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EDITORIAL

Farewell to the first Editor-in-Chief and some thoughts from the new Editors-in-Chief

Min Reuchamps & Luana Russo[*]

Upon assuming the position of Editors-in-chief of *Politics of the Low Countries* (PLC) for the three upcoming years, it is inspiring to start this adventure in a moment in which PLC has successfully moved into a new, more international phase, with a growing reputation while still maintaining its well-crafted niche. We are grateful to our predecessor, Nicolas Bouteca, and the outgoing Editorial Assistant, Lorenzo Terrière, as well as to the whole editorial board, both as BeNeLux political scientists and as new Editors-in-chief, for leading the transition of the journal to a fully English research outlet. This was not only important for the journal's visibility and accessibility worldwide, but also to reflect the growing international composition of political scientists in the three BeNeLux countries, as they are the backbone of PLC and constitute both its primary readership and its content producers.

With the help of a new Editorial Assistant, Rebecca Gebauer, we step into this position well aware of the history and the position of this journal in the field and we are ready and keen on having the opportunity to further consolidate its well-respected reputation and long tradition (sixty years of history under the name *Res Publica*) and its more recent international vocation. In its new form, PLC continues to provide scientific insights in Belgian, Dutch and Luxembourg politics, from a wide variety of methodological perspectives and on a broad range of topics. It this sense, the journal kept and strengthened its identity as the official journal of the Flemish (VPW), Francophone (ABSP) and Luxembourg (LuxPol) political science associations, in cooperation with the Dutch Political Science Association (NKWP). The increasing number of submissions by authors from the Low Countries, but also from elsewhere, reaffirms the need for a scientific journal that explores the politics of this small, yet politically lively region of Europe and of the world.

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Thanks to the extraordinary work done during the last few years, PLC has reached a consolidated position that will allow us to undertake three constructive new challenges.

The *first challenge* consists in further increasing the number of submissions while maintaining high quality. We will direct our effort in trying to balance the number of contributions from the three countries in the region – which are mainly coming from Belgium now.

The *second challenge* consists in rebalancing the submitted topics. Currently, most of the submissions belong to the broad category of national or comparative politics in a multi-level perspective, followed by papers focusing on public administration, and, finally, few papers investigating international relations. Although comparative politics is likely to stay the most popular topic, we believe that it might be beneficial for the journal to make the other two subfields more prominent, as this will make interconnections more visible and broaden the scope of the journal without losing its focus.

The *third challenge* concerns pursuing increased visibility of the journal and its content. Visibility will be increased by undertaking two strategies: by making the journal more active on social media (e.g. Twitter and academic social media) and by being actively presenting at national and international conferences and events.

Finally, we commit to encourage, through the use of specific guidelines we will offer to reviewers, *kind and constructive as well as speedy feedback*. We firmly believe that for all authors, and especially for young authors, it is important to submit their work to a journal that cherishes their hard work and promotes a constructive and fair environment.

We conclude this brief editorial by extending an invitation to all the talented BeNeLux researchers, and beyond, to continue to support PLC by submitting their research, and playing an active role in the review process. We look forward to this adventure and working together with the editorial board and our publisher Eleven International Publishing.

Min Reuchamps – Université catholique de Louvain

Luana Russo – Maastricht University

ARTICLES

An Actor Approach to Mediatization

Linking Politicians' Media Perceptions, Communication Behaviour and Appearances in the News

Pauline Ketelaars & Peter Van Aelst[*]

Abstract

In the light of the broader debate on the mediatization of politics, this study wants to better understand how the media perceptions and media behaviour of politicians are related to their appearances in the news. We opt for an innovative actor-centred approach to actually measure the views and actions of individual politicians. We combine surveys conducted with 142 Belgian representatives with data on politicians' external communication behaviour and on their appearances in television news, newspapers and news websites. The results show that media behaviour is not so much related to beliefs of media importance. We do find a significant positive relationship between strategic media behaviour and media attention suggesting that politicians who put in more effort appear more often in various news media. However, this positive relationship depends on the specific form of strategic communication and the political position of the legislator. Our study adds to the mediatization literature by showing how and when politicians are successful in obtaining media attention.

Keywords: mediatization, politicians, news media, media perceptions, news management.

1 Introduction

The efforts politicians make to manage the news are increasingly relevant. Since the 1960s politicians have gradually lost control over how politics is communicated and interpreted in the public sphere. We witness a process of mediatization in which journalists are more guided by their own routines and standards and less by what political actors deem important. Correspondingly, politicians adapted to

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the media logic, the rules, formats and routines the mass media employ to cover current affairs. There is a booming literature on this adaptation process, called the 'mediatization of politics' (Blumer and Kavanagh 1999; Esser and Strömbäck 2014b; Strömbäck 2008). This mediatization process implies that politicians no longer think about the media only during elections, but almost permanently reflect on how their words and actions play out in the media (Davis 2010). Their belief in the power of the media is also reflected in their behaviour. Politicians and parties have professionalized their communication strategies and are involved in a permanent campaign to keep their visibility high and to gain attention for their interpretation of societal problems (Brants and Voltmer 2011).

Although the literature on news management and the mediatization of politics is growing steadily, several questions remain unanswered. As Strömbäck and Van Aelst (2013) point out, the concept of mediatization is often referred to in the political communication literature, but it is less used to guide thorough empirical research. The evidence about the mediatization of politics is generally unsystematic and often anecdotal. This is partly due to the fact that the concept is mostly used to describe the broad, aggregate process of political adaptation, but much less to actually study and understand the views and actions of individual politicians. In this study we opt for an actor-centred approach, guided by two specific research questions. Following the mediatization hypothesis, our first question deals with the link between politicians' media perceptions and their behaviour: *To what extent is the strategic media behaviour of politicians connected to their perceptions of media importance?* Several studies have indicated that parliamentarians strongly believe in the power of the media (*e.g.* Lengauer, Donges and Plasser 2014; Van Aelst and Walgrave 2011). However, the extent to which these perceptions are linked to their behaviour is much less clear (Cohen, Tsfati and Sheafer 2008; Matthes, Maurer and Arendt 2019). The second question focuses on the link between politicians' communication behaviour and media success: *To what extent is strategic media behaviour connected to media appearances?* While political candidates seem to spend a lot of energy attempting to meet journalistic criteria, few studies empirically investigate the activities by which they try to shape news coverage (Gershon 2012), and empirical studies on whether adaptation to the news media logic actually leads to media access are limited.

To answer both research questions, we use a twofold, subsequent design. First, we look at media perceptions of politicians and how these are linked with their communication behaviour (RQ1). Using surveys conducted in 2018 with Belgian Members of Parliament (MPs) (N = 142), we measure to what extent politicians believe appearing in news media is important (for their personal election results, to get a good position on their party's ballot list and to what extent traditional media are more important than social media to reach voters). We also use these surveys to ask politicians about communication behaviour that would be difficult to measure directly (contacts with journalists, employees to manage media and media trainings). We complement the survey information with behavioural data on politicians' external communications (press conferences, press releases and tweets). Subsequently, we explore the connection between politicians' communication behaviour and their number of appearances in television

news, print newspapers and news websites (RQ2). Our reliance on cross-sectional data implies that we will not study mediatization as process over time, but rather the degree to which politicians' thinking and behaviour is mediatized anno 2018.

We are aware of the fact that politicians' quantity of media attention (number of appearances) does not tell the whole story – we do not account for *how* politicians are covered. However, we argue that for most parliamentarians – hardly known by the public at large – getting some media attention is key. Moreover, we believe our study goes beyond existing research in at least two ways. First, we move away from the concept of mediatization as an all-embracing concept that deals with the power struggle between 'media' and 'politics'. Rather we opt for an actor approach at the individual level that allows to study variation in the views and actions of politicians. A central interest running through both research questions is the difference between different types of politicians. From previous studies we know that the distribution of media attention is highly unequal (Kruikemeier, Gattermann and Vliegenthart 2018; Tresch 2009). Although all politicians aim to receive media attention, few actually get it on a regular basis. Since we know that political status is the crucial factor that drives media attention (Vos 2014), we devote special attention to differences between MPs with a relative strong parliamentary position or previous government experience – so-called frontbench MPs – and less prominent, backbench MPs who have no official position in parliament nor previously held a position that distinguishes them from the rest.

Second, we use a broad perspective on politicians' communication strategies and its effects. Previous research has often focused on one specific kind of 'media accommodation', for instance having employees who do media work (Van Aelst, Sehata and Van Dalen 2010) or the press releases politicians send to the media (Meyer, Haselmayer and Wagner 2020). This study includes both short-term and long-term ways in which individual politicians can adapt their behaviour, and we investigate the use of both traditional (press releases and press conferences) and new, digital ways of communication (tweets). Finally, while scholars mostly investigate politicians' access to one type of media, we study two 'offline' channels (print newspapers and television news) and investigate attention for politicians on the most important Belgian news websites. By including online news media and social media in our design, we try to take into account that the media environment in which politicians are operating has structurally changed over the last decade.

2 Towards an 'Actor-Centric' Approach on Mediatization

The mediatization of politics can be considered as a broad structural process, or as Strömbäck and Esser (2014:6) define it: 'a long-term process through which the importance of the media and their spill-over effects on political processes, institutions, organizations and actors have increased'. Mediatization is seen as one of the most influential drivers of changes in politics during the last decades (Kriesi 2013). The initial mediatization literature stressed that this structural

process meant that the power of the media increased at the expense of politics and that political actors were forced to adapt. Strömbäck (2008:235), in his seminal article, noted that in the final stage of the mediatization process political actors would be 'governed' by the media logic. More recent studies, however, stress the idea that the media matter because politicians strategically choose to adapt to the media logic and rather use the media in their competition with other politicians (Landerer 2013; Marcinkowski and Steiner 2014; Van Aelst et al. 2014). Also, Esser and Strömbäck (2014a:227) have acknowledged a shift from a 'media-centric' to an 'actor-centric' perspective in mediatization research. This means that more scholars start to investigate how parties and politicians proactively try to use the media to reach certain political goals (Strömbäck and Van Aelst 2013; Van Aelst and Walgrave 2016). As a consequence, current mediatization research treats the adaptation to, and use of, the media no longer as a given, but as an empirical question. This study follows that tradition, also by integrating mediatization studies with literature on communication strategies and news management.

There is little doubt that politicians have invested in media expertise and have surrounded themselves with communication experts. This evolution is mostly studied at the government level where powerful political leaders have the means to structurally invest in news management. Studies have shown how this is done in the United States (Bennett, Lawrence and Livingston 2007; Manheim 1998), but also in European countries such as Germany (Pfetch 1998) and France (Kuhn 2005). At the level of individual politicians, our knowledge is mainly limited to the United States, where studies show that Members of Congress and Senators invest heavily in their strategic communication efforts (Cook 1986; Sellers 2010). The extent to which individual parliamentarians in multiparty systems use news management strategies is much less clear. As Brants and Van Praag (2006) show, the practice of political communication in countries with a democratic corporatist model such as Belgium (Hallin and Mancini 2004) significantly differs from Anglo-American systems. Due to consensus democracy with a central position for political parties and a strong public broadcasting tradition, the Belgian political system confines the necessity of active news management for individual politicians. Our analyses focus solely on the Belgian (Flemish) case, but in the discussion section we will elaborate on how our findings should be interpreted in a comparative perspective.

Our goal is to find out to what extent MPs have adapted to the news media logic and whether this adaptation is actually connected to media access. Theoretically, we distinguish between two aspects of this process. First, we investigate how convinced politicians are that appearing in the news media is important and to what extent these beliefs are linked to their strategic media behaviour. Second, we test whether this media behaviour can help politicians to gain media coverage.

RQ1: To what extent is the strategic media behaviour of politicians connected to their perceptions of media importance?

When asked directly, many political elites agree that the media exert substantial power to set the political agenda and that media affect their political careers

(Fawzi 2018; Lengauer et al. 2014; Maurer 2011; Strömbäck 2011; Van Aelst et al. 2008). However, only few studies have tested whether perceptions of media importance actually affect politicians' behaviour and whether this type of attention remains that crucial in the social media era (*see* further).

For individual representatives, getting in the media is not a goal in itself, but a means to reach other purposes. For a politician, one of the central goals is to get (re-)elected. In multiparty systems, the news media can help to reach that goal in two ways. Firstly, media appearances help politicians to get known by the public. As citizens are unlikely to vote for candidates they know little about, and because most people obtain their knowledge about politicians via the news (Arnold 2004), media exposure helps politicians to get votes (Kahn and Kenney 2002). Second, in political systems like Belgium, political parties decide which representatives get a (high) place on the ballot list. In mediatized democracies, political parties will at least partly base the selection of their representatives based on media performance (Sheafer and Tzionit 2006). A lot of exposure can boost one's position within the party and this may result in a higher ranking on the ballot list (Davis 2010). This ballot list position, in turn, is crucial in terms of personal electoral success (van Erkel and Thijssen 2016). In order to answer our first research question, we asked politicians in a survey about the extent to which they perceive appearing in the news media to be important to reach these two prominent goals. Additionally, we asked them about a related aspect that has become more relevant in recent years; the importance of the traditional mass media to reach voters compared to the rising importance of social media. Since social media allow for more direct communication with voters, and since they are a way to bypass the critical questions and framing of journalists (Klinger and Svensson 2015), politicians might attribute less importance to the mediating role of classical news media these days. On the other hand, social media such as Twitter are often used to attract the attention of journalists. In that respect, social media remain an instrument to influence the traditional media rather than a new medium in itself (Harder, Sevenans and Van Aelst 2017).

In their seminal study, Cohen et al. (2008) found that perceptions of Israeli parliamentarians about media power positively affect their efforts to achieve media coverage. Matthes et al. (2019) found a similar connection between perceptions and media behaviour. They showed that MPs (from Switzerland, Germany and Austria) who have more hostile perceptions of the media have less contacts with journalists. On the other hand, however, a recent study among German parliamentarians did not confirm that media perceptions correlate with politicians' strategic behaviour. Bernhard, Dohle and Vowe (2016) expected that 'parliamentarians use Facebook and Twitter more extensively when they believe that these social media tools have a strong political influence on the public, journalists, and other politicians'. Their study indicates that politicians use social media regardless of whether they expect it to have an impact on journalists or the general public. These limited and mixed findings require further investigation. Moreover, Cohen et al. measure politicians' media behaviour via just one general survey item, whereas Matthes et al. only study the effect of perceptions on contact with journalists and the study of Bernhard et al. is limited to online activities. As dis-

cussed below, we will test the relationship between perceived media power and six types of media activities. As such, we will be able to test more comprehensively whether mediatization is indeed 'driven to a large extent by politicians' perceptions that media have a powerful influence on politics' (Tsfati 2017:572).

RQ2: To what extent is strategic media behaviour connected to media appearances?

Mediatization does not only involve the adaptation of politicians' perceptions, it also implies that politicians alter their behaviour in order to gain media attention. We differ between short-term news management behaviour – actions aimed to 'immediately' affect media coverage – and long-term news management – more structural ways of accommodating to the news media logic that should improve access to the media arena. This later type of media behaviour is not related to a specific event or message, but can rather create a structural basis for success regarding politicians' direct media actions.

The short-term way for politicians to promote themselves and their agenda is through the provision of 'information subsidies' (Gandy 1982), such as organizing press conferences or other media events. These happenings make it easy and cheap for journalists to make news. While organizing press conferences requires time and effort from politicians, sending out press releases is a relatively easy method to proactively provide journalists with information (Boumans 2018). In particular, as journalists have short deadlines to provide (online) news, press releases not only provide journalists with a topic to cover, but also with the right words to do so (Jacobs 1999). As a consequence, it is no surprise that press releases are frequently and successfully used by different types of politicians across countries to promote themselves or their issue agenda (*e.g.* Gershon 2012; Kiousis et al. 2009). During the last years the toolkit to provide journalists with information subsidies has expanded. In particular, Twitter is increasingly used by politicians to reach out to their followers, but mainly to try to influence journalists (Jungherr 2014b; Parmelee 2014). According to Parmelee (2014:446), tweets have the potential to be more influential than press releases as they simultaneously reach a wide public that reacts to them and because they force journalists to follow up on the current debate. On the other hand, the extreme fast and cheap nature of this new type of information subsidy may create information overload for journalists. Nevertheless, recent studies show that tweets from (important) politicians, at least in election time, often set the agenda of both new and traditional media (Harder et al. 2017; Jungherr 2014a; Wells et al. 2016).

Besides providing journalists with information subsidies, there are various structural and organizational ways in which political parties and politicians can accommodate their behaviour to the media logic. This study focuses on three structural or long-term means of accommodating to the news media by individual representatives. First, politicians can ask their personnel to manage and respond to the mass media. Although having professional support to deal with the media is hardly the norm for European politicians, previous research found that having a spokesperson increases the chance of having frequent contacts with journalists (Van Aelst et al. 2010).

Second, individual politicians can follow media trainings to increase their knowledge of how the media work and how they should respond to journalists. Little is known about this practice of media adaptation. We know that political parties in countries such as the United Kingdom, Sweden and Norway started offering media training to their political candidates in the 1970s, as part of their effort to professionalize their media strategy (Allern 2011; Negrine and Lilleker 2002). During media training, politicians can learn how to behave more in line with media logic and formats by, for instance, providing journalists with sharp sound bites. Compared with early media coaching, modern media training increasingly teaches politicians how to be proactive and how to use the media for their own objectives (Rosenbaum 2016). Finally, having frequent contact with journalists can be an important tactic for politicians to influence media coverage (*see e.g.* Gans 1980; Nimmo and Geyer 2014). Although both politicians and journalists often publically complain about each other, behind the scenes they routinely keep on working in good understanding and cooperation (Kumar and Jones 2005). For politicians these interactions can lead to a cooperative context that can improve their chances to pass the media gates.

3 Data and Methods

We use three types of data in this article: surveys with politicians, politicians' external communications and news media data. All external communications and news media data were gathered during one year. The research period for the data gathering was from 1 July 2017 until 30 June 2018, only for television news the data were gathered from 1 January 2017 until 31 December 2017. The survey data collection was part of a larger project for which a series of interviews with politicians were conducted between March and July 2018. The representatives were interviewed by a team of trained and experienced researchers who visited them in their Brussels offices. We contacted the entire population of Belgian Dutch-speaking MPs holding office at the federal level or at the regional level of Flanders. In total, 153 out of the population of 212 politicians participated, leading to a response rate of 72%.[1] This is very high for elite research (*see e.g.* Deschouwer and Depauw 2014 for a study among MPs in 15 countries, with response rates ranging between 13 and 43%). 142 politicians answered all questions that are used in this study. We use the surveys in order to measure politicians' perceptions of media importance and their long-term media strategies (*see below*).

3.1 Perceptions of Media Importance

Politicians were asked to indicate to what extent they agree or disagree with three statements on a scale from 1 to 5 (1: totally disagree to 5: totally agree). The first statement was 'For the personal election result of a politician it is more important to influence policy than to get in the media.' (*media importance: election result)*. We reversed these scores so that high scores mean that getting in the media is more important than influencing policy for personal election results. The second state-

ment was: 'Getting in the media helps me to get a good position on the ballot list of my party' (*media importance: ballot list*). Finally, the third statement wording was: 'In order to reach voters, social media are better suited than traditional media (like radio, television and newspapers)' (*media importance: traditional media)*. Again, we reversed the scores. High scores on this variable now mean that traditional media are more important than social media to reach voters.[2]*See* Appendix A for the frequency distributions of the media perceptions across frontbench and backbench MPs.

3.2 Media Strategies

In order to measure politicians' short-term media strategies, we gathered three types of politicians' external communications. First, the *number of press releases* measures the total number of press releases that were sent by a politician during the one-year research period (July 2017-2018). In order to collect press releases, we subscribed to all Flemish political parties' press mailing list. For each politician we calculate the number of press releases that he or she sent out. During the research period, 17% of the MPs in our sample did not send out any press releases, 35% distributed between one and three, 33% spread three to ten and 15% sent out more than ten press releases. The second indicator of short-term strategic media communication is the *number of press events*. This variable measures the number of press events or media happenings that were held by a politician. Media events were collected via the agenda of Belga, the Belgian press agency. Every agenda event in which a politician of the sample was mentioned was incorporated in the data set. Media events that were announced via politicians' press mailing lists (*see* above) were coded as press events as well. Almost two thirds of MPs (64%) were not part of a press event or media happening, 25% of the MPs organized one or two press conferences and only 8% arranged three or more. Third, the variable *number of tweets* measures the total number of tweets that were sent by a politician during the one-year research period. Retweets are not included in this measure. We divide the number of tweets by 100 to make sure that potential effects are observable in our regression analyses. Although sending tweets requires little effort, ten politicians do not have a Twitter account or did not tweet any message. More than a fifth (22%) sent between one and 50 tweets (less than one per week on average), 39% of the politicians tweets between one and five times a week, while 32% sent more than 250 tweets.

There are some important differences between frontbench and backbench MPs when it comes to providing these three types of information subsidies. *See* Appendix B for the distributions of these variables across backbench and frontbench MPs.

The variables to measure more structural or long-term media behaviour were gathered via the surveys with politicians. First, we asked 'How many full-time personal employees do you have? Please fill in the total percentage points, where 50% means you have one half-time employee, and where 200% means you have two full-time employees'. When the answer was higher than '0', we asked: 'What percentage of the working hours of these employees is allocated to external communication and contacts with the media?' Using both questions, we calculate the

total time of a politician's employee(s) that goes to external communication and contacts with the media (*employees media time*). Most MPs have only one employee that can devote a (small) part of his or her time to media communication. For a third of the politicians, not more than 10 hours of their employees' work time is devoted to media affairs. Six per cent say that it consumes 50 hours or more of their employees' time. Second, in order to measure the frequency of politicians' *contact with journalists* we asked: 'Think about an average month during the political year. How often per month do you personally have contact with a political journalist (both formally and informally)?' We recoded some outliers on this variable to a maximum of 25 contacts per month. Again, the variation between MPs is very outspoken: 35% of the MPs say they informally or formally have contact maximum two times a month while 21% have contact with journalists ten times or more per month. This variation is partly related to the position of the MP (*see* Appendix C). Third, we asked politicians about the number of times they had *media training*: 'How often did you personally have media training?' Twelve per cent of the MPs indicated that they never had media training. A large group (42%) received media training once or twice and 6% said they had media trainings more than four times. We recoded some outliers on this variable to a maximum of ten media trainings.

