enhancing their political internal efficacy. Over time, however, disparities in political involvement appear to resurge in Scotland as young adults do not spend time in the formal educational track anymore (Eichhorn & Hübner, 2021). This highlights still ex-

isting uncertainties over the long-term educational effects on equal political participation among the general population. The new nationwide-developed Scottish political education and literacy policy might perhaps be fruitful in reinforcing the effect of education in the long term. Similarly, in Austria, a significant effect persists several years after young adults leave school, albeit with a slight decline in voting motivation observed over time (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2020). Therefore, more longitudinal research is necessary for researchers to have a genuine understanding of the long-term effects stemming from comprehensive national efforts of political education within schools. Post-school political education campaigns might be deemed necessary initiatives to mitigate potential declines in the effectiveness of school education over the years.

5 The Marginal Impact of Lowering the Voting Age on the Political Landscape

This section delves into the possible implications of reducing the voting age, particularly focusing on its long-term potential to reconfigure the political dynamics within the Low Countries. An understanding of how this alteration may disrupt party affiliations is imperative for policymakers and scholars, offering valuable insights into potential shifts in political representation. The following figures illustrate the voting tendencies of both the youngest enfranchised cohort and the disenfranchised youth.

5.1 Belgium

Academic research by Meeusen et al. (2023) about the electorates of the Flemish parties at the Belgian federal elections of 2019 reveals that the youngest cohort of voters aged 18 to 24 – predominantly composed of first-time voters in national elections – exhibited a diverse array of party preferences, with three parties closely aligned in terms of votes. Notably, the Greens of Groen emerged as the most popular, followed closely by the extreme-right Flemish nationalists of Vlaams Belang and the liberal party Open Vld. There were also many blank votes within this age group. Similar patterns were observed in subsequent age cohorts, with the Greens maintaining popularity and other parties gaining traction in later age groups (e.g., the socialists of Vooruit, the right-conservative Flemish nationalists of N-VA and the Christian democrats of CD&V). In Wallonia and the Brussels-Capital Region, first-time voters in the 18 to 24 age category overwhelmingly supported the green party Ecolo, securing almost 42% of the votes within this age group. The liberals of MR (Mouvement Réformateur) and the socialist PS (Parti Socialiste) lag far behind. The extreme-left party PTB (Parti du Travail de Belgique) and the Christian democrats of CdH (today Les Engagés) showed to be less popular. A notable 11.1% of the newest French-speaking voters opted to abstain or vote blank or cast an invalid vote. In the Belgian context, the overall political party preferences in the northern and southern regions of the country are reflected in the youngest and already enfranchised age cohort, with a larger right-wing bloc in Flanders and a clear majority for left-leaning parties in Brussels and Wallonia.

Regarding the voting intentions of adolescents, very few studies have been undertaken in Belgium to genuinely grasp the party preferences of not-yet-enfranchised young people. Hooghe and Boonen (2015) shed light on the party preferences of Flemish 15-year-olds in 2012, revealing a significant alignment with the overall election results of the 2010 federal elections among the adult, enfranchised public. Just as in the general elections, a substantial proportion of adolescent votes went to the Flemish right-wing nationalists of the N-VA and the Christian democrats of CD&V. The Greens of Groen and the extreme-right Vlaams Belang held less popularity among this age cohort. Today, the political context is completely reversed in the north of Belgium, with an extreme-right party that made a breakthrough as second biggest party in Flanders in 2019 and is now battling to become the first Flemish party. A more recent report on the Flemish youth voting intention just before the federal elections of 2019, based on the study conducted by Desmet and Verhoogen (2019), seems to reflect that new political reality among younger people between 12 and 24 years old. The Greens emerged as the most popular single party. However, the right and extreme-right parties of N-VA and Vlaams Belang also secured a significant part of the Flemish youth's voting intentions. The other two left parties, the socialists of Vooruit and the extreme-left PVDA, were clearly less popular among young voters. Interestingly, the extreme-right Vlaams Belang seems to be the most popular party when only the age cohort of 15 to 18 years old is taken into account. This is also confirmed by the more recent work done by the Flemish *Jeugd Onderzoeksplat-*

form in 2023, in which young Flemings between 16 and 25 years old showed a clear preference for Vlaams Belang, followed by the N-VA and Groen (Spruyt et al., 2024). In Wallonia and Brussels, a study from 2006 on the voting intentions of 16-year-olds shows the same dynamic as in the north of the country with voting preferences remaining rather close to that of the general election (Claes et al., 2006). The left-wing Parti Socialiste (PS) was the most popular party with the liberal MR and the Greens from Ecolo trailing far behind. Conversely, the Christian democrats of CdH and the extreme-left PTB exhibited notably lower levels of popularity among adolescents during that period. These voting proclivities largely mirror the electoral outcomes of the federal elections in 2003 in French-speaking Belgium, albeit with the liberals of MR achieving a discernibly stronger performance relative to their standing among 16-year-olds.

Drawing insights from these existing academic works and reports it can be argued that lowering the voting age in Belgium may yield distinct election results in the north and the south of the country and, therefore, aligning with the general electoral results. Moreover, opening the voting age to 16- and 17-year-olds is likely to have varying (marginal) effects on different political parties. In Flanders, the lowering of the voting age is anticipated to provide a small boost to three parties – Groen, the N-VA and Vlaams Belang. While there is insufficient research for Wallonia and Brussels to make a definitive prediction, based on the electoral cohort of 2019, one could posit that the green party Ecolo would likely be the small beneficiary of a lowered voting age in that part of the country. Overall,

these Flemish and French-speaking adolescent voting preferences do not show a radical longstanding shift in the political landscape of Belgium and its three regions if the voting age were to be lowered. The 16- and 17-year-olds tend to closely follow the election preferences of the general enfranchised public with just some minor deviations in favour of certain parties.

5.2 *The Netherlands*

The parliamentary elections held in the Netherlands on the 22nd of November 2023 offer an intriguing view into the voting intentions of young voters. The party preferences of 18- to 34-year-olds closely align with the general election results. The extreme-right PVV (Partij van de Vrijheid) holds its first position and is even slightly more popular among younger voters. The other moderately more popular parties are the GreenLeft party of GroenLinks-PvdA and the liberal democrats of D66. The liberals of VVD and the new centre party Nieuw Sociaal Contract (NSC) both lose support in the younger age group (NOS, 2023). This is particularly interesting as it highlights how a political context can significantly alter voting intentions, making it challenging to predict future results, especially if the voting age is to be opened to 16- and 17-year-olds. This challenge is amplified in a fragmented and volatile party landscape like the Netherlands. In the elections of 2017, just seven years ago, GroenLinks as a single party held massive popularity among the youngest voters, securing 43% of their votes. D66 (38%), the Partij van de Dieren (Animals Party, 33%) and the populist-right party Forum voor Democratie (31%) were other popular parties. The extreme-right PVV, back then, gathered

only 20% of the young electorate's votes (van Dalen, 2021). In other words, the younger Dutch electorate often shows minor differences with the general result and more or less follows the general political trend. Yet, currently, the extreme-right is clearly dominating that part of the Dutch population slightly more than in the overall population.

To measure the voting preferences of not-yet-enfranchised youth, the Dutch organised the so-called 'Scholierenverkiezingen'. This nonofficial election precedes the real general elections and takes place in schools that have applied for it, offering a glimpse into how youth between the ages of 12 and 18 years would vote if they had voting rights. The November 2023 edition, with 143,991 participants, revealed a clear shift to the right side of the political spectrum with the three parties the PVV, Forum voor Democratie and the liberal VVD finishing, respectively, on the first three places. Groenlinks is the first left party on a fourth place followed by D66 and the new farmers' party of BBB (BoerBurgerBeweging) (ProDemos, 2023). In this sense, the current Dutch adolescents seem to have a strong preference for right-wing, extreme-right and populist parties, which tends to confirm the results from Rekker et al. (2015) positing that adolescents have slightly more extreme positions in comparison to the general population.