3.3 Media Appearances

In order to measure the presence of these politicians in the news, we gathered three different news media data: television news, print newspaper articles and online news articles. For appearances in television news we are grateful to the Electronic News Archive (ENA) that collects and codes all evening newscasts of the two main Flemish broadcasters: the public broadcaster (VRT) and the commercial channel (VTM). We count for each politician the number of times he or she appeared in a newscast (*television news appearances*) during one year – including both speaking and non-speaking appearances. Furthermore, via the Belgian 'Gopress' search engine (www.gopress.be), all print newspaper articles in which one or more politicians were mentioned were gathered. A Python script was used to automatically gather all articles of the seven most important Flemish newspapers (De Standaard, De Morgen, De Tijd, Het Laatste Nieuws, Het Nieuwsblad, Gazet van Antwerpen and Het Belang van Limburg). The data was used to count the total number of print newspaper articles in which each politician was mentioned (*newspaper appearances*). Online news was gathered by scraping four times a day all the articles that appeared on the relevant RSS feeds of eight news websites: vrt.be, knack.be, destandaard.be, demorgen.be, hln.be, nieuwsblad.be, gva.be and hbvl.be. All these websites are linked to offline media since Flanders does not have substantial online-only news media. Only the articles that were available without a subscription for these media outlets were selected. We take the total number of online articles in which a politician was mentioned to measure *online news appearances*. *See* Appendix D for the frequency distributions of these three variables.

3.4 Regression Analyses and Control Variables

To answer RQ1, we analyse the effects of perceptions of media importance on strategic media behaviour. We run six regressions, one for each measure of a politician's media behaviour (three short term and three long term). RQ2 deals with the effect of media behaviour on appearances in news media. We run three regressions as we have three measures of media attention. All dependent variables of these nine regressions are count data with overdispersion: the conditional variances exceed the conditional means. We therefore use negative binomial regressions. Negative binomial regressions have an extra parameter to model the overdispersion. The distributions of the variables – and their mean and variance scores – can be found in Appendices B-D.

In our analyses, we account for several characteristics of the politicians that might influence their relationship with the media. First and foremost, we expect that political status matters. Therefore, we differ between regular MPs or so-called backbench MPs (0), and more important, *frontbench MPs* (1): commission chairs, former ministers and state secretaries, and present or former party (floor) leaders and speakers of parliament. Our sample contains 94 backbench and 48 frontbench MPs. Second, we control for whether a politician is part of an opposition party (0) or of a party in government (1) (*member government party)*. Third, we account for the *number of preference votes* a politician got in the previous elections, as a proxy for how well known a politician is. Because candidates participate in different electoral constituencies with different numbers of voters, the potential number of preference votes a politician can receive varies. We therefore divide the number of preference votes by the total number of preferential votes cast in a district. We also code the representatives' political position in parliament. Finally, as we know that media attention for female and male politicians can differ (Tresch 2009; Vos 2013), we add *sex* as a control variable: male (0), female (1).

4 Results

4.1 Research Question 1

Our first research question is: To what extent is the communication behaviour of politicians connected to their views on the influence of the news media? We start by looking at some descriptive results of politicians' perceptions of the importance of media coverage. Overall, and in line with previous research, parliamentarians strongly believe in the power of the media (*see* Appendix A). Interestingly, the statement politicians most widely agree upon (73%) is that getting in the media helps them to get a good position on the ballot list of their party. A similar – yet less outspoken – picture arises regarding the effect of media presence on personal election results. Almost seven out of ten (68%) politicians think that it is more important to get in the media to gain votes than to influence policy. Politicians' opinions are more dispersed when it comes to the power of traditional media versus social media: about one out of four (27%) neither agrees nor disagrees with this statement, four out of ten (40%) are convinced that social media

are better suited to reach voters while a third (33%) of the representatives believe that traditional media are still the best way to get to citizens. There are no important differences between frontbench and backbench MPs when it comes to perceptions of media importance.

Table 1 *Negative binomial regressions to explain strategic media behaviour (N = 142)*

	Model A Press releases		Model B Press events		Model C Tweets		Model D Emp. media time		Model E Contact Journalists		MODEL F Media training	
	Coef.	**S.E.**	**Coef.**	**S.E.**	**Coef.**	**S.E.**	**Coef.**	**S.E.**	**Coef.**	**S.E.**	**Coef.**	**S.E.**
Media importance: election result	0.204	0.114	0.308	0.192	**0.363****	**0.114**	**–0.167***	**0.083**	–0.077	0.071	**–0.160***	**0.071**
Media importance: ballot list	0.024	0.121	–0.302	0.197	0.162	0.118	–0.097	0.089	0.004	0.078	**0.217****	**0.083**
Media importance: traditional media	–0.068	0.102	0.098	0.169	–0.137	0.097	0.012	0.076	0.096	0.065	–0.033	0.066
Member government party	–0.024	0.218	**–0.690***	**0.340**	–0.183	0.206	**0.419***	**0.163**	–0.220	0.137	–0.020	0.142
Frontbench MP	**0.562****	**0.213**	**1.449*****	**0.335**	–0.005	0.207	**0.328***	**0.159**	**0.583*****	**0.133**	0.232	0.138
# Preference votes	–0.005	3.041	5.741	4.620	**6.334***	**2.634**	3.929	2.173	**3.492***	**1.752**	0.016	1.931
Sex (female)	0.096	0.203	–0.364	0.346	**–0.455***	**0.200**	0.147	0.150	**–0.331***	**0.132**	**–0.319***	**0.136**
Intercept	0.864	0.646	–0.616	1.082	–0.456	0.641	3.535***	0.475	1.660	0.411	0.881*	0.424
Log-likelihood (df) Log-likelihood empty model (df)	–397.397 (9) (–402.794 (2))		–173.133 (9) (–191.549 (2))		–297.144 (9) (–310.2321 (2))		–586.586 (9) (–597.9412 (2))		–371.964 (9) (–392.9596 (2))		–282.170 (9) (–290.5338 (2))	
AIC AIC empty model	8.12.795 (809.587)		364.267 (387.098)		612.289 (624.464)		1,191.173 (1,199.882)		761.929 (789.919)		582.339 (585.068)	
BIC BIC empty model	839.397 (815.499)		390.869 (393.009)		638.891 (630.376)		1,217.775 (1,205.794)		788.531 (795.831)		608.942 (590.979)	
Theta (S.E.)	0.870 (0.792)		0.479 (0.229)		1.225 (0.935)		1.448 (1.234)		2.897 (1.891)		5.340 (3.850)	

Notes: * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001

The question now is to what extent politicians' perceptions of media power can help to explain strategic media behaviour. Are politicians who perceive the media to be powerful also more active in their media efforts? In short, the answer is not much. Table 1 shows regressions with the six different forms of media behaviour as the dependent variables. None of the three media perceptions correlate with the number of press releases nor with the number of press conferences (Models A and B). The number of tweets (Model C) is slightly influenced by the perceived importance of news media for personal election results. The same statement has small negative effects on employees' media time and media training (Models D and F). This seems to suggest that the media's perceived influence on electoral success is linked to more short-term social media behaviour and to somewhat less investments in more long-term strategies. These rather limited correlations contrast with the much more outspoken relationship with the position of the MP. Frontbench MPs are much more active in their communication strategy towards the media: they send more press releases, organize more press events, ask for more media support from their employee(s) and have much more frequent contacts with journalists. The individual electoral capital of a parliamentarian, measured by the number of preferential votes, also matters to some extent. Popular politicians tweet more and have more frequent contacts with journalists. Overall, the differences between government and opposition MPs are limited, and gender differences are modest as well with female politicians being slightly less active on several forms of strategic media behaviour. In sum, differences in politicians' perceptions of the importance of the news media are only slightly correlated with the differences between politicians' media efforts. Politicians who think traditional news media are more important to reach voters than social media, and who think news media are important to get re-elected and to gain a high position on the ballot list, are not necessarily more active in their strategic media behaviour.

Table 2 *Negative binomial regressions to explain appearances in various media (N = 142)*

	Model A Television		Model B Newspapers		Model C Online news	
	Coef.	**S.E.**	**Coef.**	**S.E.**	**Coef.**	**S.E.**
# Press releases	0.019	0.014	0.016	0.009	0.009	0.011
# Press events	**0.083***	**0.042**	**0.074****	**0.027**	**0.095****	**0.032**
# Tweets	0.030	0.031	0.017	0.019	**0.053***	**0.022**
Employees media time	0.004	0.005	–0.002	0.003	0.001	0.003
Media training	–0.072	0.053	–0.051	0.031	–0.019	0.037
Contact with journalists	**0.062****	**0.023**	**0.44****	**0.014**	**0.049****	**0.017**
Member government party	–0.471	0.243	–0.156	0.148	**–0.430***	**0.173**
Frontbench MP	**0.705****	**0.267**	**0.544*****	**0.161**	0.361	0.190
# Preference votes	1.006	3.351	1.814	2.001	1.608	2.348
Sex (female)	**–0.688****	**0.251**	**–0.400****	**0.143**	–0.141	0.167
Intercept	0.608	0.308	3.449***	0.187	3.504***	0.220
Log-likelihood (df) Log-likelihood empty model (df)	–294.141 (12) (–329.036 (2))		–657.791 (12) (–700.879 (2))		–687.4491 (12) (–727.246 (2))	
AIC AIC empty model	612.281 (662.072)		1,339.582 (1,405.757)		1,398.898 (1,458.492)	
BIC BIC empty model	647.751 (667.984)		1,375.052 (1,411.669)		1,434.368 (1,464.404)	
Theta (S.E.)	0.857 (0.169)		1.805 (0.216)		1.284 (0.150)	

Notes: * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001

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4.2 Research Question 2

The second, subsequent research question of this study was: To what extent is behavioural adaptation to the news media logic connected to media access? In order to answer this question, we again run regression analyses (*see* Table 2) and investigate whether politicians' appearances in television news, print newspapers and online news are correlated with their media efforts. In order to interpret effect sizes, we will report in the text predicted probabilities while keeping other variables at representative values.

First of all, the regression results show that sending out press releases is not significantly correlated with media attention. Yet, organizing press conferences and media happenings does help to gain media visibility. Predicted probabilities indicate that politicians who organized no press conferences on average had 30 newspaper, 28 online and 1.4 TV appearances, while politicians who organized two events were covered in 35 newspaper articles, 33 online articles and 1.8 television newscasts. Hence, holding a press conference does pay off. Sending out tweets is linked to media attention as well. Yet, interestingly, Twitter only affects visibility on online media. A tweet is easily picked up by online news editors who need to make their stories fast; they can use the tweets of politicians to construct their news items. In line with previous studies, these tweets often do not remain part of the 'printed' news story the next day (Paulussen and Harder 2014). Politicians who sent about one tweet per week (50 tweets during the year) averagely appeared in 26 online news articles. The ones who tweet double as often appeared in 27 articles. Only rather active tweeters really feel the difference: the ones who tweet every day (350 during one year) were on average mentioned in 31 articles (predicted probabilities based on Model C).

The more long-term investments of politicians in news management seem to pay off a bit less. Investing in media training is not positively related to media attention, and we even find a negative effect on television appearances. Having an employee who devotes more time to dealing with the press also does not increase a politician's media visibility. The only structural media activity that matters is more frequent contacts with journalists. The fact that having regular contact with the people who make the news matters is not surprising. However, this variable might also be a consequence rather than the cause of media visibility. Politicians who often appear in the media meet journalists more regularly. This is partly confirmed by the positive effects of frontbench MPs on media appearances. Nevertheless, there is an effect even when controlling for the difference between frontbench and backbench MPs, which suggests that backbench MPs who have close contacts with journalists can benefit from this. Contact with a journalist once per month results on average in 1.4 appearances on television, 27 mentions in newspapers and 24 in online articles per year. Representatives who formally or informally have contact four times per month averagely appear 1.6 times on television, 31 times in the newspapers and 28 times online.

Finally, we control for the characteristics of the politicians. First, it is striking that the results for online media attention mirror the results for appearances on television and in print newspapers. While the position of a politician has a substantive effect on his or her offline coverage, this does not matter for online

media. Similarly and in line with previous studies, female politicians are significantly less represented on TV and in newspapers, but they do not have a disadvantage on news websites. At the same time, politicians from opposition parties have an advantage online compared to government party members. The lower online attention for government MPs is probably a form of compensation for the vast media presence of their party members who are part of the cabinet as ministers and state secretaries (*see also* Van Aelst et al., 2008). As such, news websites are more egalitarian than television news and newspapers. It is a place where traditionally 'weaker' politicians can take the stage as well.

5 Conclusion and Discussion

In general, scholars agree that the world of politics is getting ever more mediatized and that political actors have adapted to the media and its logic. However, there is less agreement on the extent to which politicians' attempts to influence the media are related with their perceptions of media influence (RQ1) and how strategic communication behaviour is linked to politicians' access to the media arena (RQ2). Using an actor approach, focusing on the individual perceptions of politicians and their personal media behaviour, we addressed both questions.

First, our study showed that perceptions about the political influence of the news media are not strongly connected with politicians' behaviour. Their position in parliament seems much more relevant than their beliefs to explain the use of six forms of strategic communication. Not so much what they think about the media, but rather their political position determines how they try to access the media arena. How can this be explained? Some mediatization scholars might argue that the reason for this is that mediatization is hard to measure via traditional empirical research because it is a meta process that transcends discernible media effects at the individual level (Schulz 2004). Dealing with the media has become a natural part of politics for politicians, so much interwoven with their daily work that it has become hard to distinguish their perceptions of the media from their overall view of political reality. This line of reasoning finds some concrete support in our data. The lack of influence of perceptions might partly be explained by the relative strong agreement among MPs that attracting media attention is crucial for their political career. A large majority of politicians are convinced that media attention is relevant to convince both voters and party elites. Yet, if the lack of variance is the main explanation, the statement about social media being more important to reach voters than the traditional media should have explanatory power, as the perceptions of MPs vary considerably on this matter. However, we find that these varying views have no influence on media behaviour, not even on politicians' use of Twitter. This might be due to the fact that Twitter is mainly used by politicians to reach journalists, rather than the general public. In other words, the hybrid nature of the media landscape (Chadwick 2013), blending new and old media, might also make it hard to find an effect of media perceptions on politician's media efforts.

Second, we studied how different forms of strategic media behaviour have an impact on politicians' appearances in the news. Overall, we can conclude that investing in strategic communication works, even when controlling for political position and the number of preference votes. Providing journalists with different types of information subsidies has a significant effect on the number of times a politician is mentioned in the news. Organizing press events, something which is done mainly by frontbench MPs, leads to more coverage on all types of news media platforms. Using Twitter is only beneficial to influence the coverage of news websites. In contrast to these forms of 'short-term' news management, more structural long-term forms of news management proved less relevant. Following media training and having more support from an employee in dealing with the media does not contribute to personal media attention. These findings seem to indicate that professionalizing your media skills and media support is not directly connected to your media success. This is in line with the idea that media popularity might be more related to personal characteristics that are not easy to obtain (nor measure) such as politicians' charisma, rhetoric qualities or energy level (*e.g.* Sheafer 2001). Having more frequent personal contacts with journalists, however, seems to pay off. Interacting with journalists leads to more coverage, but is probably also partly a consequence of appearing in the news more regularly.

This last finding brings us back to the causal relationship between media perceptions, media behaviour and media access. We started from the idea that perceptions are correlated with behaviour, and that this behaviour in turn is connected to access. We found fairly strong proof for the second relationship, but little for the first. The fact that contacts with journalists can be as much a result of media access as a cause also makes us cautious for strong causal claims. Detangling the virtuous interaction between visibility in the news and contacts with news makers requires more in-depth studies. Further studies could also go beyond the frequency of media attention and include tone or sentiment of the coverage. In addition, studying the concrete issues that were dominating the news might contribute to explain why some politicians did better in terms of media attention than others (*e.g.* Wolfsfeld and Sheafer 2006).

Despite these shortcomings, we believe our actor-centred approach helps to push the mediatization literature in a more empirical direction with more attention for the contingency of media effects. While scholars generally assume there is a direct link between perceptions of media power and politicians' activities to get into the news media, our results do not support this assumption. In line with Bernhard and colleagues (2016), we believe other factors such as the political position of a politician is much strongly linked to media behaviour than mere perceptions. More generally, this refers to the importance of taking into account the political context when studying mediatization. Although MPs are a fairly homogeneous group of politicians, differentiating between frontbench and backbench members matters: they use different strategies to influence the news, strengthening the unequal access to the media arena. Simultaneously, however, strategic communication behaviour does not only bear fruit for frontbench MPs but for backbench parliamentarians as well. In particular for online news media, the

political status of the politician seems to matter less, and can therefore be a way for ordinary MPs to compete in the skewed competition for media attention.

Finally, we reflect on the generalization of our findings. The characteristics of the Belgian multiparty system, characterized by strong political parties, probably limit the demand for active news management, in particular for individual politicians. Furthermore, the resources Belgian politicians have to invest in news management are limited. These factors can explain the relatively low number of Belgian politicians that have full-time media employees and the fact that very few Belgian politicians frequently organize press events. This is quite different from the media practice of individual legislators in larger majoritarian systems such as the United Kingdom or the United States (Brown 2011). However, we do think that our main finding that political position trumps media perceptions travels across the board. The structural differences between politicians with a different political status in both their dealing with the media as their media attention have become a consistent finding in the literature. Our study confirms that the relatively small differences between politicians in parliament can also explain to a large extent how they relate and adapt to different old and new media. This finding also proves that using an actor-centred approach is insightful and adds to the mediatization literature by stressing the contingency of media adaptation by individual political actors.

Notes

1 The population consists of 212 members of parliament as the Flemish parliament has 124 members and there are 88 Dutch-speaking parliamentarians at the federal level.
2 The three perception variables cannot be used to create one scale. Cronbach's alpha of this scale is only 0.35.

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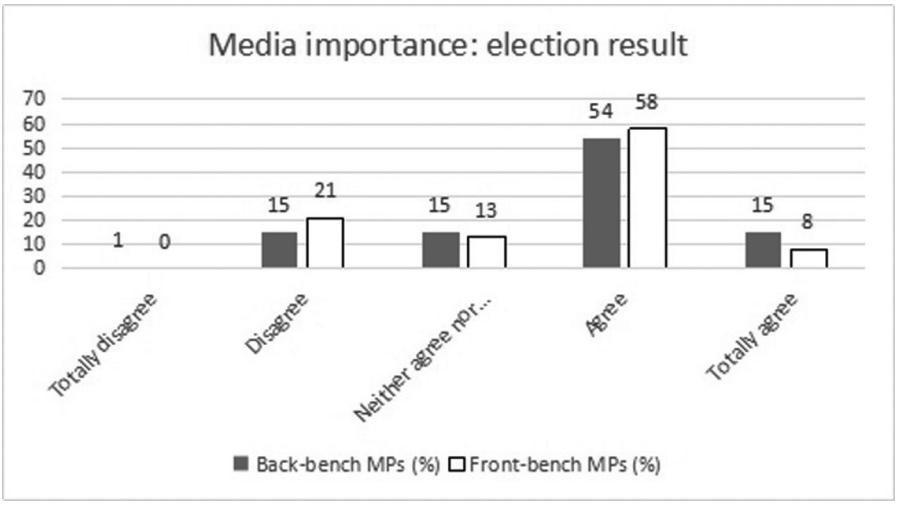
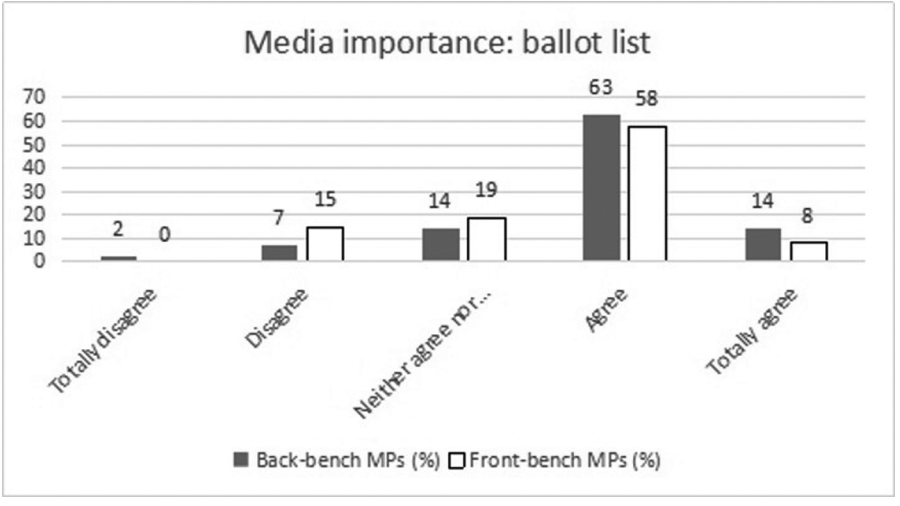
Appendix A. Frequency distributions (%) of perceptions of media importance across back-bench (N=94) and front-bench MPs (N=48)