Lowering the voting age to 16 in the Netherlands will probably not totally reshape the political landscape, given the observed preferences of the youth in the 'Scholierenverkiezingen'. And as stated by the organiser ProDemos on its website: "Often, the results of the Scholierenverkiezingen are very similar

to the actual election results.”¹ Nevertheless, the data suggest a leaning towards right-wing and populist parties, indicating that if these younger individuals were granted voting rights, these parties might see a small increase in support. However, as seen in the Belgian case as well, it is essential to consider the dynamic nature of political preferences and the impact of changing circumstances. Therefore, while a preference for certain parties is evident, predicting the exact political outcomes of lowering the voting age requires careful reflection and a certain intellectual restraint. The literature only allows to state that it appears probable that the Low Countries would not undergo a significant alteration in their general election outcomes should they opt to lower the voting age to 16 years for national elections.

5.3 *Next to the Low Countries?*

Predicting the voting preferences of 16- and 17-year-olds in countries is a challenging task, as previously outlined. Various factors play a crucial role, and these factors can vary significantly across different countries. Authorities implement the electoral reform of a lower voting age in various ways. For instance, Austria adopted a rather centralised approach, while Scotland experienced notable variations in the educational support provided by schools prior to elections. Furthermore, academic research is still in the process of fully revealing the impact of educational measures on the party preferences of older adolescents. Although limited, existing academic works on this subject tend to align with observations in Belgium and the Netherlands, indicating that adolescent and older voters are mostly aligned with general voting

preferences, with a slight inclination towards more radical parties (van der Kolk & Aarts, 2010).

On a political party preference level, the Austrian case confirms the previous understanding of political preferences among adolescents. The latter’s voting choice generally mirrors the overall electoral trend with occasional deviations to the right or the left. The youngest Austrian voters indeed tend to position themselves slightly more on the left or on the right of the political spectrum. Additionally, adolescent voters do not exhibit a significant difference in political attitudes compared to older young voters above the age of 18 years (Aichholzer & Kritzing, 2020). This alignment was further affirmed in an American study conducted by Hart and Atkins (2011, p. 214), demonstrating that 16- to 17-year-olds closely align on the political interests of the older cohort of 18- to 24 year-olds. In other words, the voting preferences of adult first-time voters serve as a potential reference for the party preferences of adolescents. However, this assertion should be approached with caution, considering Austria’s substantial efforts in political education, which may have impacted the voting preferences of the youngest voters.

To illustrate the challenges to interpret and extrapolate results across countries, the Estonian case is an additional notable example. Estonia granted voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds in 2015, exclusively for local elections. The parties that slightly outperformed – namely, the liberal Reform Party and the Social Democrats – were the same parties advocating for a lowering of voting rights age and actively motivating the youngest voters to cast their ballots on election day (Eichhorn &

Bergh, 2020). This suggests that the Reform Party's and Social Democrat Party's young voters were more targeted by these specific parties than the youngest voters of other parties. Consequently, these efforts resulted in a slightly better outcome for these two parties among the newest enfranchised age cohort. In essence, the strategies and initiatives that political parties choose to employ for the youngest voters significantly impact their political outcomes among adolescents. Since not every ideological party aligns uniformly on the issue of lowering the voting age across Europe, predicting which specific party might gain votes in general by lowering the voting age becomes extremely difficult. The varying stances and readiness to push for electoral efforts focusing on 16- to 17-year-olds are very different from country to country, making it challenging to pinpoint a singular party that would universally benefit from lowering the voting age.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the examination of literature surrounding the proposal to lower the voting age to 16 in the Low Countries reveals multifaceted implications for long-term democratic engagement. A comprehensive understanding of this reform requires a nuanced assessment of its lasting impact on various aspects, including voter turnout, political knowledge and maturity, social inequalities, and consequences for the political party landscape.

Regarding voter turnout and political knowledge, studies present a complex relationship. While a positive short-term effect is observed, empha-

sising the importance of political education, caution is advised against overestimating the potential for prolonged impact. Civic education emerges as a crucial component, with political literacy courses showing promise in promoting sustained political engagement among younger people. However, more research on the effects of civics education is necessary to provide a better view on its implications for political participation in the long run. Educational measures in schools show positive short-term impacts, suggesting a potential for a lifelong voter reflex. Yet, lasting increased political participation over decades poses challenges, highlighting the need for on-going efforts to retain older adults' attention to politics after their schooling years. Social inequalities persist as a challenge, and lowering the voting age alone may prove insufficient in addressing disparities in political participation for a longer period of time. While educational efforts may temporarily mitigate these inequalities, sustained interventions beyond the school period are also deemed necessary here. Turning to the lasting consequences for the political party landscape and political attitudes in the Low Countries, it has been found that young voters in Belgium and the Netherlands under the age of 18 often align with the overall political preferences of the general population. Their party preferences evolve quite equally to the trends in the broader society, showing therefore no clear discrepancy in voting coherence with young enfranchised adults. However, adolescents can in some cases display a slightly higher preference for the extremes of the political spectrum. In other words, lowering the voting age in the Low Countries will neither normally nor dramatically

alter future political preferences in both countries.