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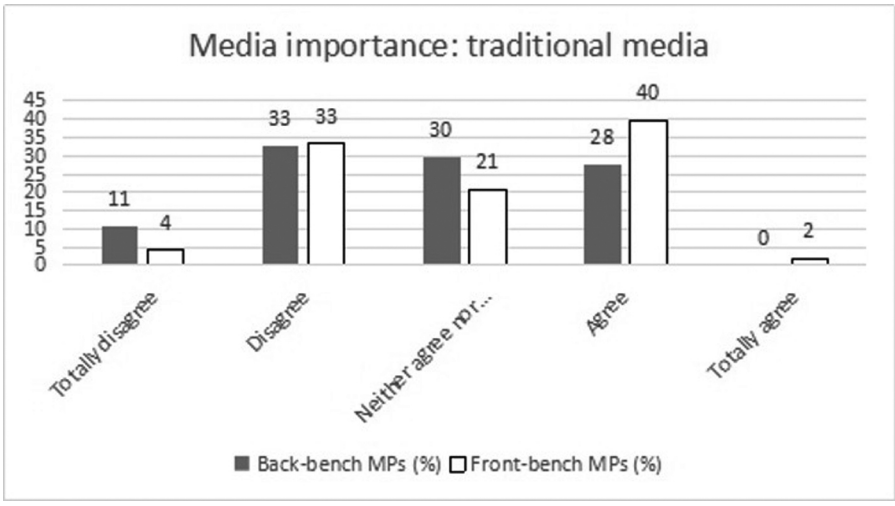
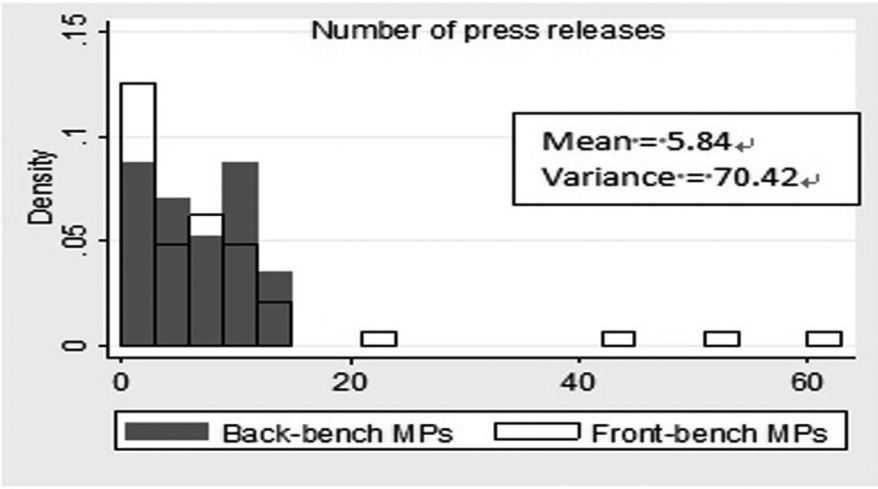
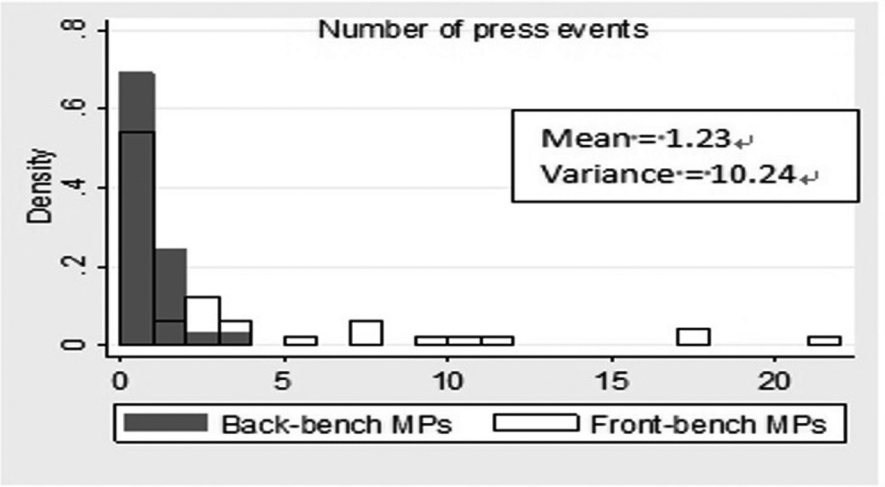
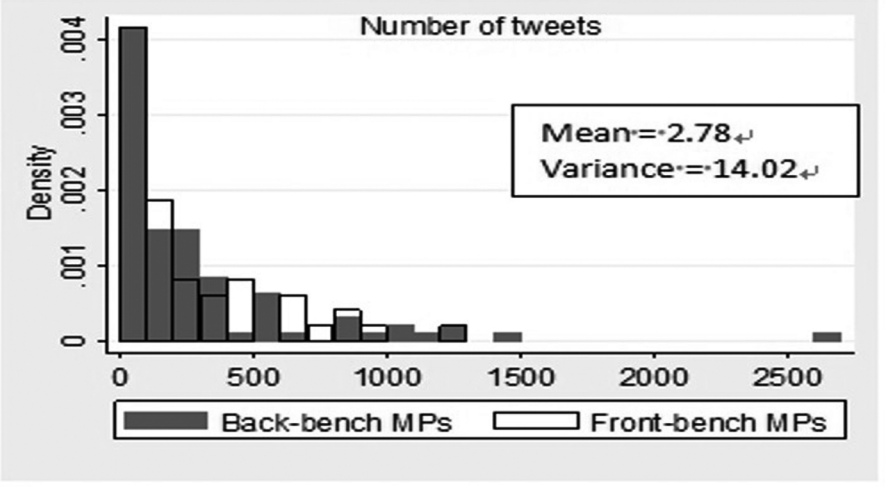


Appendix B. Distributions of press releases, press events and tweets across backbench (N=94) and frontbench MPs (N=48)







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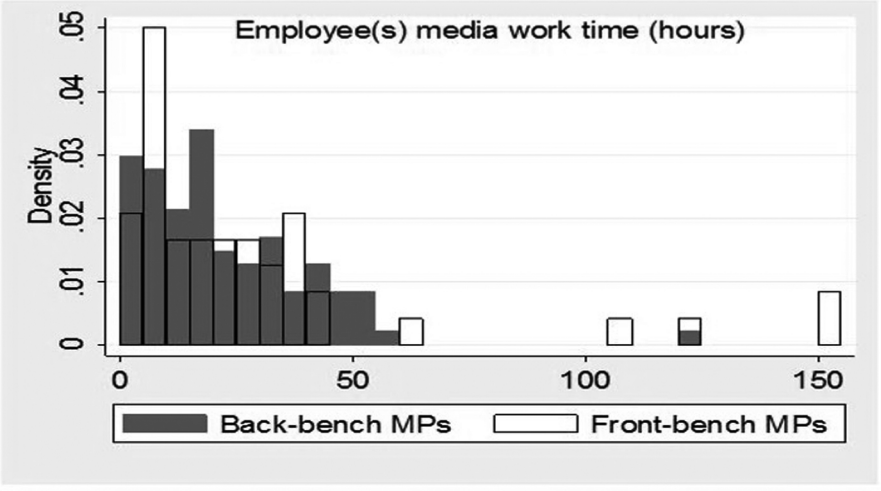
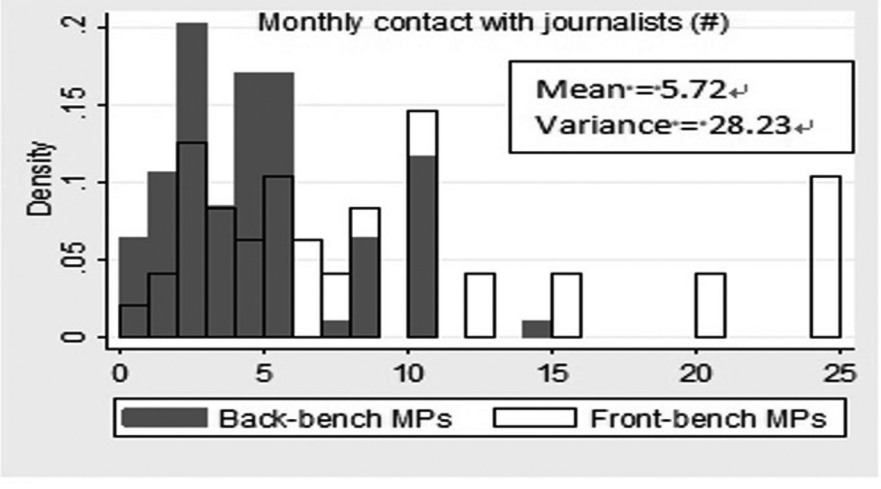
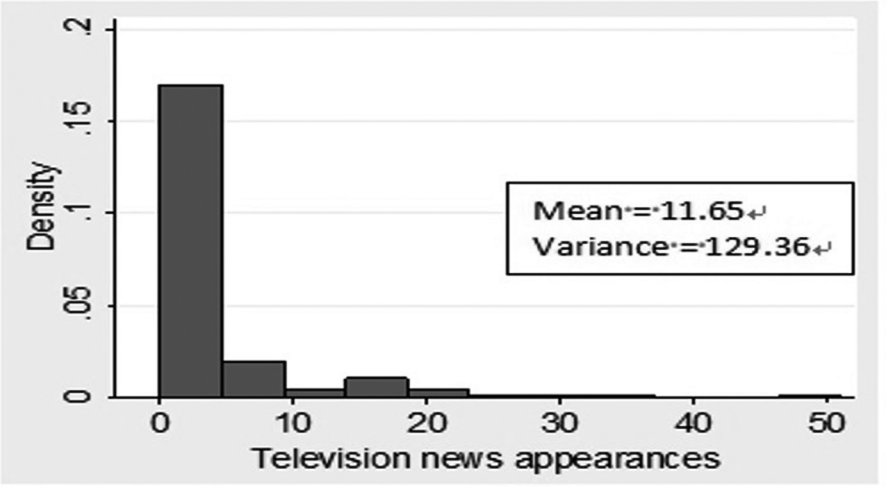
Appendix C. Distributions for media training, employees' media work time and contact with journalists across backbench (N=94) and frontbench MPs (N=48)





Appendix D. Distributions of appearances in television news, print newspapers and news websites (N=142)



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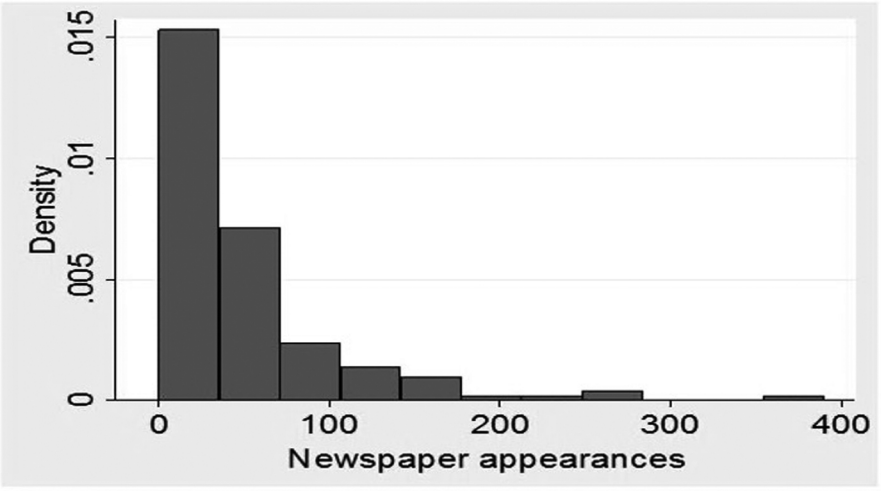
Density
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.005
.01
.015
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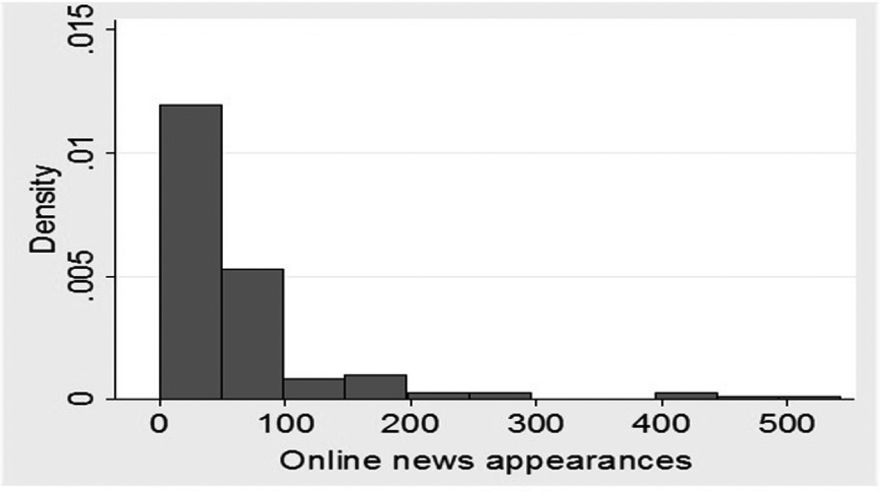
100
200
300
400
Newspaper appearances


Density
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.01
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0
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200
300
400
500
Online news appearances

Interest Representation in Belgium

Mapping the Size and Diversity of an Interest Group Population in a Multi-layered Neo-corporatist Polity[*]

Evelien Willems, Jan Beyers & Frederik Heylen[**]

Abstract

This article assesses the size and diversity of Belgium's interest group population by triangulating four data sources. Combining various sources allows us to describe which societal interests get mobilised, which interest organisations become politically active and who gains access to the policy process and obtains news media attention. Unique about the project is the systematic data collection, enabling us to compare interest representation at the national, Flemish and Francophone-Walloon government levels. We find that: (1) the national government level remains an important venue for interest groups, despite the continuous transfer of competences to the subnational and European levels, (2) neo-corporatist mobilisation patterns are a persistent feature of interest representation, despite substantial interest group diversity and (3) interest mobilisation substantially varies across government levels and political-administrative arenas.

Keywords: interest groups, advocacy, access, advisory councils, media attention.

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1 Introduction

Interest groups are important players in democracies, as they provide crucial linkages between the state and society. Basic questions on interest groups concern who gets mobilised, who is politically active and who enjoys access to the policy process and/or gains media attention. These questions all pertain to whether systems of interest representation are biased or rather diverse. Interest group scholars usually conceive of a biased system of interest representation as lacking diversity and where access and influence are skewed towards a small number of well-resourced interests, especially economic interests (Lowery et al., 2015). Many domestic systems, as well as the European system of interest representation, have been found to be characterised by bias in various policymaking arenas and the news media (Binderkrantz, 2012; Binderkrantz et al., 2015; Bunea, 2017; De Bruycker & Beyers, 2015; Lowery & Gray, 2004; Rasmussen & Gross, 2015; Schlozman et al., 2012). Similarly, in Belgium, scholars have observed a bias towards a limited number of privileged, mostly economic, interests that gain regular access to the policy process and receive media attention, while many interest groups enjoy no or only limitedly access. In short, interest representation in Belgium is characterised by a strong core-periphery dynamic (Beyers et al., 2014a; Fraussen et al., 2015; Fraussen & Wouters, 2015; Verschuere & De Corte, 2014).

Although representational bias in Belgium is often linked to neo-corporatism and consociationalism, various recent developments, including federalisation, the politicisation of domains such as migration and the environment, and growing contestation of elitist neo-corporatist practices, have challenged traditional patterns of interest representation (Beyers et al., 2014a; Fraussen & Beyers, 2015; Fraussen et al., 2017; Hooghe, 1995, 1998; Van Den Bulck, 1992). These developments may have resulted in a larger, more diverse, fragmented and competitive interest group system. Hence, it is doubtful whether traditional concepts of Belgian interest representation, such as consociationalism and neo-corporatism, still adequately characterise the overall pattern of state-society relations. After all, similar developments have also affected the Belgian party-political landscape and the overall political-administrative system (De Winter et al., 2006; Deschouwer, 2012; van der Meer et al., 2019; Van Haute & Wauters, 2019).

Studying the size and diversity of the Belgian interest group community allows us to assess the extent to which neo-corporatist patterns – such as the privileged status of economic interest organisations as core policy insiders compared to the more peripheral role of citizen groups – are still prevalent. Although the size and diversity of interest group systems at the national as well as European and international levels have been long-time concerns in the literature (for an overview, *see* Halpin & Jordan, 2012), we know relatively little about the overall system of interest representation in Belgium. In Belgium, efforts mainly focused on Flanders, while systematic research on national and Francophone organised interests has been limited (Fraussen & Beyers, 2015; Verschuere & De Corte, 2014). Moreover, while providing empirical depth and rigor, analyzing a small set of well-known organised interests – or 'usual suspects' – in one

specific arena or region does not capture the overall nature of Belgian interest group politics (Bouteca et al., 2013).

In the first section of this article, we highlight three macro-concepts characterising Belgian politics and its system of interest representation, namely neo-corporatism, consociationalism and federalism. We also discuss two factors – the politicisation of policy domains such as the environment, migration and the growing contestation of neo-corporatist practices – challenging traditional patterns of interest representation. Next, we elaborate conceptual and methodological issues concerning the mapping of interest group populations and present our datasets on Belgian organised interests. We combine data sources on mobilisation in four arenas: parliament, the executive branch, advisory councils and the news media. The third part provides a first analysis of the size and diversity of the Belgian interest group system. We find that: (1) the national government level continues to be an important venue for interest mobilisation, despite the continuous transfer of competences to the subnational and European levels; (2) neo-corporatism remains a persistent feature of interest representation, despite substantial interest group diversity; and (3) mobilisation patterns differ across government levels and political-administrative arenas. The concluding section offers some general reflections on how the systematic combination of different data sources delivers important insights into the nature of the Belgian system of interest representation.

1.1 Interest Representation in Belgium

The Belgian system of interest representation is traditionally characterised as neo-corporatist with a consociational legacy (Siaroff, 1999; Van Den Bulck, 1992). Belgian neo-corporatism entails extensive institutionalised concertation processes (*i.e.* social dialogue and advisory councils) between the government and a few business associations, labour unions and/or institutional associations (*e.g.* schools, hospitals, health insurance providers). Since the 1970s, neo-corporatist practices have spilled over from socio-economic policies to other policy domains such as environmental protection (Hooghe, 1995, 1998; Kriesi et al., 1995). These domains are also characterised by privileged access for a limited number of prominent interest groups, albeit not in the classic tripartite way of business associations and labour unions as government interlocutors (Fraussen, 2014). In other domains such as justice, foreign affairs or migration and even within the aforementioned domains, various arrangements for interest representation exist that are not or quasi-neo-corporatist in nature (van den Bulck, 1992). Hence, it might not be appropriate to characterise an entire system as neo-corporatist; instead, we need to analyze sectorial/policy domain variation in interest representation and go beyond the traditional areas of welfare state policies.

Moreover, the neo-corporatist nature of the Belgian system of interest representation is inseparable from consociationalism (Beyers et al., 2014a; Fraussen & Beyers, 2015; Van Den Bulck, 1992). This implies a cultural/religious and socio-economic ideological segmentation into so-called 'pillars', pacifying Belgium's main political cleavages. The Christian, socialist and liberal pillars represent(ed) dense organisational networks, with strong ties to their respective political par-

ties. The combination of neo-corporatism and consociationalism often involves reaching consensus on policies between the various peak associations, each tied to a pillar. This pillarisation has coincided with extensive government patronage, since pillar organisations were and still are strongly involved in the formulation and implementation of welfare state policies (*i.e.* providing unemployment benefits and health care reimbursements).

However, consociational practices gradually declined since the 1990s due to decreasing representativeness of peak associations – because of declining membership, internal heterogeneity – and/or the delaying effect on public policymaking that extensive consultation of peak associations produces. Whereas in the heyday of corporatism, interest intermediation relied on the peak associations' ability to align and appease their members in exchange for political concessions and/or funding, this has shifted as members of peak associations increasingly bypass their organisation and lobby the government directly (Grote et al., 2008; Kriesi et al., 2006). Moreover, multiple more specialised interest organisations which focus on issues more closely tied to narrow constituencies have been established. In sum, the tension between acting upon the membership interests and reaching political compromises is nowadays much more prevalent; this has put corporatist and consociational practices under strain.

Currently, consociationalism is predominantly applied to pacify the language cleavage, for instance through language parity requirements and the devolution of competences from the national to the subnational entities. Devolution has resulted in substantial interest group communities at different government levels (Fraussen, 2014; Keating & Wilson, 2014). On the one hand, the growing scope and volume of regional government activities triggered organised interests to mobilise at the subnational level. On the other hand, regional governments themselves actively stimulated a system of interest representation by subsidising regionally based organisations and establishing a system of advisory councils. The devolution dynamic also resulted in organised interests splitting up along linguistic lines and/or creating separate 'branches' in each subnational entity (Celis et al., 2012; Fobé et al., 2010; Fraussen, 2014; Heylen & Willems, 2019; Keating & Wilson, 2014; Verschuere & De Corte, 2014). At the same time, neo-corporatism and consociationalism have impacted subnational interest representation profoundly; neo-corporatist practices, initially applied at the national level, were mimicked at the regional level, making peak associations to still play a prominent role at the regional level.

However, traditional modes of interest representation are increasingly put under pressure. More specifically, the 'permanent conflicts of interest' frequently deadlock concertation at the national level, especially in a context of social policy retrenchment (Arcq et al., 2010; Van Gyes et al., 2017). This has fueled, as in other countries, political contestation over presumably 'elitist' (neo-corporatist and consociational) practices; populist discourses using an anti-establishment rhetoric found its way into Belgian party politics (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Pauwels, 2011; van den Berg et al., 2014). The de-politicisation of (*old* socio-economic, linguistic and religious) cleavages by institutionalising them into the political system and applying principles of 'grand coalitions' and power sharing

ultimately fed the emergence of populist criticism (Deschouwer, 2012). Regarding interest representation, this has induced a shift from behind-the-door corporatism to the 'primacy of politics'. In recent years, for instance, parties at all government levels have tried to decrease the involvement of organised interests in various policy domains, sought to limit the proliferation of advisory councils and implemented budget cuts in various subsidy programs (Fobé et al., 2013; Heylen & Willems, 2019). Moreover, the 'mediatisation' of public policymaking constrains corporatist interlocutors to negotiate and produce compromises behind 'closed doors' (Häusermann et al., 2004; Kriesi, 2006).

Finally, due to the politicisation – *i.e.* increased public salience and intensified party–political conflict – and the widening scope of interest mobilisation tied to policy domains such as migration, justice and the environment, patterns of interest representation have changed (Fraussen, 2014; Hooghe, 1998; Kriesi et al., 1995). As in other European countries, multiple citizen groups became mobilised on 'new politics' issues not covered by the traditional corporatist interlocutors (*see also* Binderkrantz et al., 2016; Kriesi et al., 1995). This has resulted in a more diverse and fragmented set of organised interests seeking access to policymaking processes and the news media. Hence, business associations and labour unions, the principal interlocutors of governments in neo-corporatist systems, might no longer be each other's sole competitors to gain access and influence.

In short, as in other small European neo-corporatist countries, corporatist and consociational patterns of interest representation are increasingly put under pressure (Binderkrantz & Christiansen, 2015; Christiansen et al., 2018; Häusermann et al., 2004; Rommetvedt et al., 2013). However, at this moment we lack systematic data on the extent to which the composition of the Belgian interest group population still corresponds with these traditional patterns of interest representation, or that, due to federalisation, societal and political constraints (such as anti-elitist attitudes) or opportunities (such as growing politicisation of certain policy areas), the overall pattern of interest representation has become more diverse and fragmented.

1.2 Defining and Mapping Interest Group Populations

One important challenge for answering these questions concerns the conceptualisation of interest groups and its implications for mapping group populations. A commonly used definition of organised interests includes three criteria: (1) being organised, (2) aiming to influence public policy and (3) achieving political goals through informal and formal political engagements outside the electoral arena (Beyers et al., 2008). The latter component sets interest groups apart from parties; typically, interest groups do not seek office through elections like parties but try to achieve their goals through formal (*e.g.* advisory councils) or informal engagements with policymakers.