In essence, the discussions about lowering the voting age to 16 in the Low Countries mark a significant stride towards engaging younger generations in democratic processes, if possible, for the rest of their life. However, the true effectiveness of this reform hinges on the implementation of complementary measures, particularly in the realm of civic education. Political authorities must demonstrate a comprehensive and sustained commitment to fostering civic education and political engagement throughout the life course of young citizens, recognising both the opportunities and challenges associated with such a transformation. While the potential for increased political participation among the youth is promising, social inequalities persist as a formidable challenge that requires broader societal interventions to ensure lasting impacts. This nuanced interplay between these various elements underscores the need for careful consideration and on-going evaluation of the broader long-term societal consequences of such electoral reforms.

Note

- 1 scholierenverkiezingen.nl/over-ons/faq/

References

- Aichholzer, J. & Kritzinger, S. (2020). Voting at 16 in Practice: A Review of the Austrian Case. In J. Eichhorn & J. Bergh (Eds.), *Lowering the Voting Age to 16* (pp. 81-101). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-32541-1_5.
- Bhatti, Y. & Hansen, K. M. (2012). Leaving the Nest and the Social Act of Voting: Turnout among First-Time Voters. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion & Parties*, 22(4), 380-406. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2012.721375>.
- BMUKK & BMWF. (2007). *Entscheidend Bist Du! Start Der Intensivphase Der Demokratie-Initiative Der Bundesregierung*. https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20071026_OTS0017/entscheidend-bist-du-start-der-intensivphase-der-demokratie-initiative-der-bundesregierung-bild.
- Calvo, K. & Defossé, G. (2021). 04358 (Chambre des Représentants de Belgique) *Proposition de Loi: Modifiant La Loi Du 23 Mars 1989 Relative à l'élection Du Parlement Européen, En Vue d'abaisser l'âge Du Début Du Droit de Vote à 16 Ans Pour Les Élections Européennes*. <https://www.lachambre.be/FLWB/PDF/55/1898/55K1898001.pdf>.
- Chan, T. W. & Clayton, M. (2006). Should the Voting Age Be Lowered to Sixteen? Normative and Empirical Considerations. *Political Studies*, 54(3), 533-58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2006.00620.x>.
- Claes, E., Declaire, C., Dejaeghere, Y., Fiers, S., Hooghe, M. & Quintelier, E. (2006). *Etude Jeunesse 2006: Un Premier Portrait Des Opinions Des Jeunes de Seize Ans*. KU Leuven.
- Dalton, R. J. (2007). *2 The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation Is Reshaping American Politics*. CQ Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/23744823.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A8d90b8c4c86243a1d498f112a6c25ac4&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1.
- Delli Carpini, M. X. & S. Keeter (1997). *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* (1st ed.). Yale University Press.
- Desmet, S. & Verhoogen, L. (2019). *Stem van de jeugd: bulletrapport*. IVox.

- https://ambassade.be/files/attachments/.1929/20190044_StemvdJeugd_Bulletrapport_iVOX.pdf.
- Devolution (Further Powers) Committee. 2015. *Stage 1 Report on the Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill*. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body. https://archive2021.parliament.scot/S4_ScotlandBillCommittee/Reports/dfpR-15-04w.pdf.
- Dinas, E. (2012). The Formation of Voting Habits. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion & Parties*, 22(4), 431-456. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2012.718280>.
- Dow, J. K. (2011). Political Knowledge and Electoral Choice in the 1992-2004 United States Presidential Elections: Are More and Less Informed Citizens Distinguishable? *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion & Parties*, 21(3), 381-405. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2011.592191>.
- Eichhorn, J. & Bergh, J. (Eds.). (2020). *Lowering the Voting Age to 16: Learning from Real Experiences Worldwide*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-32541-1>.
- Eichhorn, J. & Hübner, C. (2021). *Votes at 16 in Scotland*. University of Edinburgh. <https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/assets/doc/Votes%20at%2016%20in%20Scotland.pdf>.
- Galston, W. A. (2004). Civic Education and Political Participation. *Political Science and Politics*, 37(2), 263-266.
- Hart, D. & Atkins, R. (2011). American Sixteen- and Seventeen-Year-Olds Are Ready to Vote. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 633(1), 201-222. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716210382395>.
- Hooghe, M. & Boonen, J. (2015). The Intergenerational Transmission of Voting Intentions in a Multiparty Setting: An Analysis of Voting Intentions and Political Discussion Among 15-Year-Old Adolescents and Their Parents in Belgium. *Youth & Society*, 47(1), 125-147. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X13496826>.
- Hooghe, M. & Dassonneville, R. (2011). The Effects of Civic Education on Political Knowledge. A Two Year Panel Survey among Belgian Adolescents. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 23(4), 321-339. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-011-9131-5>.
- Howe, P. (2006). Political Knowledge and Electoral Participation in the Netherlands: Comparisons with the Canadian Case. *International Political Science Review*, 27(2), 137-166. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512106061424>.
- Huebner, C. & Eichhorn, J. (2022). The Tide Raising All Boats? Social Class Differences in Political Participation among Young People in Scotland. *Scottish Affairs*, 31(2), 165-189. <https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2022.0407>.
- Karlhofer, F. (2007). Voting at 16: Expectations and Perspectives. *Forum Politische Bildung: Informationen zur Politischen Bildung*, 27, 37-42.
- Konzelmann, L., Wagner, C. & Rattinger, H. (2012). Turnout in Germany in the Course of Time: Life Cycle and Cohort Effects on Electoral Turnout from 1953 to 2049. *Electoral Studies*, 31(2), 250-261. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2011.11.006>.
- Kozeluh, U., Kromer, I., Nitsch, S., Reichmann, A. & Zuba, R. (2005). „Wählen Heißt Erwachsen Werden!“ Analyse Des Wahlverhaltens Jugendlicher Zwischen 16 Und 18 Jahren Bei Der Wiener Landtagswahl 2005. Institute for Social Research and Analysis. https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/16441/ssoar-2006-2-kozeluh_et_al-wahlen_heit_erwachsen_werden.pdf;jsessionid=20EE8174F5A6ABBA9E9DC09D14EC18A0?sequence=1
- Kritzinger, S. & Zeglovits, E. (2013). *Projekttitel: Wählen mit 16 bei der Nationalratswahl 2013*. <https://>