Next, 'organised' refers to a minimal level of structural association, thus excluding broad societal movements and waves of public opinion. Some scholars emphasise the membership component or collective, constituency-based features interest organisations must have (Jordan et al., 2004). Hence, organised interests include organisations with formal members – individuals or other organisations

such as firms or institutions – as well as organisations with more informal constituencies – donors or supporters (Jordan & Maloney, 2007). These organisations advocate for enfranchised (*e.g.* the self-interest of affiliates such as companies or professional groups) and disenfranchised (*e.g.* the poor, the environment, animal rights, child protection) constituencies (Halpin, 2006).

Finally, interest organisations should show some level of political activity and articulate a collective interest; they potentially aim to influence public policies (Jordan et al., 2004). However, this criterion entails that many civil society organisations, often labelled 'service/non-profit organisations', would not be characterised as interest organisations simply because they demonstrate limited or no political activities. For instance, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) primarily focusing on development aid or national sports federations, becoming only occasionally politically active, would not be included (Halpin, 2006; Jordan et al., 2004). Yet, these organisations can play a key role in the policy process because they deliver public services (*e.g.* social welfare, youth work). As such, these latter organisations are often involved in less visible instances of advocacy, while social movement organisations (SMOs), labour unions, business associations and citizen groups are often pursuing policy influence through more visible advocacy tactics.

Depending on which conceptual component is emphasised, interest group scholars tend to apply two kinds of data collection strategies for mapping interest group populations, focusing either on behavioral (advocacy or lobbying for policy influence) or on organisational aspects (mobilising a constituency) (Berkhout et al., 2018). First, a frequently used approach by scholars emphasising organisational aspects is called 'bottom-up mapping'. These scholars are mostly interested in varying levels of collective action, the density and diversity of interest group communities and how organisational entities are established. Typical data sources are directories and encyclopedia of organisations. This approach has been used for mapping transnational advocacy, as well as interest group communities at the national level (Berkhout et al., 2015, 2017; Fraussen & Halpin, 2016; Hanegraaff et al., 2011, 2015; Wonka et al., 2010, 2018). The extent to which groups are politically active is not a central criterion for mapping a community. Irrespective of their involvement (and interest) in policymaking processes, all organisations having a collective supporter or membership component are included in the mapping effort. This inclusive and broad mapping is occasionally followed by a survey among the identified interest groups focusing on organisational characteristics and general tendencies in advocacy strategies and/or influence (Hanegraaff et al., 2016; Heylen et al., 2018).

Second, studies focusing on the behavioral component of interest representation tend to prefer a top-down mapping strategy. Interest organisations are identified through their participation in specific policymaking processes. Examples are studies using the US state lobby registration rolls or all interest groups registered at the German Bundestag (Klüver & Zeidler, 2019; Lowery & Gray, 1995, 2004), lists of organisations attending political events such as global diplomatic conferences (Hanegraaff et al., 2015), organisations participating in public consultations, parliamentary hearings, advisory bodies (Bunea, 2017; Fraussen et al.,

2015; Pedersen et al., 2015; Rasmussen, 2015) and organisations appearing in the news media (Binderkrantz, 2012; Binderkrantz et al., 2017a; De Bruycker & Beyers, 2015). These data sources are particularly suited to study advocacy strategies and influence tied to specific policy dossiers (Berkhout et al., 2018; Beyers et al., 2014b). Compared to bottom-up mapping, the threshold for inclusion is relatively high, as organisations only weakly or not involved in policymaking processes, or engaged with policymakers through other or less visible venues and channels, are usually filtered out. Hence, a top-down mapping mostly identifies organisations visibly advocating on specific policies, but it does not necessarily lead to a valid and comprehensive estimate of the extent to which particular societal segments have been able to establish interest organisations and overcome their collective action problems.

This distinction affects the conceptual boundaries of interest group populations. A behavioral focus might underestimate the size of an interest group population, as scholars mostly focus on groups demonstrating significant political activities. An organisational approach, by comparison, focusing on the mobilisation of constituencies, also has some limits, as it is not immediately clear to what extent organisations effectively seek to influence public policy. Hence, the emphasised component of the definition – political activities or organisational constituencies – strongly shapes the nature of the studied organisational population.

Our mapping of the Belgian interest group community relies on an extensive scrutiny and triangulation of multiple data sources. By combining a top-down and a bottom-up approach we seek to account for the potential limitations each specific method entails. We relied on a bottom-up registration of organisations and a survey implemented among high-level representatives (such as the director, chair, president or secretary-general) of these organisations (*see* Appendix). A distinction was made between concentrated groups representing the self-interests of well-circumscribed constituencies and diffuse groups representing broader societal segments. The former set of organisations includes professional associations (*e.g.* lawyers), business associations (*e.g.* the chemical industry) and associations representing institutions and (semi-)public authorities (*e.g.* hospitals), while the latter set of organisations includes citizen groups such as cause groups (*e.g.* consumer rights, environmental protection) and identity groups (*e.g.* youth, patients, the LGBT community, migrants), as well as constituency-based service/non-profit organisations (*e.g.* social welfare) (Baroni et al., 2014; Beyers et al., 2008, 2014b; Binderkrantz et al., 2015).

These data are combined with two top-down maps. First, we identified interest groups gaining news coverage through a content analysis related to 110 policy issues included in a 2014 voter survey (*see also* Appendix). Second, we identified groups with access to 616 advisory councils at the national and subnational levels. The latter two datasets thus include groups demonstrating a substantial level of political activity. Table 1 gives an overview of the data sources, and each of them will be discussed in the following sections in relation to some key findings. Combined, these datasets assess interest group mobilisation, involvement (*i.e.*

Table 1 Overview of datasets

Dataset	Sampling approach	Outcome	Period	Data repository
Registered interest organisations in the KBO	Bottom-up	1,678 organisations	2015	www.cigsurvey.eu
Survey of interest organisations	Bottom-up	771 survey responses	2015	www.cigsurvey.eu
Interest organisations as members of advisory councils	Top-down	616 advisory councils with 1,154 organisations	2016-2017	www.ibias.eu
Interest organisations in the news media	Top-down	110 policy issues with 247 organisations	2014-2018	www.ibias.eu

seeking contact), access (*i.e.* granted contact) and prominence (or pre-eminence) across different political arenas and government levels (for a detailed conceptual discussion, *see* Halpin & Fraussen, 2017).

2 Density and Diversity of the Belgian System of Interest Representation

2.1 A Bottom-Up Census of Belgian Interest Groups

First, we describe the demography of the Belgian interest group population based on a bottom-up mapping. The bottom-up census was primarily drawn from the *Kruispuntbank voor Ondernemingen* (Crossroads Bank for Enterprises, CBE), the official federal government register documenting the legal statuses of enterprises and organisations in Belgium. Through multiple semi-automated processes based on the NACE classification code S94 and manual operations aimed at grouping organisational conglomerates, we identified 1,461 Belgian interest organisations.[1] We supplemented this list with organisations identified through SectorLink and Filantropie.be.[2] This resulted in a set of 1,678 interest organisations. Table 2 presents this demography by group type across government levels.

First, the census delineates not one but three distinct systems of interest representation, namely at the national level, the Flemish level and the Walloon/Francophone government level.[3] Some 41% of groups are mobilised nationwide, while 35% and 24% of the groups limit their activities, respectively, to the Flemish and Walloon/Francophone government level. Second, considering the distribution of group types, an obvious observation is not only the prominence of economic interests, but also the considerable presence of non-business interests. Although business and professional groups account for 50% of the entire Belgian interest group community, a considerable share of 30% are cause groups and identity groups. The distinctiveness of the interest group communities at each government level is substantial. As Table 2 demonstrates, business interests are strongly mobilised at the national level (42% of identified groups represent business interests), while the prevalence of business is less outspoken at the subna-

tional level (18% of Flemish organisations and 13% of Walloon/Francophone groups represent business interests). Vice versa, cause groups and identity groups are especially mobilised at the subnational levels. Respectively, 18% and 15% of the organisations active in Flanders, and 18% and 24% of Francophone groups represent an identity or cause group. Hence, when looking systematically at a wide range of groups, the enormous diversity of interest groups across government levels is remarkable, which reflects the division of policy competencies in a federal setting (Fraussen, 2014; Heylen & Willems, 2019; Keating & Wilson, 2014).

To explore this diversity further, Table 3 reports the mean year of foundation, the mean staff size and the median level of financial resources across group types. The figures corroborate that the Belgian system of interest representation is characterised by substantial diversity between and within group types. For instance, labour unions are few in number (less than 5% of the population), but they mobilise a huge number of individuals (more than three million Belgian citizens are labour union members), and they trump all other group types in terms of staff and financial resources. By contrast, while business associations make up the largest share of the population and have mostly corporate members, they are characterised by relatively lower staffing levels. Interestingly, although business groups have a reputation of being well-resourced (Dür & Mateo, 2013), we also observe non-business interests possessing substantial resources. Compared to business associations, cause groups and identity groups have on average the same or an even larger capacity in terms of financial resources and staff.

To summarise, traditional neo-corporatist organisations such as business associations and labour unions are still prominent, but the contemporary Belgian interest group community also exhibits substantial diversity and signs of a more pluralist system of interest representation – *i.e.* having many different interest groups competing to get their voices heard by policymakers.

Figure 1 takes a closer look at the founding dates of the organised interests that exist today. This overview allows us to tentatively discuss the impact of major institutional and societal changes on the contemporary interest group community.[4] A first peak in the establishment of organisations is situated in the post-war period (1). This is the time the welfare state was established, incentivising the founding and growth of socio-economic interest groups playing a key role in developing and implementing welfare state policies (Deschouwer, 2012). The founding dates by group type – shown in the Appendix (Figure 2A) – confirm that especially business groups and professional associations were established during the post-war period, together with labour unions.

Further growth peaks manifest in the late 1970s, the period after the enactment of the first state reform (2), and in the late 1990s, marked by the continuous devolution of competences from the national to the subnational level (3). First, devolution stimulated existing organisations to split up their nationwide structure into Flemish and Francophone branches. For instance, one of the largest environmental associations in Belgium (*i.e.* Bond Beter Leefmilieu/Inter-Environnement) was first established as a nationwide organisation in 1971, consisting of four regional branches (Fraussen, 2014). However, due to the increasingly out-

Table 2 Demography by group type across government levels

	National (%)	Flemish (%)	Francophone (%)	Total (%)
Business	42	18	13	26
Professional	25	25	21	24
Labour	3	1	2	2
Identity	8	18	18	14
Cause	12	15	24	16
Leisure	8	19	16	14
Associations of institutions	2	4	6	4
Total (%)	**41**	**35**	**24**	**100**

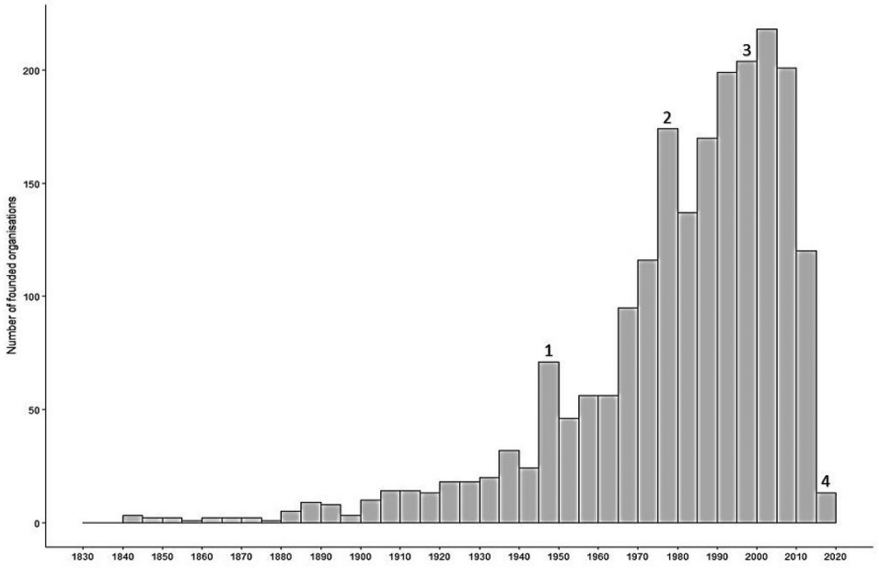
Note: Percentages based on N = 1,678 from bottom-up mapping

Table 3 Basic organisational features by organisation type

Group type	Number of groups	Foundation (mean)	Staff (mean FTE)	Budget (median category)
Business associations	235	1973	9	€100,000-500,000
Professional associations	199	1970	44	€50,000-100,000
Labour unions	20	1947	58	€5,000,000-10,000,000
Identity groups	144	1976	26	€100,000-500,000
Cause groups	205	1985	15	€100,000-500,000
Leisure associations	145	1974	7	€100,000-500,000
Associations of institutions	36	1986	8	€100,000-500,000
Number of observations	n = 984	n = 947	n = 768	n = 851

Note: Numbers based on survey responses

spoken claims of the nationwide association on nuclear energy, several important private sponsors withdrew their funds, and this incentivised the association to foster more structural ties with policymakers. As a consequence of these intensified interactions with policymakers, the association had to deal with growing cultural-linguistic tensions between its Flemish and Francophone strands. This eventually led to the disbandment of the association along subnational lines in 1979. Moreover, instead of adopting a nationwide structure, many new organisations established themselves immediately at the subnational level. The Flemish and Francophone governments increasingly provided financial resources and policy access, especially in areas of important competencies, creating incentives for organisations to have a clear subnational territorial focus (Celis et al., 2012; Keating & Wilson, 2014).



Notes: 1 = post-war period; 2 = late 1970s; 3 = 1990s; 4 = recent era

Figure 1 Founding dates of Belgian interest organisations

The growing number of new interest organisations should also be seen in the context of post-materialist issues supplementing – from the late 1960s/early 1970s onwards – the left–right socio-economic cleavage (2 and 3). An assessment of the disaggregated founding dates by group type confirms that the founding of cause and identity groups exploded from the 1970s onwards (Figure 2A in the Appendix). Many of these social movements are today well-established organisations, as illustrated by their formal recognition as members of several advisory bodies (Defourny et al., 2005; Dewachter, 1995; Fobé et al., 2010). This rise of citizen groups thus reflects growing public concerns with topics such as the environment, climate change and human rights (Hooghe, 1995, 1998; Kriesi et al., 1995).

Overall, the devolution of policy competences and the territorial fragmentation along linguistic lines has resulted in distinct interest group communities with little interaction between them. Many socio-economic policies remain the prerogative of the national level and this is reflected in the prominence of traditional neo-corporatist associations at the national level, while most social movements/citizen groups active in the field of the environment, transportation or culture operate at the subnational level. These interest group communities have developed separately, and few groups have incentives to organise at the national level. Only those groups – the so-called 'social partners' consisting of the peak business associations and labour unions – for which key policy interests are still determined by the national government maintain their nationwide organisational structure and resist the devolution of competences in areas such as social security and labour market policy (Bouteca et al., 2013).

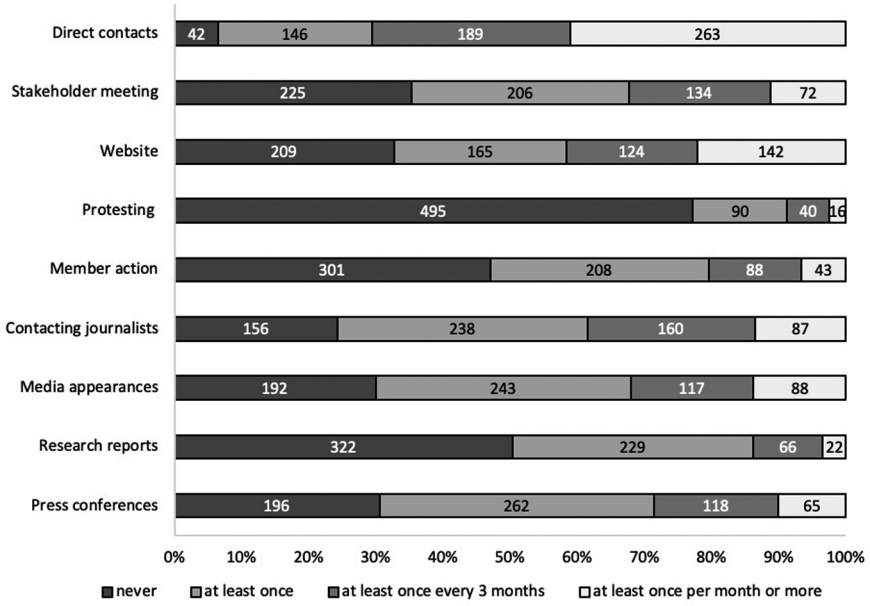


Figure 2 Inside and outside advocacy tactics (n = 641)

2.2 Bottom-Up Mapping of Seeking and Gaining Access to Policymakers

In this section, we map the extent to which different group types are insiders to the policymaking process. We rely on two data sources, the survey data and the dataset on advisory councils, to assess who is seeking and gaining access to the policy process. First, to assess inside tactics – the seeking of direct contact to policymakers – we use the survey data (Beyers et al., 2016). These contacts are initiated at the discretion of interest organisations – respondents in the survey – themselves and do not warrant an invitation by policymakers (Halpin & Fraussen, 2017). Of all interest organisations in our sample, 41% at least once per month or more directly contact a policymaker, 30% do so at least once every three months and 23% do so at least once a year. These observations signify the importance of inside advocacy tactics for Belgian interest organisations.

When it comes to advocacy strategies, most interest groups prefer inside strategies – directly contacting policymakers – over outside strategies – reaching out to the broader public and members – to affect public policies (Figure 2). When engaging in outside activities, Belgian interest organisations mainly use media-oriented strategies such as contacting journalists and organising press conferences. Activities involving members such as signing petitions and staging protests are less frequently used. Compared to these media-oriented tactics, the least used outside tactics – such as developing research reports, publishing opinions online and organising stakeholder meetings – are also strategies with a smaller target audience.

Interest groups can choose to directly address policymakers located within various political arenas – ranging from the legislative to the executive and administrative branches of government – when they seek to influence public policy. The survey included questions probing the frequency of contacts with government officials initiated with the purpose to 'influence public policy'. Figure 3 compares the prevalence of contacts initiated across government levels with the executive branch of government (ministers and cabinets), the administration (civil servants within ministerial departments and agencies) and the parliament.

We can draw three conclusions by comparing these results. First, in each jurisdiction, the parliament is least contacted compared to the administration and the executive branch. When we consider weekly and monthly contacts together, we observe, depending on the jurisdiction, less than 30% of interest groups developing regular contacts with parliamentarians. While some longitudinal research conducted in other neo-corporatist European countries found that the parliament as a lobbying target has gained substantial importance since the heyday of corporatism (Gava et al., 2017; Rommetvedt et al., 2013), this seems to be less markedly the case in Belgium. Belgium is still characterised by a weak parliament, 'politicised' government administrations and large personal cabinets of ministers (van den Berg et al., 2014; van der Meer et al., 2019). Second, most contacts are initiated with the administration, especially at the subnational level. While the joint 'weekly', 'monthly' and 'once every three months' contacts with the national administration sum to 62%, this comes to 76% for the Walloon/Francophone administration and 69% for the Flemish administration. One reason for the differences between the subnational and national levels could be the extent to which groups depend on subnational subsidies (Celis et al., 2012; Heylen & Willems, 2019). Third, the executive branch in Flanders and Wallonia is contacted on a more regular basis by interest groups – respectively 33% and 29% of groups seek contacts at least once every three months or more frequently – compared to groups seeking contact with the national government – at this level only 19% seek contacts 'at least once every three months' or more frequently with ministers and cabinet members. In short, while interest mobilisation differs across government levels, also the variation in lobbying strategies reflects the multi-level structure of the Belgian polity. Moreover, the clear prominence of the administration as a lobbying target seems to be a persistent feature of neo-corporatist and consensual policymaking in Belgium (*see also* van den Berg et al., 2014; van der Meer et al., 2019). This finding matches the assessment of 'corporatist resilience' observed in other small European countries (Binderkrantz & Christiansen, 2015; Binderkrantz et al., 2015; Christiansen et al., 2018).

2.3 Top-Down Mapping of Gaining Access to Advisory Councils

Advisory councils, and their composition, are one of the foremost formal and institutional expressions of neo-corporatist practices (Christiansen et al., 2010). Moreover, access, more specifically obtaining seats in advisory councils, can be seen as a lobbying success; it reflects the effectiveness of an interest organisation in passing a certain threshold that is beyond their own discretion and gaining rec-

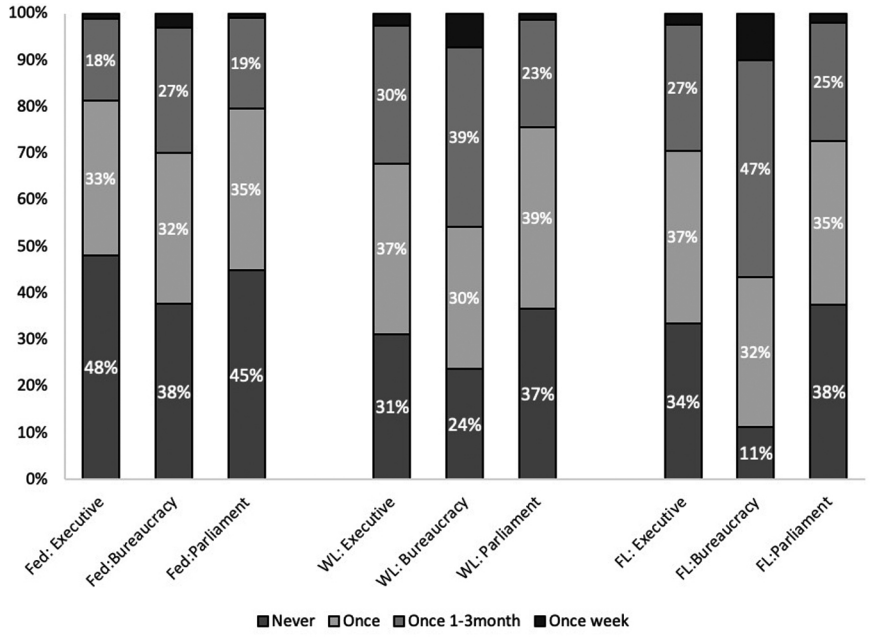


Figure 3 ***Seeking access to different governmental branches by government level***

ognition by policymakers (Binderkrantz et al., 2017b; Halpin & Fraussen, 2017). We mapped interest group membership in 616 advisory councils at the national (n = 290), Flemish (n = 116) and Walloon/Francophone (n = 167) government levels. Three information sources were used: councils' own websites and dedicated government webpages, Politiek Zakboekje/Mémento Politique 2016 and Moniteur Belge (*see also* Appendix). This allowed us to check the following criteria: (1) sufficient information availability, (2) dealing with policy formulation or implementation, not individual administrative acts or management tasks such as hiring and selection or awarding project funding, (3) permanently established and active during the legislature 2014-2019 and (4) at least one member is a non-governmental stakeholder. Finally, we conducted a detailed coding of these 616 advisory councils and mapped a total of 1,154 interest groups being council members.