- impact-sowi.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user_upload/p_societal_impact/2018_Phase_2/Stawi/Wahlstudie_Waehlen_mit_16.pdf.
- Meeusen, C. & Abts, K. (2024). Niet-kiezers: een blik op de afgehaakten van de politiek. *Samenleving & Politiek*, 31(4), 9-13.
- Meeusen, C., Roelands, E., Abts, K. & Swyngedouw, M. (2023). Structurele En Culturele Determinanten van Het Stemgedrag in 2019. In K. Abts, C. Meeusen, B. Meuleman & M. Swyngedouw (Eds.), *De Breuklijnen Voorbij?* (pp. 19-60). Mirto Print.
- Mindich, D. T. Z. (2005). *Why Americans under 40 Don't Follow the News*. Oxford University Press.
- NOS. (2023). Minder Jongeren Naar de Stembus: Dit Is Hoe Zij Stemden. Nos.nl. Retrieved 25 January 2024, from <https://nos.nl/op3/artikel/2498984-minder-jongeren-naar-de-stembus-dit-is-hoe-zij-stemden>.
- Perlot, F. & Zandonella, M. (2009). Wählen Mit 16: Jugendliche Und Politik in Österreich. *SWS-Rundschau*, 49(4), 420-445.
- Plutzer, E. (2002). Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adulthood. *American Political Science Review*, 96(1), 41-56. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055402004227>.
- ProDemos. (2023). *Uitslagen Scholierenverkiezingen Tweede Kamerverkiezingen 2023*. Retrieved 26 January 2024, from <https://stem.scholierenverkiezingen.nl/uitslagen>.
- Reid, S., Montagu, I. & Scholes, A. (2019). *Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2019: Attitudes to Government, the Economy and the Health Service, and Political Engagement in Scotland*. ScotCen Social Research.
- Rekker, R., Keijsers, L., Branje, S. & Meeus, W. (2015). Political Attitudes in Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood: Developmental Changes in Mean Level, Polarization, Rank-order Stability, and Correlates. *Journal of Adolescence*, 41(1), 136-147. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2015.03.011>.
- Reuchamps, M., Caluwaerts, D., De Winter, L., Jacquet, V. & Meulewaeter, C. (2015). Vote Obligatoire et Abstention Dans Une Perspective Multi-Niveaux". In K. Deschouwer, P. Delwit, M. Hooghe, P. Baudewyns & S. Walgrave (Eds.), *Décrypter l'électeur : Le Comportement Électoral et Les Motivations de Vote* (pp. 174-191). Lannoo Campus.
- ROB. (2019). *Jong geleerd, oud gedaan: pleidooi voor experimenten met het verlagen van de kiesgerechtigde leeftijd*. Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur.
- Schmeets, H. (2017). *Politieke betrokkenheid in Nederland*. Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek.
- Schwarzer, S., Zandonella, M., Zeglovits, E., Perlot, F. & Kozeluh, U. (2009). „Wählen mit 16“ Eine Post Election Study zur Nationalratswahl 2008 Befragung – Fokusgruppen – Tiefeninterviews. Institut für Strategieberatungen. <https://images.derstandard.at/2009/05/15/studie.pdf>.
- Schwarzer, S. & Zeglovits, E. (2013). The Role of Schools in Preparing 16- and 17-Year-Old Austrian First-Time Voters for the Election. In S. Abend-schön (Ed.), *Growing into Politics. Contexts and Timing of Political Socialisation* (pp. 73-89). ECPR Press.
- Spruyt, B., Dhoore, J. & Siongers, J. (2024). Jongeren En Politiek. In S. Lagaert, S. Pleysier, J. Put, J. Siongers, B. Spruyt & L. Bradt (Eds.), *Jongeren in Cijfers En Letters: Bevindingen Uit de JOP-Monitor 2023* (pp. 257-313). Owl Press.
- Stiers, D., Hooghe, M. & Goubin, S. (2020). Are 16-Year-Olds Able to Cast a Congruent Vote? Evidence from a "Voting at 16" Initiative in the City of Ghent (Belgium). *Electoral Studies*, 63, 102107. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2019.102107>.
- van Dalen, H. (2021). Demografie in het stemhokje. *Demos*, 37(1), 1-8.

- van der Kolk, H. & Aarts, K. (2010). *Het Verlagen van de Kiesgerechtigde Leeftijd Tot 16 Jaar; Debatten, Argumenten En Consequenties*. Universiteit Twente.
- van der Meer, T., & Dekker, P. (2011). Politieke participatie. In L. C. J. M. Halman & I. J. P. Sieben (Eds.), *Respect man! Tolerantie, solidariteit en andere moderne waarden*. (pp. 211–226). Celsus.
- Verhaegen, S. & Boonen, J. (2018). *The Development of Political Knowledge in Adolescence: Which Mediating Institutions Have the Strongest Influence?* Conference Paper. Salamanca.
- Waeterloos, C., Walrave, M. & Ponnet, K. (2021). *Online en offline politieke participatie en attitudes bij Belgische jongvolwassenen*. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.14979807>.
- Wagner, M., Johann, D. and Kritzinger, S. (2012). Voting at 16: Turnout and the Quality of Vote Choice. *Electoral Studies*, 31(2), 372-383. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2012.01.007>.
- Wattenberg, M. P. (2020). *Is Voting for Young People?* (5th ed.). Routledge.
- Zeglovits, E. & Aichholzer, J. (2014). Are People More Inclined to Vote at 16 than at 18? Evidence for the First-Time Voting Boost among 16- to 25-Year-Olds in Austria. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 24(3), 351-361. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2013.872652>.
- Zeglovits, E. & Zandonella, M. (2013). Political Interest of Adolescents before and after Lowering the Voting Age: The Case of Austria. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 16(8), 1084-1104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2013.793785>.