Of the entire interest group population, 41% of national organisations, 38% of Flemish organisations and 45% of Francophone organisations have access to at least one of these 616 advisory councils. The somewhat higher percentage of Francophone organisations having access – compared to Flemish organisations – might be due to the overall higher number of Francophone advisory councils. Across group types enjoying access (*i.e.* light grey bars in Figure 4), business and professional associations make up the largest category. Respectively 23% and 26% of groups having access are business and professional associations, illustrating a clear prominence compared to other group types. Associations of public authorities and institutions (12%), cause groups (14%) and identity groups (11%)

also make up quite a substantial portion in the system of advisory councils. Compared to other group types, labour unions (3%) constitute only a small portion of all groups having access. Economic interests are core policy insiders compared to the more peripheral position of citizen groups.

To assess this representational bias further, we compared access across group types relative to their total share in the population (*i.e.* dark grey bars in Figure 4). If certain group types dominate the population, it would be no surprise that these types enjoy higher levels of access. Or by contrast, if some group types, for instance labour unions, are less numerous, this could affect their access. A total of 85% of all associations of (semi-)public authorities and institutions and 82% of all labour unions have access to at least one advisory council. While the overall portion of labour unions is small compared to the total number of interest groups having access to at least one council, the overwhelming majority of Belgian labour unions does gain access. Also, business associations, professional associations, identity groups and cause groups enjoy substantial access. Respectively, between 48% and 60% of all these groups have access to at least one advisory council.

However, we need to be careful as these conclusions concern access to *at least one* advisory council and not the *absolute* number of seats these organisations hold across multiple councils. In this regard, we can clearly detect a core-periphery dynamic. Few groups have seats in a high number of advisory councils. Of all groups with access (n = 1,154), the overwhelming majority (n = 719 or 58%) has access to only *one council*, and most of these (n = 375 or 52%) have only *one seat* per council.

Table 4, presenting the top 20 organisations with the most seats, illustrates this skewed access pattern. This list consists mostly of labour unions, peak business associations and (professional) associations in the health care sector. No identity groups (*e.g.* youth, patients, gender and migrants) or cause groups (*e.g.* environment, human rights, traffic safety) are among this set of core insiders. The centralisation of the interest group system around a few business, labour and professional groups is a typical feature of consociationalism and neo-corporatist systems (Grote et al., 2008; Kriesi et al., 2006). Policymaking and implementation – especially in welfare state domains – is still a matter of concertation among organisations representing key socio-economic segments (Beyers et al., 2014a; Deschouwer, 2012; Van Den Bulck, 1992). These top 20 interest organisations, for instance, have a strong presence in influential socio-economic advisory councils (*i.e.* the National Labour Council and the Central Economic Council, at the national level, SERV in Flanders and CESE in Francophone Belgium). Moreover, the reach of these core insiders is much wider than traditional welfare state domains. The fact that they also enjoy substantial access to advisory councils in other domains such as environment, transport and cultural policy clearly demonstrates the prominence of these actors among policymakers. It illustrates the pre-eminence or 'taken-for-grantedness' of these groups and their viewpoints among policymakers, despite the presence of other groups that represent similar constituencies (Halpin & Fraussen, 2017).

Table 4 List of top 20 advisers

1. ACV/CSC	**2. FGTB/ABVV**	**3. ACLVB/CGSLB**	**4. Landsbond der Christelijke Mutualiteiten Alliance Nationale des Mutualités Chrétiennes**
– 422 seats – Christian labour union – National	– 373 seats – Socialist labour union – National	– 201 seats – Liberal labour union – National	– 190 seats – Health care association – National
5. Union des Classes Moyeness	**6. Union Nationale de Mutualités Socialistes Landsbond der Socialistische Mutualiteiten**	**7. Belgische Vereniging van Artsensyndicaten Association Belge des Syndicates Médicaux**	**8. Unie van Zelfstandige Ondernemers**
– 170 seats – Business association: small and medium enterprises – Francophone	– 164 seats – Health care association – National	– 161 seats – Professional association: doctors – National	– 157 seats – Business association: small and medium enterprises – Flemish
9. Vlaams Netwerk van Ondernemingen	**10. Brussels Enterprise and Commerce**	**11. Union Wallon des Entreprises**	**12. Zorgnet-Icuro**
– 126 seats – Business association – Flemish	– 114 seats – Business association – Brussels	– 111 seats – Business association – Francophone	– 95 seats – Association of health care facilities – Flemish
13. Verbond van Belgische Ondernemingen Fédération des Entreprises de Belgique	**14. Fédération Wallonne de l'Agriculture**	**15. Landsbond van de Onafhankelijke Ziekenfondsen Union nationale des Mutualités Libres**	**16. Union des Villes et Communes de Wallonie**
– 90 seats – Business association – National	– 86 seats – Professional association: farmers – Francophone	– 78 seats – Health care association – National	– 78 seats – Association of municipalities and cities – Francophone
17. Boerenbond	**18. ACOD/CGSP**	**19. AXXON Physical Therapy**	**20. Landsbond der Liberale Mutualiteiten Union Nationale des Mutualités Libérales**
– 69 seats – Professional association: farmers – Flemish	– 67 seats – Socialist labour union: public sector – National	– 67 seats – Professional association of physiotherapists – National	– 62 seats – Health care association – National

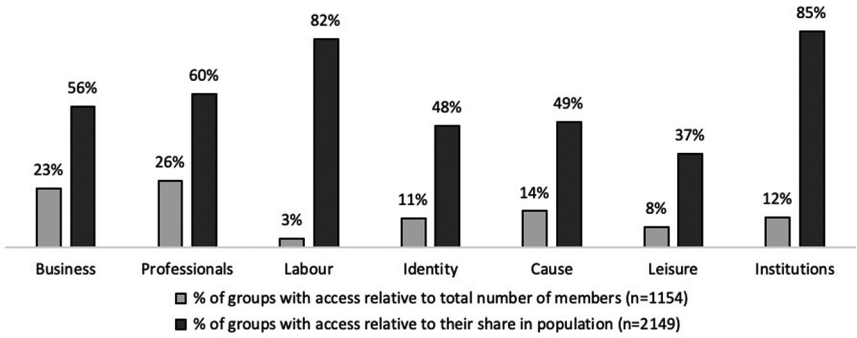


Figure 4 ***Comparing access of different group types to advisory councils List of top 20 advisers***

However, in these domains also citizen groups gain substantial access. Citizen groups' rise in numbers following the increased politicisation of certain policy domains is to a certain extent matched by these organisations' successful entry into the system of advisory councils. Although neo-corporatist patterns of interest representation still rule the system of advisory councils, the years since the economic and financial crisis are characterised by increasing political and public contestation for these 'elitist' closed-door decision-making structures and more frequent deadlocks of social dialogue because of retrenchment (Van Gyes et al., 2017). Neo-corporatist practices have increasingly been put under pressure and the traditional interlocutors of government face more competition from other types of interest groups to gain access to the system of advisory councils.

2.4 Top-Down Mapping of Interest Groups in the News Media

For assessing media attention, we rely on a content analysis of various news media outlets for a sample of 110 specific policy issues included in a 2014 voter survey, comprising 37 federal issues, 34 Flemish issues and 39 Walloon/Francophone issues (*see also* Appendix). First, the relevant media coverage from June 2013 to December 2017 in four media outlets was automatically scraped from GoPress.[5] To identify relevant articles, we applied a computer-automated Boolean search with up to six keywords – in both Dutch and French for national issues – closely related to the policy issues.[6] This resulted in 26,512 unique newspaper articles. Next, we automatically identified interest organisations active on these issues based on a curated dictionary containing 2,340 organisation names and abbreviations.[7] The advantage of a curated dictionary is that it allowed us to quickly sift through a substantial number of newspaper articles. However, to account for the limitations of the computer-automated identification, coders manually added organisations making relevant claims in the selected articles and excluded those newspaper articles containing irrelevant claims. A manual coding was opted for because the claims interest groups made in the news are often complex and multi-faceted. In total, we sampled 2,740 newspaper articles in which interest groups were identified (for an overview, *see* Appendix).

Although outside strategies are usually deployed by groups to gain news coverage, media coverage could also be due to the fact that journalists (or policy advocates) disclose hidden lobbying activities and/or publicly challenge some organised interests (*i.e.* some groups cannot escape media attention due to being a policy insider and/or the need for counteractive lobbying). The overall media attention groups gain is rather limited and also in the media arena considerable bias is present. Across the 110 policy issues, we identified 247 *unique* interest organisations making relevant claims on these issues in the sampled newspaper articles, which is only 11% of all mapped organisations. Across all group types appearing in news coverage (*see* Figure 5), business associations (26%) and cause groups (24%) make up the largest categories (*i.e.* light grey bars in Figure 5). Also, identity groups (15%), associations of (semi-)public authorities and institutions (15%) and labour unions (11%) make up quite substantial portions. Professional associations (9%) and leisure associations (4%) gain comparatively less attention.

However, when comparing media attention across group types relative to their total share in the population, a different picture emerges. Of all labour unions, 56% appears at least once in the news, making them the group type with the most attention. Cause groups also enjoy substantial levels of attention; 18% of these groups appears in the news – which is slightly more than business associations (13%). Nonetheless, compared to the population – except for the labour unions – the vast majority of groups does not appear in the news. The scarce media attention for interest groups might be due to the overall harsh competition to gain news coverage, not only among interest groups themselves, but especially with parties and politicians (Tresch & Fischer, 2015).

Similar to the access interest groups enjoy to advisory councils, media attention also displays a profound core-periphery dynamic (Fraussen & Wouters, 2015). Of all groups attracting media attention, a high number (n = 95 or 40%) appears in only *one article*. Looking at the distribution across group types (Table 5), business associations attract more media attention – exemplified by their higher mean and maximum values – compared to identity groups and cause groups. For instance, while the top 25% of business associations appears 7.25 times in the news (Q4), the top 25% of identity groups appears only four times in the news. Cause groups are more on par with business associations; the top 25% of them appeared six times in newspaper articles related to one of the 110 policy issues. Again, labour unions are successful when it comes to media attention, as the median labour union appears in six newspaper articles *on the same policy issue* and the top 25% of them appears in 15.5 articles (Q4).

The clear prominence of business associations and labour unions in the news indicates that – although every arena has its own logic – some characteristics, such as the core-periphery structure of interest representation in advisory councils, are also reflected in the media arena. As some research demonstrates, the news media often attribute news value to powerful political insiders and pay less attention to outsiders. This has led authors to characterise the – Belgian as well as Scandinavian – news media as an arena of 'privileged pluralism' (Binderkrantz et al., 2015; Fraussen & Wouters, 2015; Tresch & Fischer, 2015). However, some groups with less inside access do seem to be able, at least to some extent, to make

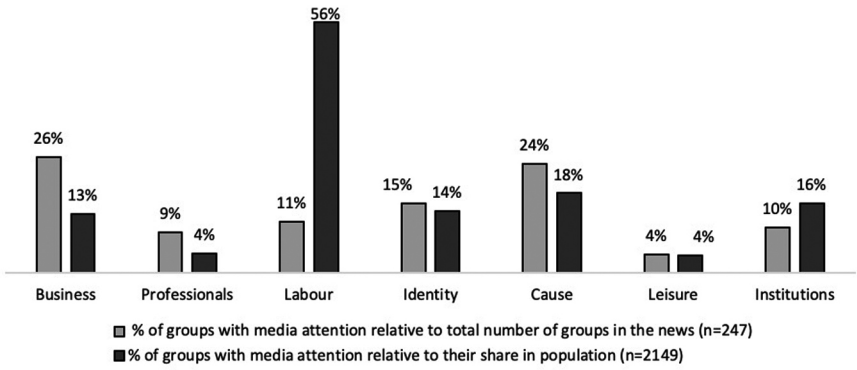


Figure 5 *Comparing media attention for different group types The distribution of media attention by group type, at least one media hit*

Table 5 *The distribution of media attention by group type, at least one media hit*

Number of media hits	n	Min.	Mean	SD	Q1	Median	Q4	Max.
Business	64	1	7.62	13.7	1	3	7.25	88
Professionals	22	1	2.59	2.77	1	2	2.75	13
Labour unions	28	1	16.64	26.48	1.75	6	15.5	106
Identity groups	38	1	4.21	5.53	1	2	4	24
Cause groups	60	1	4.53	4.58	1	3	6	21
Leisure associations	10	1	2.9	2.9	1	1	1.75	11
Associations of institutions	25	1	4.32	6.64	1	2	4	27
Total	247	1						106

Note: Numbers based on the media data

up for this through the news media. For instance, many cause groups gain substantial news coverage.

3 Conclusion

The descriptive analyses presented in this article give some tentative insights into some key features of Belgian interest representation. We find that: (1) neo-corporatist core-periphery structures continue to be a persistent feature, (2) the national government level remains an important venue for interest groups, despite the continuous transfer of policy competences to the subnational and European levels, but (3) patterns of interest representation vary across government levels and policymaking arenas. First, our descriptive overview demonstrates that neo-corporatist mobilisation patterns are quite persistent. As in

other European countries, the traditional neo-corporatist interlocutors of government – labour unions, peak business and professional associations – tend to dominate in absolute numbers (Dür & Mateo, 2013; Wonka et al., 2010). However, while in absolute numbers labour unions and business associations are achieving more political voice, cause groups and identity groups may shout as loudly – for instance because of their resource endowment and substantial media attention – and therefore have considerable chances to influence public policymaking.

Still, the (peak) business associations and labour unions enjoy more access to traditional neo-corporatist venues such as advisory councils compared to citizen groups – an outspoken core-periphery dynamic is present. Although these traditional neo-corporatist practices are mostly present at the national level, they also prevail at the subnational level, exemplified by the multitude of advisory councils established by subnational governments and these councils' composition, in which the traditional peak business associations and labour unions are also prominent (Fobé et al., 2013; Fraussen & Beyers, 2015; Keating & Wilson, 2014). A rather small set of groups – mostly business associations and labour unions – has access to a large number of councils and gains substantial media attention. Hence, the media arena resonates the political power of insider groups, and, in the case of Belgium, this perpetuates traditional neo-corporatist patterns of interest representation.

Second, one important consequence of the Belgian federal state structure is the presence of different interest group communities at the national and subnational levels. Drivers for these diverging patterns of mobilisation and the emergence of a multi-layered interest group system are multiple. On the one hand, many organised interests have – confronted with the continuous devolution of competencies – rescaled their organisational structure and activities towards the subnational level and new interest organisations are mostly established at the subnational level (Fraussen, 2014; Keating & Wilson, 2014). This is especially the case for identity groups, cause groups and associations of institutions and public authorities – all are predominantly mobilised at the subnational level. By contrast, business interests, professional associations and labour unions are still primarely mobilised at the national level. On the other hand, the Belgian governments have themselves actively developed distinct systems of interest intermediation, for example, by awarding subsidies or setting up consultation venues (Celis et al., 2012; Fraussen, 2014; Heylen & Willems, 2019). As a result, Belgium offers an excellent case to assess how multi-layered political institutions shape the mobilisation of societal interests and their interaction with public authorities. It enables an analysis of how institutions and political elites can provide incentives for the formation of subnational interest communities with distinct features and dynamics, as well as (possibly) constrain the establishment or maintenance of nationwide groups bridging territorial interests. In short, devolution has created an incentive to 'abandon' the center, but it has, in the case of Belgium, not resulted in the hollowing out of the national interest group community.

This brings us to the third conclusion, namely that interest mobilisation varies profoundly across political arenas and branches of government. For instance, while the media arena resonates the core-periphery structure of the political–

administrative arena of advisory councils, it does not provide a perfect mirror. In this regard, the media arena is somewhat more inclusive of citizen groups (compared to advisory councils). This can be framed in the context of increased public attention and interest mobilisation on issues such as the environment and human rights (*see* Binderkrantz, 2012). In addition, while the traditional neo-corporatist actors have maintained their core position in advisory councils dealing with welfare state policies, in other 'new' domains also citizen groups have gained substantial access (Willems, 2020). The growing number of citizen groups is to a certain extent matched with these organisations' successful entry into the system of advisory councils. At the same time, the system of advisory councils and social dialogue is increasingly criticized and contested by political and public actors (Van Gyes et al., 2017). In addition, substantial variation can be observed across government branches. The evidence reveals that, compared to the administration and the executive branch, Belgian organised interests least contact parliamentarians.

An important limitation of our characterisation of interest representation in Belgium is that we only focused on organised interests, while excluding other actors such as companies and semi-public authorities such as universities or hospitals – often referred to as 'pressure participants' – from our analyses (Jordan et al., 2004). These entities have no intermediary function; they do not represent a constituency or membership, and their potential political activities are usually a by-product of their core business – if their interests are threatened, they mobilise politically. The expertise these actors have at their disposal, as well as their economic significance (in terms of employment and/or investments) means that they play a crucial role in any political system (Salisbury, 1984; *see also* Lowery, 2007). Some results – such as the prominence of business interests and the importance of inside lobbying – might even be more pronounced if we would have included these actors in our analyses (*see* for instance Aizenberg & Hanegraaff, 2020); follow-up research could investigate the role of these 'pressure participants' more closely.

Overall, the evidence suggests that the federalisation of Belgium, the politicisation of issues such as migration and the environment and growing political contestation towards elitist neo-corporatist practices put pressure on traditional patterns of neo-corporatism. These developments have nourished a more competitive interest group system, larger in size as well as more diverse and fragmented. Hence, traditional concepts of Belgian interest representation, such as consociationalism or neo-corporatism, can no longer adequately characterise the overall pattern of state–society relations in Belgium. The Belgian system of interest representation has become considerably segmented and characterised by distinct constellations of organised interests at each government level and distinct mobilisation patterns across political and public arenas. Nonetheless, the neo-corporatist legacy has proven to be resilient, as the prevailing prominence of labour unions and peak business associations demonstrates. In essence, when it comes to interest mobilisation, we observe on top of the persistent neo-corporatist patterns substantial ingredients of a more pluralist system of interest representation.

Notes

1 NACE is the abbreviation of the French *Nomenclature statistique des activités économiques dans la Communauté européenne*. This European industry classification system consists of a six-digit code and is systematically used in most national statistical data systems (*see*http://goo.gl/8NLquM). The full definition of S94 reads as follows: This division includes activities of organisations representing interests of special groups or promoting ideas to the general public. These organisations usually have a constituency of members, but their activities may involve and benefit non-members as well. The primary breakdown of this division is determined by the purpose that these organisations serve, namely interests of employers, self-employed individuals and the scientific community (group 94.1), interests of employees (group 94.2) or promotion of religious, political, cultural, educational or recreational ideas and activities (group 94.9).

2 SectorLink (currently www.bsae.be) provides an overview of Belgian professional associations, industry groups and business federations. It includes organisations recognized as professional associations by the 'Hoge Raad van de Middenstand', as well as the member organisations of the main peak business associations. Filantropie.be (currently www.goededoelen.be) is a voluntary register with mostly non-profit organisations and encompasses organisations active at the national, subnational and local level (n=2,904 on 15 December 2014). It is an online platform developed through a cooperation between the Koning Boudewijnstichting and the National Bank of Belgium.

3 Also, the Brussels Capital Region and the German-speaking community have their own interest group community. Due to the strongly locally based nature of the latter and the considerable overlap with the Flemish and Francophone/Walloon interest group communities, we decided not to include these smaller communities in our bottom-up mapping.

4 There are two important aspects to be aware of when considering Figure 1. First, the evidence only concerns founding dates of groups that currently exist, which are all survivors. It tells us little about the composition of the groups' system in previous eras and the dynamics associated with organisational mortality and survival in the past. Second, the strong decline in recent founding rates (4) should be dealt with cautiously. Although a possible explanation for this is the financial crisis starting in 2008 and government austerity suppressing organisational establishment and survival (Heylen et al., 2018), an entry lag in public directories for several years must be taken into account (Bevan et al., 2013; Fraussen & Halpin, 2016).

5 GoPress is the online press database and monitoring service for all Belgian newspapers and magazine publishers (www.gopress.academic.be). In Flanders, the news media outlets selected were De Standaard (715,100 daily readers) and De Morgen (448,500 daily readers). In Wallonia, the media outlets were Le Soir (639,400 daily readers) and La Libre Belgique (339,700 daily readers). For more information, see https://www.cim.be/nl/pers/bereik-resultaten.

6 Keywords were carefully selected based on the name of the policy issue in the online voter survey and extensive desk research including legislative initiatives on the policy issue. The saturation point for identifying key words was inductively determined by

checking the number of (new) relevant articles that could be found by entering a new keyword in the GoPress search tool.

7 This list of 2,340 organisations resulted from a combination of identified organised interests through the bottom-up mapping and the mapping of advisory councils' members. Additional coding was done so that different variations on the name and acronym of an interest group could be stored in the curated dictionary.

8 NACE is the abbreviation of the French Nomenclature statistique des activités économiques dans la Communauté européenne. This European industry classification system consists of a 6 digit code and is systematically used in most national statistical data-systems (*see*ec.europa.eu/competition/mergers/cases/index/nace_all).

9 The full definition of S94 reads as follows: 'This division includes activities of organisations representing interests of special groups or promoting ideas to the general public. These organisations usually have a constituency of members, but their activities may involve and *benefit non-members as well. The primary breakdown of this division is determined by the purpose that these organisations serve, namely interests of employers, self-employed individuals and the scientific community (group 94.1), interests of employees (group 94.2) or promotion of religious, political, cultural, educational or recreational ideas and activities (group 94.9).*'

10 Kantar TNS Belgium is a market research company (*see* tnsglobal.com/office/tns-Belgium).

11 Further discussion of the sample of voters can be found in the online appendix of Lesschaeve, van Erkel, and Meulewaeter (2018).

12 *See* academic.gopress.be.

13 www.cim.be/nl/pers/bereik-resultaten.

14 De Standaard, De Morgen, La Libre Belgique and Le Soir are the most read high quality newspapers, while the Het Laatste Nieuws, L'Avenir and La Dernière Heure are the most read mainstream newspapers.

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Appendix – Interest Representation in Belgium

A Bottom-Up Census of Belgian Interest Groups

To map the population of Belgian interest organisations in a bottom-up fashion, we had different sources at our disposal. The most comprehensive database is the Kruispuntbank voor Ondernemingen (Crosspoint Bank for Enterprises – KBO) which is maintained by the Federal Public Service Economy, SMEs, Self-Employed and Energy (FPS Economy, Federale Overheidsdienst Economie, K.M.O., Middenstand en Energie). It registers more than two million corporate entities and, important for our purposes, all established VZWs (non-profits) or foundations. The register uses the second revision of the NACE classification (which is called NACEBEL in Belgium, and uses ISIC classification codes), requiring organisations to indicate in which industrial or other activities they primarily engage in (multiple options can be selected).[8] To account for interest organisations, a separate category was created known as S94, which refers to organisations that represent the interests and views of specific constituencies.[9] This initial list contained 19,191 organisations.

The S94 category is further specified under sub-headers including business, employers and professional membership associations, development NGOs, as well as religious orders (such as abbeys, dioceses and other mostly local religious institutions). The latter organisations were deleted from the list (3,358 in total). Furthermore, the list also contained a high number of double entries (3,797 were deleted). Furthermore, we also deleted organisations based on tag-word searches (*e.g.* 'EURO' and 'Youth House') (in total 827 entities deleted). The remainder of the list included 11,209 entities.

One feature of the KBO is that it contains data on the connectedness of organisations. Indeed many Belgian organisations are part of a conglomerate structure, which is represented in the KBO as dyadic ties between organisations (Figure A1). The KBO makes a distinction between the 'maatschappelijke zetel' (main office/secretariat or main organisation) and the 'vestigingseenheid' (sub-entity/branch/ chapter or sub-organisation). The 'maatschappelijke zetel' is uniquely identified by the enterprise number. In principle, each organisation (with its different sub-entities) has one enterprise number, also known as the VAT number (value added tax number; used for tax purposes). Each separate 'vestigingseenheid' of an organisation has a unique identifier called the entity number. In principle, all entity numbers are linked to a registered main office (which always has an enterprise number). This feature was used to drastically reduce the number of organisations that needed to be checked manually. We did so by separating the so-called 'main organisations' (5,024) from the 'sub-organisations' (6,185). Yet, as some sub-organisations are active at the national or subnational level, they also needed to be processed; but we managed to do so in a semi-automated way.

This means that we can map whether and how organisations have established distinct branches, which often have their own legal personality and autonomy. For example, according to the KBO, the Ordre des Pharmaciens – Orde van Apothekers (Association of Belgium Pharmacists) has a secretariat which is

located in Brussels, in addition to ten branches, one for each province in Belgium. In what follows, we refer to the secretariat as main organisation and to the branches or establishments as sub-organisations. Keep in mind that these sub-organisations are not the same as the members of an organisation. Also the main organisation is not necessarily more important than the sub-organisation. Although this is usually the case, sometimes sub-organisations are highly autonomous entities. The result is that some interest groups have a rather complicated branch structure, which might be typical for Belgium, yet similar structures can probably be observed in various other countries that are characterised by federalism, multilevel governance and neo-corporatism. Yet, one of the conceptual messages we draw from this is that we cannot equate an 'interest group' with one organisation, but that in many cases an interest group consists of a complicated patchwork of multiple interlinked organisations.

To process these organisations, we developed an (online) data-processing interface. First, a list of 5,024 organisations was uploaded. For these organisations, coders first determined whether the organisation is indeed 'in target' (given the criteria outlined above). Many main organisations – about 80% – did not qualify. This means that for about 80% of the organisations, the matching sub-organisations need not be checked. For the organisations that are in target, the tool compiled a list of matching sub-organisations, drawing not from the limited list of 6,185 sub-organisations, but from the full KBO database. Furthermore, as some organisations can have multiple main organisations (this is sometimes done for administrative reasons), from the uploaded list, the tool also compiled a list of main organisations based on a word similarity match (hereby reducing the list of organisations we had to manually check even further). The coders then arranged these entities in a hierarchical structure (based on whether the organisational entity is active on the local, subnational, national or international level).

Take, for instance, a certain interest organisation that is a conglomerate of three main organisations, to which ten sub-organisations are tied to each. This organisation would take up 33 entries in the registry. In essence, when not in target, the coder only has to process one of these main organisations to reduce the list with 33 entries. When in target, the coder can process these entities more efficiently, compared to processing them one by one, at random. So although we started from a 'flat' list of entities, the tool, in an efficient manner, enabled us to capture the hierarchical nature of organisations. All organisations active at the national and subnational level were included in the sample.

The resulting sample (n=1,461) was further triangulated, by comparing it to two other bottom-up sources: SectorLink and Filantropie.be. First, Filantropie.be is a voluntary register with mostly non-business interests, or social profit organisations, and encompasses organisations that are active at the national, subnational and local level (N=2,904 on 15 December 2014). It is an online platform that was developed through cooperation between the Koning Boudewijnstichting and the National Bank of Belgium. The database (www.filantropie.be) provides very detailed and precise information on each organisation (such as its mission, contact information, details about the structure of the organisation, annual accounts and yearly reports) and can be linked with the KBO. Still, it does not

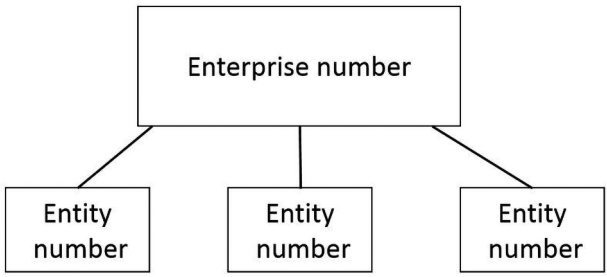

Figure A1 Code structure in the KBO

allow to distinguish local organisations from those that are organised at a regional or nation-wide level. Another drawback involves that, given the register's voluntary nature, it is hard to assess which (and how many) organisations are missing, and to find out if there are any systematic or ad hoc biases in the current online database. Compared to the register of the KBO, however, one important benefit is that very small and informal organisations can also be registered (whereas the KBO requires a minimum amount of staff and/or financial resources). All in all, if one seeks to analyse the non-profit (or more specifically social sector) field in Belgium, filantropie.be probably offers the best and most comprehensive starting point.

Second, a similar and complementary initiative is SectorLink (www.bsae.be). It provides an overview of Belgian professional associations, industry groups and business federations. It includes organisations that are recognised as professional associations by the 'Hoge Raad van de Middenstand', as well as the member organisations of the main industry peak associations. These lists of organisations were also uploaded in the tool, and matched to the existing list by using a customised automated text-comparison function.

The new organisations were processed according to the same procedure, which resulted in 230 new organisations. The end result was a list of 1,678 organisations (for more detailed information, *see*www.cigsurvey.eu). After this sampling procedure, the online tool prompted the coder to collect contact data and some additional data from the organisation's website. To establish the type of organisation, the coder first determined whether the organisation mentioned whether or not it had formal members. If this was the case, the coder coded the type and kind of members (from this can be derived whether the organisation is a business, professional, leisure, identity or labour union). The organisations without formal members were given a separate code. Additionally, for all organisations it was also established whether being politically active was one of their goals. Furthermore, for public interest organisations, it was also gauged what kind of interest they represent (cause or identity). Instead of instructing the coders to categorise organisations in a preset classification, coding separate variables allowed to make several typologies.

The Online Survey Procedure

The online survey of Belgian interest groups focused on topics such as advocacy strategies, organisational development and management, relations with members and stakeholders, and the challenges that organisations face. For each interest organisation we searched contact data for two (high-level) representatives of each organisation (for instance, the director, chair, president or secretary general). Contacting these high-level interest group representatives consisted of four consecutive steps, namely an invitation, an email reminder, a telephone reminder and one last email reminder. After these four steps, we repeated the procedure for those organisations that did not respond and for which we had a second contact person (so 4×2=8 steps). In total, this survey was sent to the high-level representatives of 1,678 nation-wide and subnational organised interests we identified. The survey was conducted over a time span of 117 days (between January and May 2016) and delivered a response rate of 42% (n=727 organisations that responded to more than 50% of questions).

The Mapping of Advisory Councils and Their Members

Sampling Advisory Councils

Advisory councils should be established at the national, Flemish or Walloon/Francophone level of government and have to deal with the consultancy of non-governmental stakeholders within the framework of policy formulation and evaluation, and implementation. Yet, these councils are not easily detectable and not one data source is available in Belgium. Therefore, the identification procedure of the population of advisory councils in Belgium rests on three data sources in order to come to the most complete picture possible: a website search of all the ministries at the national, Flemish and Walloon/Francophone level; a consultation of Politiek Zakboekje/Mémento Politique 2016; and several parliamentary questions. Furthermore, we identified also a substantial amount of councils while coding (often being sub-councils). At this stage, no distinction was made regarding the tasks nor the type of members of the identified advisory councils. The complete identification procedure was done in June-September 2016. In total, 1,136 advisory councils were identified. Table 1A gives an overview of identified councils by data source and level of government.

This general mapping of advisory councils resulted in a high number of councils that was not relevant for the purpose of this study. To filter these advisory councils out, four sampling criteria were used and Table 2A gives an overview of the number of councils excluded on the basis of each criterion. The criteria are put in hierarchical order, which means criterion one is the most determinant criterion. To assess the four criteria, three data sources were used: the own website of the advisory council or the dedicated webpages of a ministry or agency to that advisory council, Politiek Zakboekje/Mémento Politique 2016, and Het Staatsblad/Moniteur Belge. Het Staatsblad/Moniteur Belge is a particularly useful data source as in the founding law of each advisory council the functions and tasks are precisely listed. This delivers us with the most complete picture as to check the following criteria. First, sufficient information needs to be available in order to

Table 1A Number of advisory councils by source of identification

Data source of identification	Number of advisory councils	Level of government	Number of advisory councils
Website	463	National	711
Politiek Zakboekje/ Mémento Politique	170	Flemish	174
Parliamentary questions	389	Walloon/Francophone	202
Identified while coding	114	Brussels	30
		German-speaking	15
		Local level	4
Total	**1,136**	**Total**	**1,136**

assess the subsequent criteria. Second, the advisory body should concern consultancy within the framework of general policy formulation and policy evaluation, or the guidance and monitoring of policy implementation. The policy advice concerning implementation can also be directed at institutions or professionals responsible for policy implementation and execution. All advisory bodies concerned with only the advice for the purpose of the adoption of individual administrative acts are excluded (*see* Table 2A).

Third, the advisory body has to be permanently established/active. All advisory bodies that are temporal or ad hoc in character will be excluded. In addition, all advisory councils that were found to be abolished during previous legislatures were excluded from the sample. Finally, at least one member in the advisory council has to be a non-governmental actor (*e.g.* interest group, expert organisation) or be a government representative not dependent on the governmental level on which the advisory council is established. When this is not the case, the advisory body was excluded from the sample.

Mapping Members of Advisory Councils

Finally, a detailed coding of the 616 advisory councils in the sample was conducted. This involved evidence on the jurisdictional level of political activity (*e.g.* federal or subnational), some basic legal information (*e.g.* year of foundation, type of founding law, amendments), the policy domain and evidence on the day-to-day functioning of the council (*e.g.* staff, meetings, annual budget, gender quota, tasks). At the same time, we mapped and coded all the members of these 616 advisory councils. These members were classified into five categories: interest organisations (1), expert organisations (2), government representatives (3), political party representatives (4) and members of other advisory councils (5). Effective, alternate (*i.e.* having voting rights), as well as members that have a consultative voice and observers (*i.e.* having no voting rights) were mapped according to the number of seats they hold. In the end, 2,372 unique organisational members were mapped (thus excluding individual experts).

Table 2A Overview of the selection criteria and excluded councils

	Exclusion criterion	Number of excluded advisory councils
1.	***No sufficient information availability***	26
2.	***Administrative acts***	
	Accreditation	73
	Arbitration, appeal and disciplinary bodies	88
	Examination, appointment/selection and promotion procedures (including internships)	84
	Approval, control and evaluation of projects	13
	Retributions in individual cases	31
	Licences and permits	7
	Management	48
	Social dialogue: employee–employer relationship and negotiations on labour conditions within specific ministries or government agencies	41
	Subsidies	40
	Other	17
	TOTAL ADMINISTRATIVE ACTS	441
3.	***Temporal or dead***	23
4.	***Only government members*** dependent on the level on which the advisory council is established	26
		Total
	Removed from sample	520
	Remaining in sample	616

Coders were instructed to consult three data sources: the own website of the advisory council or the dedicated webpages of a ministry or government agency to that advisory council, Politiek Zakboekje/Mémento Politique 2016 and Het Staatsblad/Moniteur Belge. In Het Staatsblad/Moniteur Belge, every time the composition of an advisory council is changed, the list of members is published here.

Media Attention for Belgian Interest Groups

The Selection of Policy Issues

The starting point for our selection of policy issues is the Benchmark Survey for 'de Stemtest', conducted by TNS.[10] This is an online voter survey of 2,081 eligible Belgian voters conducted in the run-up to the subnational, national and European elections held on 25 May 2014. A separate survey was conducted in Flanders (n=1,053) and Wallonia (n=1,028), which resulted in an average response rate of 17%. Respondents were sampled on the basis of gender, age, education level, language and region. For generalisation purposes, oversampling was done for spe-

cific types of voters who are usually underrepresented in public opinion surveys (Lesschaeve, 2018).[11] Respondents were approached in two waves to avoid survey fatigue (each wave lasted on average 15 minutes). The statements on the national level were the same in both parts of the country, but each survey also contained custom-made statements for each subnational level. Consequently, while both surveys have some statements on subnational policy issues that are very similar, they also contain a substantial number of statements that have no counterpart in the other region. Voters could either agree or disagree with a policy statement (Lesschaeve, 2018). The statements were developed through consultation with political journalists from De Standaard, La Dernière Heure, La Libre Belgique (newspapers), VRT and RTBF (television) to guarantee resonance among voters and political parties and were refined through the use of focus groups of potential respondents. Moreover, the number of statements per policy domain also reflects the budgetary weight of the policy domain in each of the (sub)national governments' budgets.

Three criteria were used to evaluate the quality and suitability of each of the 163 survey questions for gauging congruence between public opinion and interest groups. First, the question had to measure citizens' preferences favouring or opposing a specific policy topic. Hence, the survey question had to be unidimensional and could not be hypothetical or conditional in nature (Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2018; Gilens, 2012). Thus, two Flemish issue statements and one Walloon statement addressing multiple priorities at once or that set conditions were excluded. In this way, all questions polling (broader) political attitudes were also excluded.

Second, a question had to concern an issue that could (possibly) be acted upon by either the national, Flemish or Walloon/Francophone governments, since our measure of positional congruence is applied to interest groups mobilising at the national, Flemish or Walloon/Francophone level (Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2018; Gilens, 2012). Based on this requirement six issue statements labelled as belonging to the national level were excluded because they included European or subnational matters on which the national government could not act independently. In addition, one issue statement labelled as belonging to the Flemish level was excluded because it was a local matter on which the subnational governments could not act alone. Finally, we excluded all survey questions dealing with administrative regulations, the institutional structure of the polity, election rules and party financing, the implementation and ratification of international treaties, the internal functioning and management of various governmental organisations and (the accumulation of) mandates, budget appropriations, etc. These cases were excluded from the sample because they do not address substantive regulations but rather relate to administrative organisation or budgetary allocations. This last step resulted in the exclusion of 42 issues. At this point, 110 policy issues remained in the selection, of which 37 were federal issues, 34 were Flemish issues and 39 were Walloon/Francophone issues. A complete list of policy issues can be consulted below.

Table 3A List of policy issues

ID	Statement	Jurisdiction	Policy domain
2	De pensioenleeftijd mag niet stijgen	National	Social affairs
3	Leefloners moeten verplicht kunnen worden gemeenschapswerk te verrichten	National	Social affairs
5	Wie nog nooit heeft gewerkt, mag geen werkloosheidsuitkering krijgen	National	Labour
6	De lonen moeten bevroren worden als ze sneller stijgen dan in de buurlanden	National	Economic affairs
7	In tijden van crisis mogen lonen niet automatisch worden aangepast aan prijsstijgingen	National	Economic affairs
8	Als er bij de NMBS wordt gestaakt, moet er een minimumdienst zijn	National	Labour
9	De verplichte sluitingsdag voor winkels moet worden afgeschaft	National	Economic affairs
10	Het moet makkelijker worden om werknemers te ontslaan	National	Labour
11	Er mag geen alcohol in drankautomaten zitten	National	Health care
12	Alle veroordeelden moeten hun straf volledig uitzitten	National	Justice
13	De GAS-boetes moeten worden afgeschaft	National	Justice
14	Grote vermogens moeten meer worden belast	National	Economic affairs
15	Klanten van prostituees moeten worden beboet	National	Justice
16	Het stakingsrecht mag niet worden ingeperkt	National	Labour
17	Er moet een rijbewijs met punten komen	National	Justice
18	Draagmoederschap voor homokoppels moet worden toegestaan	National	Rights
19	De federale overheid moet haar aandelen in Belgacom verkopen	National	Economic affairs
21	Er moeten kerncentrales open blijven	National	Energy
22	Een asielzoeker die hier als minderjarige is binnengekomen mag niet meer worden teruggestuurd	National	Migration
23	Jongeren die naar Syrië vertrekken om deel te nemen aan de strijd moeten hun recht op uitkeringen verliezen	National	Rights
27	Alle kernwapens die op Belgisch grondgebied opgeslagen zijn, moeten worden verwijderd	National	Foreign affairs & defence
28	Het Belgische leger moet minder deelnemen aan buitenlandse interventies	National	Foreign affairs & defence
29	Mensen moeten meer belastingen (BTW) betalen op wat ze kopen dan op wat ze verdienen	National	Economic affairs
30	Bedrijfswagens moeten zwaarder worden belast	National	Economic affairs

Table 3A (Continued)

ID	Statement	Jurisdiction	Policy domain
31	Het Belgische leger moet investeren in een opvolger van het F-16 gevechtsvliegtuig	National	Foreign affairs & defence
34	Een gezin moet voor ieder kind evenveel kinderbijslag krijgen	Flemish	Social affairs
35	Voor hoge inkomens moet de kinderbijslag naar omlaag, voor lage inkomens naar omhoog	Flemish	Social affairs
36	De regels om een privé-crèche uit te baten moeten worden versoepeld	Flemish	Social affairs
37	De regels voor de uitvoer van wapens en militaire onderdelen moeten strenger worden	Flemish	Foreign affairs & defence
38	Er moeten meer technische vakken gegeven worden in het secundair onderwijs	Flemish	Education
39	Pas na de eerste twee jaren van het secundair onderwijs zouden leerlingen een studierichting moeten kiezen	Flemish	Education
41	In plaats van een verkeersbelasting, moeten autobestuurders betalen volgens het aantal kilometers dat ze rijden	Flemish	Transportation
42	De aanleg van de Oosterweelverbinding moet worden stopgezet	Flemish	Transportation
43	Ook werkloze ouderen boven de 60 jaar moeten verplicht begeleid worden naar een nieuwe job	Flemish	Labour
44	Wie meer verdient, moet meer betalen voor de zorgverzekering wie minder verdient, moet minder betalen	Flemish	Health care
45	Leerkrachten in moeilijke scholen moeten een financiële bonus krijgen	Flemish	Education
46	Ook bus- en tramlijnen met weinig passagiers moeten blijven	Flemish	Transportation
47	65-plussers moeten gratis kunnen blijven reizen met bus of tram	Flemish	Social affairs
49	Nederlands kennen mag geen voorwaarde zijn om in aanmerking te komen voor een sociale woning	Flemish	Social affairs
50	De Antwerpse haven mag niet verder uitbreiden	Flemish	Transportation
51	L'organisation de certains cours dans une autre langue en humanités (immersion) doit être rendue plus facile	Francophone	Education
52	Un examen d'entrée doit être mis en place a l'université, dans chaque Faculté	Francophone	Education
54	Les écoles à public défavorisé doivent recevoir davantage de moyens	Francophone	Education
55	Le décret inscriptions (qui organise l'accès des élèves aux écoles) doit être supprime	Francophone	Education
57	Chaque enfant dans une famille doit recevoir le même montant d'allocations familiales	Walloon	Social affairs

Table 3A (Continued)

ID	Statement	Jurisdiction	Policy domain
58	Les allocations familiales doivent diminuer pour les hauts revenus et augmenter pour les bas revenus	Walloon	Social affairs
61	Les TEC doivent être privatises	Walloon	Transportation
63	Le port du foulard doit être interdit pour les élèves dans l'enseignement officiel	Francophone	Rights
65	Au lieu de la taxe de roulage, les automobilistes devraient payer en fonction du nombre de kilomètres parcourus	Walloon	Transportation
66	La vignette autoroutière doit être mise en place en Wallonie	Walloon	Transportation
71	Un quota de 10% de logements sociaux doit être obligatoire dans toutes les communes	Walloon	Social affairs
72	Les nouveaux immigres doivent suivre obligatoirement un parcours d'intégration	Walloon	Migration
76	La production d'énergie via des panneaux solaires ne doit plus être subsidiée	Walloon	Energy
77	Les allocations de rentrée scolaire doivent être augmentées pour les revenus les plus faibles	Walloon	Social affairs
82	Zodra sociale huurders voldoende verdienen, moeten ze hun sociale woning afstaan	Flemish	Social affairs
83	Vooral een lening voor de renovatie van een oude woning moet fiscaal voordelig zijn	Flemish	Energy
84	Wie een auto ouder dan 10 jaar vervangt door een zuiniger automodel, moet een premie krijgen	Flemish	Environment
85	Alle nieuwkomers moeten deelnemen aan een inburgeringsexamen	Flemish	Migration
86	De overheid moet pensioensparen fiscaal meer aanmoedigen	National	Economic affairs
87	Het leefloon moet stijgen	National	Social affairs
88	Het gebruik van cannabis moet volledig worden verboden	National	Justice
89	Mensen met een hoog inkomen moeten minder geld van de ziekteverzekering terugkrijgen	National	Social affairs
91	Werklozen moeten hun uitkering na een tijd verliezen	National	Social affairs
92	Werkgevers moeten worden verplicht om een bepaald aandeel mensen van vreemde origine in dienst te hebben	National	Labour
93	De treinstations die door weinig reizigers gebruikt worden, moeten ook open blijven	National	Transportation
94	Het rookverbod in de horeca moet worden versoepeld	National	Health care
95	De minimumleeftijd voor GAS-boetes moet hoger liggen dan de huidige leeftijd van 14 jaar	National	Justice

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Table 3A (Continued)

ID	Statement	Jurisdiction	Policy domain
96	Een ouder die thuisblijft met de kinderen moet een inkomen krijgen	National	Social affairs
97	Mensen met een ongezonde levensstijl moeten minder geld van de ziekteverzekering terugkrijgen	National	Health care
98	Asielzoekers die te lang op een beslissing moeten wachten, moeten automatisch een verblijfsvergunning krijgen	National	Migration
99	Er moet een hoofddoekenverbod komen voor leerkrachten in het gemeenschapsonderwijs	Flemish	Education
100	Ouders van kinderen die spijbelen moeten tijdelijk hun kinderbijslag verliezen	Flemish	Social affairs
101	Scholen moeten halalmaaltijden aanbieden aan hun moslimleerlingen	Flemish	Migration
102	Bij smogalarm moeten de beperkingen op het gebruik van de wagen worden verstrengd	Flemish	Environment
103	Straten die opnieuw aangelegd worden, moeten een fietspad hebben	Flemish	Transportation
104	Tijdens spitsuren moet er op de autosnelwegen een rijstrook voorbehouden worden voor carpooling	Flemish	Transportation
106	Scholen moeten kinderen verplichten om ook op de speelplaats Nederlands te praten	Flemish	Education
107	Middelbare scholen mogen geen dure schoolreizen meer organiseren	Flemish	Education
108	Er moeten meer mensen van vreemde afkomst te zien zijn op de openbare omroep	Flemish	Culture
109	Wonen in de stad moet fiscaal aangemoedigd worden	Flemish	Environment
111	Les allocations familiales doivent être liées à la fréquentation scolaire	Walloon	Social affairs
112	Le montant maximal demande par les crèches privées doit être plafonne	Walloon	Social affairs
114	A partir du moment où les locataires sociaux gagnent suffisamment, ils doivent quitter leur logement social	Walloon	Social affairs
115	Seuls les prêts pour la rénovation de vieilles habitations doivent être fiscalement avantageux	Walloon	Economic affairs
116	Les propriétaires de plusieurs biens immobiliers doivent être davantage taxes	Walloon	Economic affairs
117	Il faut imposer des normes d'isolation pour les vieilles habitations	Walloon	Energy
118	En cas d'alerte à la pollution de l'air, les limitations d'utilisation des voitures doivent être renforcées	Walloon	Environment
119	Pendant les heures de pointe, une bande de circulation doit être réservée au covoiturage	Walloon	Transportation
123	Les écoles doivent offrir des repas halal à leurs élèves musulmans	Walloon	Migration

Table 3A (Continued)

ID	Statement	Jurisdiction	Policy domain
126	La Wallonie doit créer une ville nouvelle pour absorber la population croissante	Walloon	Environment
127	Les règles liées à l'exportation d'armes doivent être assouplies	Walloon	Foreign affairs & defence
128	Les voyages scolaires couteux pour les parents doivent être interdits	Walloon	Education
130	Les parents d'enfants qui brossent les cours doivent temporairement perdre leurs allocations familiales	Walloon	Social affairs

Content Analysis of Newspaper Articles

To identify relevant articles, we applied a computer-automated Boolean keyword search in GoPress with keywords closely related to the 110 policy issues. GoPress is the online press database and press monitoring service for all Belgian newspapers and magazine publishers.[12] Keywords were carefully selected based on the name of the policy issue in the online voter survey and extensive desk research including legislative initiatives introduced in parliament on the policy issue. Keywords per policy issue range from one to more than seven, depending on when saturation was reached (*i.e.* no new articles were found). This saturation point was inductively determined by manually checking the number of (new) relevant articles that could be found by entering a new keyword in the GoPress search tool. We performed searches in both Dutch and French for federal policy issues, and limited ourselves to searches in either Dutch or French for policy issues specifically related to Flemish or Walloon/Francophone competences. In order to validate our French keywords, as the researchers involved in the project are not native speakers and do not follow Francophone news outlets on a daily basis, we contacted an external Walloon academic familiar with these news outlets.

For the selection of news media outlets, we opted to include only the most read newspapers in both regions of Belgium and selected publications that varied in terms of their left-right political orientation (*see* Binderkrantz et al., 2017). In Flanders, the news media outlets selected were De Standaard (centre-right, 715,100 daily readers) and De Morgen (centre-left, 448,500 daily readers). In Wallonia, the media outlets were Le Soir (centre-left, 639,400 daily readers) and La Libre Belgique (centre-right, 339,700 daily readers).[13] The period from which we sampled spanned from one year before the elections to the end of 2017 (1 June 2013 to 31 December 2017, a 4.5-year period). A pilot study performed on 12 policy issues (four issues for each of the three government levels) including the most read mainstream newspapers and two additional high-quality newspapers indicated that the inclusion or exclusion of these additional outlets does not substantially alter the results.[14] The media salience of issues across the different news outlets is highly correlated, with an average correlation of 0.72. This suggests that the four news media outlets in our study are representative of the broader news media arena in Belgium implying that our aggregate measure of

media salience (the sum of all relevant and more broadly themed articles across media outlets) is reliable and valid.

The advantage of working with a computer-automated script is that it enabled us to collect a high volume of articles without manual intervention. The disadvantage of working with this script is that non-relevant articles in which our keywords appeared (*e.g.* foreign news, fait divers) were retained. Therefore, in the subsequent coding we manually checked the relevance of each article. Coders could indicate that the article was relevant, had no relevance at all to the policy issue as questioned in the online voter survey or that the article discusses the broader policy theme but not the specific policy issue (*e.g.* retirement policy is discussed, but not the specific issue of raising the retirement age). Non-relevant articles were excluded from further analyses. This coding was performed by one of the authors, a research assistant and two student assistants. Intercoder reliability checks performed on 817 double-coded articles verifying article relevance resulted in an 81.5% agreement (expected agreement of 52.3%), a kappa of 0.61 and Krippendorff's alpha of 0.61. Discrepancies were corrected by the authors.

Identifying Interest Organisations

Once articles were mapped, we automatically identified interest organisations with news coverage about one or multiple of the 110 policy issues based on a curated dictionary containing all organisation names and abbreviations. The list of organisations we used is the result of a bottom-up and top-down sampling strategy that was designed to capture the population of Belgian interest groups mobilised at the subnational or the federal level. To facilitate the computer-automated identification of interest groups mentioned in the news media, additional coding was done so that different variations of the name or acronym of an interest group could be stored in a curated dictionary. In total, up to five Dutch and five French full names could be coded for each interest organisation in the dictionary, and four Dutch and four French acronyms could be coded. Data sources used to create the curated dictionary include the website of the interest group as well as the Crossroads Bank for Enterprises. Occasionally, we also manually checked how the interest group was usually mentioned in by the media by performing a quick search in GoPress (*e.g.* ACV, but also 'Christelijke vakbond'). Furthermore, in the computer-automated identification Python-script we accounted for the possibility that an interest group name or acronym may be directly followed by a punctuation mark or preceded by an apostrophe.

Many interests groups are identified multiple times within and across different issues. To keep the coding of all media claims by interest groups expressing policy positions feasible, we used a multi-stage stratified sampling approach. First, for interest groups that appeared in up to three articles on a specific issue we sampled all the articles linked to that interest group. Second, if an organisation was mentioned more than three times in relation to an issue, a maximum of three of these articles from both the Flemish or Francophone media were randomly included in the sample. Third, to account for the limitations of the computer-automated identification, coders could also manually add organisations

that made relevant claims. In total, we had a sample of 2,740 newspaper articles in which a particular interest group was identified.

Finally, each of these 2,740 articles was manually coded. Specifically, we coded for whether or not the identified interest group made a relevant claim on the specific policy issue at hand. A claim was defined as a quotation or paraphrase that can be connected to a specific interest organisation (De Bruycker 2017; Koopmans & Statham 1999.). In total, 239 unique interest organisations made 986 claims on 83 issues (leaving 27 issues with no relevant interest group identifications and/or claims).

Data Visualisations

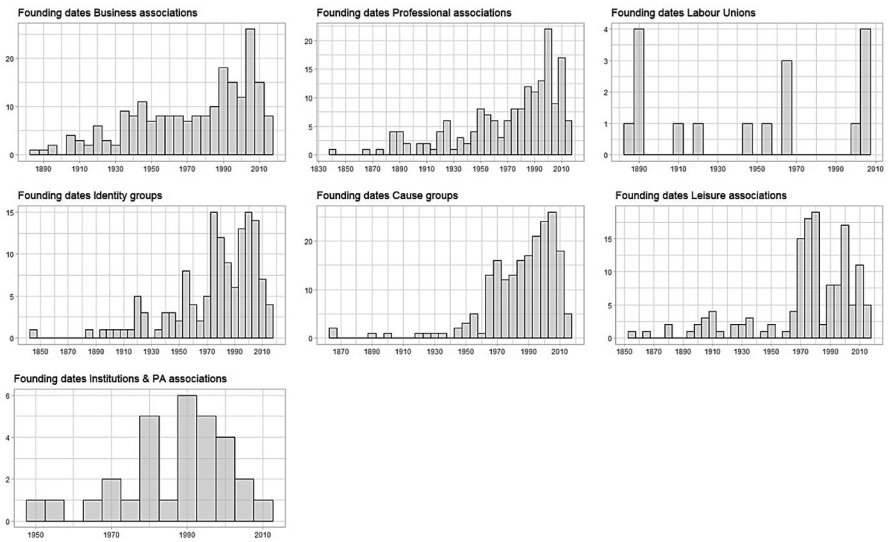

Figure 2A Founding dates by group type

Reference

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The Impact of VAAs on Vote Switching at the 2019 Belgian Legislative Elections

More Switchers, but Making Their Own Choices[*]

David Talukder, Laura Uyttendaele, Isaïa Jennart & Benoît Rihoux [**]

Abstract

During electoral campaigns, the use of voting advice applications (VAAs) has become increasingly widespread. Consequently, scholars have examined both the patterns of usage and their effects on voting behaviour. However, existing studies lead to conflicting findings. In this article, we take a closer look at the effect of De Stemtest/Test électoral (a VAA developed by academics from the University of Louvain and the University of Antwerp, in partnership with Belgian media partners) on vote switching. More specifically, we divide this latter question into two sub-questions: (1) What is the impact of a (dis)confirming advice from the VAA on vote switching? (2) Do VAA users follow the voting advice provided by the VAA? Our study shows that receiving a disconfirming advice from the VAA increases the probability of users to switch their vote choice.

Keywords: voting advice applications, vote switching, vote choice, elections and electoral behaviour, voters/citizens in Belgium, VAA.

1 Introduction

How do citizens decide on their vote choice? It is a question that numerous scholars have paid attention to. While early theorists and studies posited that a person's vote is rather stable, more recent work points to the rise in electoral volatil-

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ity: citizens frequently switch their vote choice between elections. Several theories exist as to why electoral volatility is on the rise. Some claim that traditional social and cultural cleavages have become weaker: citizens do not necessarily vote in agreement with the social groups they belong to. In this context, the importance of issues might be on the rise. Instead of voting in line with the social groups, citizens might rather focus on the issues at stake and elect a party or candidate that best matches their individual preferences. Electoral volatility exists not only between elections but also during electoral campaigns. Indeed, a substantial part of citizens switch their party preferences during the electoral campaign. During the 2019 Belgian elections, 20.8% of Flemish respondents and 21.6% of Walloon respondents switched their initial vote preference. Why did they switch and what made them reconsider their voting preference?

Issue voting models assume that voters are rational decision-makers and argue that citizens should elect parties that are closest to their own issue positions. In this regard, the spread of voting advice applications (VAAs) is particularly interesting. The main goal of these tools is to link voters' preferences to parties' policy proposals; these tools then highlight the proximity between the user and the available political parties (Walgrave, Nuytemans & Pepermans, 2009, p. 1161). In practice, users fill in a web survey according to their opinions on a set of issues. By comparing their position with those of political parties, the applications generate voting advice and suggestions (Cedroni & Garzia, 2010; Garzia & Marschall, 2019).

VAAs have found their place in the information environment of election campaigns, including in Belgium where the *Stemtest* (in Dutch) and the *Test électoral* (in French) are widely used. The *Test électoral* rendered about 1 million VAA advices during the 2019 electoral campaign, while the *Stemtest* amounted to about 3.4 million advices.

Due to their rising success since they were launched two decades ago, VAAs have been the object of studies. Munzert et al. (2020) describe how three different approaches have been used for studying the impact of VAAs on vote choice: observational panel data, observational selection models and experimental research designs (see Enyedi, 2016; Mahéo, 2016; Pianzola, Trechsel, Vassil, Schwerdt & Alvarez, 2019; Vassil, 2011). Most observational studies find that VAAs have a significant positive impact on voting decisions (see Andreadis & Wall, 2014; Klein Kranenburg, 2015; Kleinnijenhuis, van de Pol, van Hoof & Krouwel, 2017; Pianzola, 2014a; Pianzola, 2014b; Ruusuvirta & Rosema, 2009). However, Walgrave, Van Aelst and Nuytemans (2008) find little to no evidence of a significant impact of VAAs on voting behaviour in Dutch-speaking Belgium. Furthermore, experimental studies also find little to no effect of VAA results on voting behaviour (see Enyedi, 2016; Mahéo, 2016; Pianzola et al., 2019; Vassil, 2011).

In light of these conflicting findings, we use panel data to uncover the effect of VAAs on vote switching during the 2019 electoral campaign for the Belgian federal elections. More specifically, we study the impact of confirming/disconfirming advice provided by the VAA on vote switching. The case of Belgium is interesting because VAAs are widely used, yet seem to have little impact on voting

behaviour (Walgrave et al., 2008). Moreover, the country allows us to distinguish between regions where VAAs have been used since the early 2000s (Flanders) and regions where VAAs are a more recent phenomenon (Wallonia).

In a context of increasing electoral volatility and the possible prominence of issue voting, VAAs (and more particularly the results provided by the VAA) might affect users' voting choice during the campaign. Therefore, we investigate the impact of a (dis)confirming advice from a VAA on vote switching. Do users switch party when they receive a result that confirms/contradicts their initial preference? Secondly, we wonder if users actually follow the advice provided by the VAA. Do users vote in line with the VAA's suggestion? We use panel surveys – provided by the 2019 Represent Belgian Election Study that probed voters before and after the 2019 Belgian federal elections. Our study shows that having a disconfirming advice from a VAA increases users' probability to switch their voting choice. However, switchers do not always follow the advice provided by the VAA and vote, most of the time, for a different party.

2 From Stability to Volatility: How VAAs Affect Vote Switching

Our core goal is to understand the extent to which voting advice applications (VAAs) can affect voters' propensity to switch parties during the campaign. In that context, we first discuss the classical models of voting behaviour to explain electoral choice. While early models predicted electoral stability, electoral volatility has risen steadily in recent decades. Therefore, we turn to rational choice models of electoral choice, which can explain why citizens change their vote. Finally, we discuss the existing research that investigates VAAs' impact on voting behaviour and develop our hypotheses.

Classical models of voting behaviour – that is, the Columbia model, the Michigan model and cleavage theory – consider the voting choice to be rather stable. These respective models argue that citizens vote in line with their social groups, party preferences or the social/cultural cleavages present in a society. The Columbia model, developed by Paul Lazarsfeld's team (1944), is based on a longitudinal study in which researchers found that individuals vote according to the social group they belong to. Hence, they emphasise the role of these groups and socio-demographic variables on political attitudes that in turn largely determine voting behaviour. Moving beyond socio-demographic variables, the 'Michigan' model rather emphasises the effect of psychological determinants on the vote choice (Campbell, Converse, Miller & Stokes, 1980). Scholars that support the Michigan model highlight that party identification is the key for understanding and predicting one's vote. However, they do acknowledge that variables such as age and parents' party identification matter. Furthermore, adherents of the Michigan model argue that party identification increases with age and is enhanced by a high political interest. Lastly, Lipset and Rokkan (1967) explain that social and cultural cleavages determine not only the party landscape but also voters' individual voting decisions. In fact, the social and cultural cleavages present in society crystallise into political cleavages that may linger on for many decades. In sum, these

three models explain electoral stability: citizens determine their vote choices based on the social/cultural groups they belong to and their party preferences and then stick to it.

However, later studies criticise these classical models for underestimating electoral volatility. Pedersen (1979) found that party systems in terms of the net electoral volatility might vary more than existing theories up to that point had predicted. Indeed, during the last Belgian elections of 2019, electoral volatility was high (see van Erkel et al., 2019). Not only was the net volatility high between the 2014 and 2019 elections (16.8% in Flanders; 16.7% in Wallonia), the gross volatility was even higher with 32.2% of Flemish and 31.6% of Walloon voters changing parties between 2014 and 2019. Even more, citizens switch their vote choice not only between elections but also during campaigns. Indeed, according to the same panel survey, 20.8% of Flemish respondents and 21.6% of Walloon respondents switched their initial voting preference during the 2019 campaign. These elements highlight that the explanatory power of the classical literature regarding voting behaviour loses strength and might benefit from complementary explanations regarding electoral switching.

Scholars have looked at political sophistication and political frustration to explain electoral switching. Firstly, Dalton (1984) suggests that the process of 'cognitive mobilisation' (which refers to an increase in political sophistication among citizens due to rising levels of education and a media revolution) might increase the amount of 'floating voters'. The higher level of political sophistication among citizens might provoke a decline in the number of people who identify themselves with a single party (Dalton, 1984), which could in turn cause a surge in electoral volatility (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002). Despite empirical support for this theory, other studies suggest an opposite mechanism: voters who are well informed have more knowledge and hence are more stable in their vote choice (Albright, 2009; Marthaler, 2008). Some also find that volatile voters can be both highly and lowly informed (Granberg & Holmberg, 1990). Dassonneville (2012) studied electoral volatility in the 2009 Belgian elections and found that voters with low levels of political efficacy tend to switch more often between elections and during the campaign. She also emphasises that lowly sophisticated voters tend to switch their voting choice during the campaign, while highly sophisticated voters switch their vote before the beginning of the campaign. A second explanation for electoral volatility, developed by Zelle (1995), is linked to political frustration: voters that are dissatisfied with the political system might switch more due to macro stimuli (economic conditions, historic events). Zelle (1995) argues, therefore, that frustration towards politics is a driver for electoral volatility.

Another important explanation for electoral volatility comes from theories that start from the assumption that voters are rational decision-makers (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962; Downs, 1957). According to rational choice models, individuals have clear preferences. When confronted with a set of choices, they engage in a cost-benefit analysis of the different choices in order to select the optimal option (Dormagen & Mouchard, 2015). Thus, citizens elect parties or candidates that best match their preferences. In effect, derived from the rational

voter framework, some scholars argue that the lowering trend of party identification might be the consequence of 'issue voting' (Key, 1966; Nie, Verba & Petrocik, 1979). According to issue voting models (also known as 'spatial models' or 'proximity models'), voters have preferences about the policies they want to see implemented. They then compare their preferences with the policy proposals of the available parties or candidates and elect the party or candidate that comes closest to their own preferences. Actually, this model explains politics as a market where the 'demand' side meets the 'supply' side. Changes in the preferences of either side might cause vote switching during the campaign. With the decline of traditional cleavages and the rise of electoral volatility, the importance of issue voting might have increased (Walgrave et al., 2008).

In order for the political market to function properly, information on the relevant issues and on parties' policy proposals is crucial. In this context, electoral campaigns are important periods for voters to gather information so that they can develop preferences and recognise what parties or candidates propose. Indeed, political knowledge increases during campaigns (Chaffee, Zhao & Leshner, 1994; Holbrook, 2002). This increase in citizens' knowledge of parties' issue positions helps voters to choose the party that is most congruent with their opinion (Kleinnijenhuis & De Ridder, 1998). However, election campaigns sometimes risk overwhelming voters with (conflicting) information. Excessive flow of information makes it more difficult for voters to easily make the optimal voting decision (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006). The task of voting is even more complex in an environment like the Belgian case, where multiple parties compete in a highly fractionalised party system (Walgrave, Lesschaeve, Rihoux & Meulewaeter, 2015).

Since the 2000s, specific tools have emerged that fit the logic of proximity models: VAAs. These tools reduce the costs of gathering political information and help voters make sense of the political landscape. Simply put, VAAs compare voters' policy preferences to parties' policy proposals and generate voting advice. In practice, users fill out a web survey that probes their preferences on a set of issues. By comparing their issue positions with those of political parties, the applications generate voting advice and suggestions (Cedroni & Garzia, 2010; Garzia & Marschall, 2019). Based on this comparison, users of the tool can easily find out to what degree their preferences match those of the available parties, that is, the proximity to the available parties (Walgrave et al., 2009). VAAs have found their place in the information environment of election campaigns, including in Belgium where *De Stemtest* (in Dutch) and the *Test électoral* (in French) are widely used. As such, we might expect an impact of VAA use on citizens' voting decisions. Our goal is to assess the impact of VAAs on electoral volatility among users during the campaign of the 2019 Belgian federal elections.

Up until yet, the impact of VAAs on vote switching remains unclear (see Munzert et al. 2020). Some researchers find rather strong effects of VAA use on vote choice, while some other scholars do not. Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2007) find that VAAs had a significant impact on the 2006 Dutch elections. Similarly, Boogers (2006) shows that 27.4% of users of StemWijzer indicated that the VAA had an impact on their party preferences. This study, however, looks at voters' self-declared swing behaviour. Other scholars argue that the actual impact of VAAs on

citizens' vote choices should be strongly relativised. Indeed, Walgrave and colleagues (2008) warn of the difference between self-declared behaviour and actual behaviour. They studied the effect of the Belgian VAA and TV show that accompanied it in the 2004 Belgian elections and discovered that only half of the 8.2% of respondents who said that the VAA made them doubt about their voting decision actually changed their vote. Furthermore, even among the voters (1.1%) who said that the VAA made them change their vote, only two-thirds of them actually changed their vote (Walgrave et al., 2008 p. 43). Moreover, voters might have other predispositions towards parties regardless of a VAA that might explain their vote choice. Indeed, Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2017) separate the potential VAA effects from the genuine VAA effects on vote choice. They discover small but genuine VAA effects on voting choice, with doubting voters being especially susceptible to switch their vote. Nonetheless, they argue that a change in the vote choice cannot be attributed to the VAA if the voter already had several predispositions in favour of that party or when the voter has no positive predispositions in favour of that party.

Some authors have turned to experimental methods to isolate the impact of VAAs on electoral behaviour (Enyedi, 2016; Garry, Tilley, Matthews, Mendez & Wheatley, 2019; Mahéo, 2016). Enyedi (2016) reports that VAAs did not have an effect on vote choice. Mahéo (2016) finds that the effects on preference formation are only limited in time and does not find evidence that receiving a contradictory advice from the VAA leads to vote switching. Garry et al. (2019), using a field experiment, also find minimal effects of VAAs on party preferences in the deeply divided Northern Ireland. They conclude that VAAs have an impact at the individual level, with users putting their party preferences more in line with their ideology after VAA use. In sum, authors that use experimental methods find little (lasting) effects of VAAs on the electoral choice.

While experimental studies find little to no effect of VAA results on voting behaviour (see Enyedi, 2016; Mahéo, 2016; Pianzola et al., 2019; Vassil, 2011), the reverse is suggested by observational studies (see Andreadis & Wall, 2014; Klein Kranenburg, 2015; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2017; Pianzola, 2014a; Pianzola, 2014b; Ruusuvirta & Rosema, 2009). Some of the weaknesses of these studies are that they generally focus on vote switching *between* elections rather than *in-campaign* switching (e.g. Andreadis & Wall, 2014) or do not often include control variables that allow to isolate the impact of the VAA advice on vote switching (e.g. Ruusuvirta & Rosema, 2009). In contrast to most observational studies that rely on panel data, however, Walgrave et al. (2008) find little to no evidence of an impact of VAAs on voting behaviour in Belgium.

Our main aim is to contribute to the debate on VAAs' impact on vote choice. More specifically we endeavour to better understand *in-campaign* vote switching, by using data collected during the 2019 Belgian federal elections. We argue, based on the premises of issue voting, that VAA users do take the results of the tool into account before making a final voting decision. Most studies compare the impact of these applications between users and non-users. We, instead, focus on the effect of the tool's results among users. Firstly, we argue that VAA users are more likely to switch their vote choice if the VAA result goes against their initial party

preference. When users are confronted with a result that does not back up their initial voting intention, they might reconsider their final vote. Indeed, according to rational voter models, citizens should consider all information before coming to a voting decision. A VAA might provide citizens with a more complete picture of the political landscape. A rational voter would then question her initial voting intention and, if necessary, alter it. Therefore, we state the following first hypothesis:

H1: VAA users who received a disconfirming advice from the VAA switch their vote more often than users who received a confirmatory advice.

Secondly, we expect that users will switch in line with the advice provided by the VAA. VAAs not only (dis)confirm users' initial vote intention, they also introduce users to the electoral choice that best matches their preferences. Despite evidence of relatively minor effects of VAAs on voting decisions (Enyedi, 2016; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2017; Mahéo, 2016), we think it is sound to argue that the complementary and compact information given by the VAA makes an adequate voting decision (in terms of proximity of policy preferences) easier to reach (Lau, Patel, Fahmy & Kaufman, 2014). Thus, our second hypothesis is the following:

H2: VAA users who received a disconfirming advice from the VAA switch their vote in line with their VAA result.

3 Data and Methods

In this study, we rely on data collected by the EOS RepResent consortium, a collaboration between five Belgian universities (UCLouvain, Universiteit Antwerpen, ULB, VUB, KU Leuven).[1] To investigate voters during the 2019 Belgian elections, the consortium used panel data provided by Kantar TNS. The internet sample is representative in terms of age, gender and education. A total of 1,975 Flemish and 1,431 Walloon respondents completed both waves. The first wave was launched on 9 April and ended on 15 May. The second wave was launched after the elections (held on 26 May), on 28 May, and ended on 18 June.

In the second wave, respondents were asked whether they had used *De Stemtest/Test électoral*, a Belgian VAA that was launched on 3 April, before the launch of the first wave. The *Stemtest/Test électoral* is a VAA developed by academics from the University of Louvain and the University of Antwerp, in partnership with four Belgian media partners (VRT, RTBF, De Standaard and La Libre). Both Flemish and Francophone parties were asked to report their positions on a wide range of policy statements. The builders then selected a set of 25 to 35 policy statements for each VAA (the number of statements varied for the respective VAAs that were covering the federal, regional or European Parliament elections). Users could either 'Agree' or 'Disagree' with each one of these statements.[2] After answering the set of statements, they were given the option of giving extra weights to specific policy questions before getting their results. In the result section, users could see a rank-ordered list of the score for every party that was

included in the VAA. They also had the possibility to compare their position on the different policy statements with those of the parties. For the purpose of this study, we focus specifically on users who completed the version of *De Stemtest/ Test électoral* relevant to the federal level.

In the analysis, we are interested in the effect of VAAs on voters' final preference. Therefore, we assume that respondents completed the VAA after filling in the first wave of the panel survey in which they mentioned their initial preference. We control for other variables to isolate the impact of the VAA on vote switching. Unfortunately, we did not include a question in the first wave that probed if the respondent had already used the 2019 VAA prior to the first wave. This means that we cannot determine with certainty that the respondents completed the VAA before or after the first wave. As a result, we might underestimate the impact of VAAs on vote switching. A more crucial question, perhaps, is how long VAA effects on voting decisions last. VAA users might only be briefly influenced by the VAA results. Also, respondents that completed the VAA before the first wave of the panel survey might have already changed their vote preferences accordingly. They can even change it back to their initial preference by the time of the elections. The duration of VAA effects is thus essential but cannot be addressed in this analysis.

In order to answer our research question, we look at the impact of *De Stemtest/Test électoral* on vote switching. In the results section, we briefly describe who used the VAA. We then conduct two analyses to test our hypotheses: firstly, we use a logistic regression to test the impact of VAA results on vote switching; to answer our second question, we compare the percentage of switchers who switched towards a party recommended by the VAA and the percentage of switchers who changed to another party. Further, we cross-tabulate users' advice with their final voting choice to check, using association measures (Pearson's Chi-square), if they switch in line with the VAA's advice (see Table B of the Appendix). We account for the particularity of the Belgian political system by running separate analyses for the two biggest regions, Flanders and Wallonia. Each region has its own party system. Also, the Belgian VAA has a different notoriety in each region. Indeed, the first VAA in Flanders was launched in 2003, more than 10 years before the first French-speaking version of the VAA in Wallonia.

For the first analysis, we created a binary dependent variable that measures vote switching by comparing the individual's voting intention before the elections (wave 1) with their actual (declared) vote (wave 2). A substantial part of the Belgian respondents used the federal version of *De Stemtest/Test électoral*: 35.08% of the 1975 Flemish respondents and 24.45% of the 1431 Walloon respondents indicated that they used the federal VAA. To test our first hypothesis (H1), we created a measure that we call 'disconfirming advice'. This measure equals one if the initial voting intention differs from the first party that was recommended by the VAA and zero if they are the same (399 confirming advices and 642 disconfirming advices were delivered). Further, we created a measure that compares the actual (declared) vote with the VAA recommendation. The measure equals one if the declared vote in wave 2 is similar to the advice provided by the VAA and

amounts to zero if it is different. This measure allows us to acknowledge if the switchers genuinely switched towards the party provided by the VAA (H2).

Based on the literature mentioned in the previous section, we use five sets of control variables (see Appendix for details). The first group consists of socio-demographic variables: we control for age, gender (male = 0, female = 1) and the level of education (a categorical variable with three categories: 1 for those who have not finished full secondary school, 2 for those who finished secondary school and 3 for those who have a degree from higher education). Further, we control for the individual's political attitudes by looking at their level of external efficacy (principal component analysis (PCA) based on eight items, Cronbach's alpha = 0.7342), political trust (PCA based on four items, Cronbach's alpha = 0.933) and political interest (11-point scale). We also include a variable that probes respondents' position on a left-right ideological scale (self-position on a 0-10 left-right scale). Further, we check the level to which the respondent was exposed to the electoral campaign (PCA based on seven items, Cronbach's alpha = 0.8181). Lastly, we use a measure of political frustration based on the respondent's satisfaction with the policies taken by the federal government. We use voters' political knowledge as an indicator of political sophistication (Lachat, 2007).

4 Results

Before studying the impact of VAA advice on vote switching, we first describe the profile of Belgian VAA users. Scholars who study VAA users commonly assert that users differ from the general population (see Boogers & Voerman, 2003; Hooghe & Teepe, 2007). In fact, the typical VAA user has a profile that is similar to the one of the internet user: young, male, with a higher level of education and with an above-average income (Fivaz & Nadig, 2010; Ladner, Fivaz & Pianzola, 2012). Despite the further proliferation of the internet, these elements can also be found among the 2019 *Stemtest/Test électoral* users. Indeed (as shown in Table A in the Appendix), both in Flanders and Wallonia, users are younger, higher educated, show a high interest in politics and followed the campaign intensively. Our results from the Belgian legislative election of 2019 corroborate the existing knowledge in the literature of VAA users. However, we do find a surprising effect of age among Walloon and Flemish voters: the '65 to 74' years old age categories are slightly but significantly over-represented. This might indicate that older citizens are finding their way to these online applications (see Table A of the Appendix). Indeed, VAA users have been depicted as being rather young in the VAA literature (Fivaz & Nadig, 2010; Ladner, Fivaz, & Pianzola, 2012).

Now that we have a better grasp of 'who' VAA users are, we assess the potential impact of VAAs' advice on voters using a logistic regression, with vote switching between the first wave and the second wave of the survey as the dependent variable. We ran separate models for Flanders and Wallonia as they are two different cases in terms of VAA use and the party system. A total of 30.80% of the Flemish respondents who used the federal VAA (n = 692) switched their voting preference during the campaign. Among all Flemish VAA users, 57.66% received a

disconfirming advice from the VAA. Among the Walloon respondents who used the VAA (n = 347), 40.50% switched their voting intention and 70.03% of the Walloon users obtained a disconfirming advice from the VAA.

The results in Table 1 show that having a disconfirming advice from the VAA has a strong positive impact on vote switching among VAA users. While controlling for other variables that could explain vote switching, the effect of our variable is statistically significant, which indicates that having a confirming or a disconfirming advice might play a significant role in predicting users' vote switching. This corroborates our first hypothesis: VAA users who received a disconfirming advice from the VAA tend to switch more often than users who received a confirmatory advice from the VAA. Furthermore, the effect of a disconfirming advice is significant in both regions. However, the effect of a confirming advice is stronger among Flemish users (see graphs 1a and 1b). The probability that Walloon voters who received a disconfirming advice switch their initial vote choice is 50.97% (s.e. = 0.031) while it reaches 17.44% (s.e. = 0.037) for voters who received a confirming advice. In Flanders, the predicted probability that a user switches vote preference after obtaining a disconfirming advice is 48.67% (s.e. = 0.025) and only 8.96% (s.e. = 0.017) for a voter who received a confirming advice. Evidently, Flemish voters will not switch their vote preference more often than Walloon voters after receiving a disconfirming advice. Rather, voters from Flanders who obtained a confirming advice are more confident in their initial preference than Walloon voters. The greater effect of VAA results on vote switching in Flanders might also be linked to the fact that VAAs have been used since the early 2000s. The tools are thus more established in the region and citizens are possibly more eager to rely on its results.

Further, we find a negative effect of political interest on vote switching, in both regions. The odds of switching are lowered by 9.52% in Flanders and by 11.4% in Wallonia for a one-unit increase in political interest. Graph 2a and 2b show the decreasing relationship between predicted probabilities of vote switching and (higher) political interest. However, we find no convincing evidence regarding the effect of political knowledge on vote switching. These findings tend to relativise the suggestion from cognitive mobilisation theory regarding the link between higher level of sophistication and electoral volatility. However, one of the explanations regarding the results might be found in the work of Dassonneville (2012), who argues that sophisticated voters decide on their final vote before the beginning of the campaign. Considering the fact that our data were collected during the campaign, following Dassonneville's findings, most of the sophisticated voters would have switched before answering our survey.

However, these results do not tell us much about the direction in which users 'switched'. One of the principal arguments of VAA supporters is the fact that it might help voters to vote more in line with their policy preferences. In other words, VAAs could help users to vote for the party that is most 'issue-congruent' with them and, therefore, increase citizens' chances of being well represented in terms of policies.

Many scholars argue that being well represented might be essential to come near the ideal of democracy (Dahl, 1989; Lau & Redlawsk, 2006; Lau et al., 2014).

Therefore, if a disconfirming advice from the VAA leads one to vote for another party, one reasonable expectation would be that the party one would switch for is the party recommended by the VAA. If we assess that VAAs encourage citizens to cast votes for parties that resemble their policy preferences, it might generate better substantive representation, which in turn might generate a higher level of policy congruence between citizens and elected parties.

In order to examine the question, we investigate whether VAA users switch their final vote choice in line with the VAA's result.[3] The results from Table 2 show a similar trend in both regions. A large amount of VAA users (41.6% in Flanders; 56.9% in Wallonia), despite having a disconfirming advice, kept a stable voting preference between the two waves of the survey. This finding corroborates the results of Walgrave et al. (2008) in Belgium where they found that VAAs had a minor effect on vote switching. Indeed, users who received a confirming advice and keep a stable vote decision are more numerous. By contrast, users who got a disconfirming advice are less numerous than expected according to the Chi-square distribution to keep their voting decision.

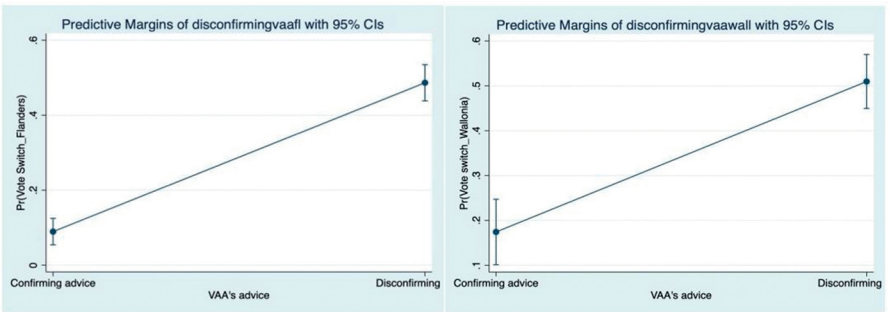
However, we have to reject our hypothesis about the direction in which switchers change their vote. Indeed, while the previous analysis has shown that VAA users tend to switch more when they receive a disconfirming advice, this analysis shows us that they do not necessarily switch in line with the VAA's advice. Unfortunately, the low number of switchers, specifically in Wallonia, does not allow us to reliably analyse the transfer of votes between each political party.

Nonetheless, two explanations might help to understand the rejection of our hypothesis. On the one hand, we know that many VAA users are either *doubters* or *seekers*: both types of users employ VAAs to make a voting decision (van de Pol, Holleman, Kamoen, Krouwel & De Vreese, 2014). Thus, having a disconfirming advice might push people to question their initial choice and switch their vote to another party without considering the advice given by the VAA. In other words, when the VAA provides a disconfirming advice, it tells the users that the proximity between their preferred party and them is suboptimal. It shows them that their party is not the best option in terms of issue congruence and the discontent caused by the results might cause them to switch to another party. On the other hand, voters who used the VAA and switched their vote were more prone to change for another party and would have changed their vote regardless of the results of the VAA. In other words, some undecided voters at the beginning of the campaign would have changed their vote no matter what, and the VAA might have pushed them towards vote switching. However, further investigation would be needed to disentangle this mechanism.

Table 1 Effect of a disconfirming advice of the Stemtest/Test électoral on vote switching (coefficient reported).

Vote switching w1-w2 (=1)	**Flanders**	**Wallonia**
	Coefficient (std. errors)	Coefficient (std. errors)
Disconfirming advice from the VAA (=1)	**2.438** (0.25)**	**1.752** (0.31)**
Female (=1)	0.181 (0.22)	0.500+ (0.26)
Age	-0.010 (0.01)	-0.002 (0.01)
Lower education (ref. = middle level education)	0.026 (0.39)	-0.508 (0.53)
Higher education (ref. = middle level education)	-0.378 (0.21)	-0.415 (0.28)
Political knowledge	-0.131+ (0.07)	-0.085 (0.08)
Political interest	-0.100* (0.05)	-0.121* (0.06)
Trust PCA	-0.067 (0.10)	0.120 (0.10)
External efficacy PCA	-0.054 (0.08)	-0.073 (0.09)
Left_Right	-0.002 (0.05)	0.108* (0.05)
Satisfaction with policies	-0.085 (0.07)	-0.096 (0.07)
Campaign exposure PCA	-0.006 (0.06)	-0.080 (0.08)
Intercept	-0.154 (0.58)	-0.528 (0.67)
Number of observations	692	347
Cragg & Uhler's (Nagelkerke) pseudo R^2:	0.368	0.255

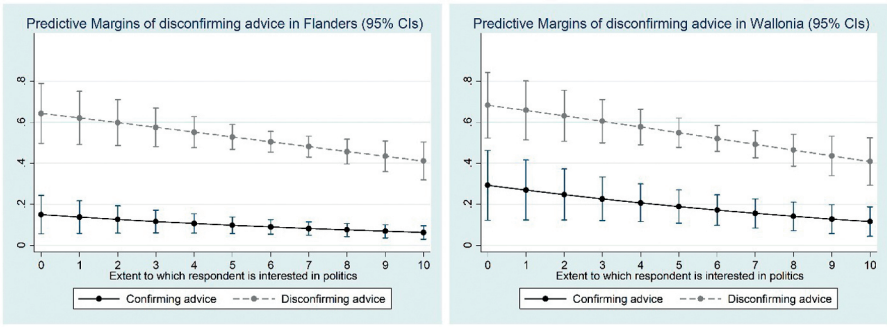
Significance level: ** <0.01; * <0.05; + <0.1



Graphs 1a and 1b: Predictive margins of a (dis)confirming advice on vote switch in Flanders (left) and Wallonia (right).

5 Discussion and Conclusion

The emergence of VAAs as a widely used tool during election campaigns has prompted many researchers to study the quality, impact and reach of the tool. We explicitly link VAAs to issue voting models and argue that they help voters recognise the electoral option that is most proximate to their policy preferences.



Graphs 2a and 2b: Predictive margins of disconfirming advice in Flanders (left) and Wallonia (right) on vote switch in relation to the level of political interest (not interested at all = 0 to extremely interested = 10).

Table 2 Switchers' vote in comparison with VAA's advice.

	Flanders			Wallonia		
	Corresponds to the VAA advice (%)	Does not correspond to the VAA advice (%)	Total	Corresponds to the VAA advice (%)	Does not correspond to the VAA advice (%)	Total
Stable vote w1-w2	58.4	41.6	466	43.1	56.9	204
Switchers w1-w2	40.1	59.9	227	28.5	71.5	144

This study aimed to contribute to the literature by investigating the case of the 2019 federal legislative elections in Belgium. More specifically, in the context of rising electoral volatility, we studied the impact of VAA advice on vote switching during electoral campaigns.

Using the 2019 Represent Belgian Election Study, a two-wave panel survey, we could observe electoral volatility between the campaign by comparing respondents' voting intention a few weeks before the election to their declared vote a few days after the election (based on recall). Furthermore, in the second wave, we asked respondents whether they had used a VAA and what the voting advice was. However, we did not ask this question in the first wave of the survey; hence, we do not know if respondents used the VAA prior to answering our survey and declaring their vote intention. This means that the VAA might have already impacted their vote intention before the first wave of our panel survey. As a result, we might underestimate the true effect of the VAA. Nevertheless, our results still show a significant effect of a (dis)confirming advice on vote switching.

In this article, we mainly studied the impact of VAAs on voting behaviour. We briefly described the characteristics of VAA users: they are younger, highly educated, rather highly politically interested and followed the campaign intensively. While those findings corroborate the literature, we do find an over-representa-

tion of VAA users aged 55-64 in Flanders and 65-74 in Wallonia and Flanders, which might indicate that older citizens are finding their way to these online tools. More importantly, we investigated the impact of VAA results on vote switching. Considering the fact that receiving a disconfirming advice tells the users that the preferred party is a suboptimal choice, the hypothesis tested was the following: VAA users who receive a disconfirming advice from the VAA switch more often than users who receive a confirmatory advice from the VAA. Our results show that in both regions, having a disconfirming advice from the VAA leads to vote switching, confirming the first hypothesis. Furthermore, when looking at the predicted probabilities, the impact is strongest among Flemish users compared to the Walloon users. In Flanders, VAAs have been present since the early 2000s. As a result, Flemish citizens perhaps trust VAA results more than Walloon citizens.

However, although we confirm that users who receive a disconfirming advice tend to switch more than users who receive a confirming advice, users do not necessarily change their vote in line with the VAA results. We hypothesised that voters who received a disconfirming advice would switch in favour of the party suggested by the VAA because it would be the party that is most congruent with the voters' issue positions. Unfortunately, our results are more mitigated: while 29% of Walloon users and 40% of Flemish users followed the advice given by the VAA, a significant majority of users switched to a different party. The rejection of our second hypothesis might be caused by the fact that some voters used it not only as a tool to help them choose their preferred party but also for entertainment purposes and to compare their positions with the party they want to vote for. Therefore, when the VAA provides a disconfirming advice, it informs the users their party is not the best option in terms of issue congruence, and the discontent caused by the test might lead users to re-examine their decision and vote for another party (even if not recommended by the VAA). An alternative explanation might be linked to the VAA itself. Indeed, as a result, the VAA displays a rank-ordered list of parties (from the more congruent to the less congruent) in percentages of closeness. The gap between the first and the second party is sometimes minimal, and users might have opted for the second/third best party due to marginal differences. These hypotheses should be tested in further analysis of VAA's impact on electoral volatility.

Finally, our research features some limitations that deserve consideration. Firstly, an endogeneity problem might be at play in the analysis. Wall, Krouwel & Vitiello (2014) state that endogeneity issues arise in VAA research because of two reasons. On the one hand, changes in issue positions might lead voters to other parties, regardless of VAA results. Indeed, parties or users can change their issue positions over time. VAA results will reflect this change in opinion. If a voter then switches his or her preferred party, rather than reflecting the genuine effect of VAAs on vote switching, the preference change reflects a change in own issue positions. Thus, it is not so much the VAA that pushes the voter to another party, but rather the change in their personal and/or the party's policy positions and because of events unrelated to the electoral campaign. On the other hand, in line with Ladner and Pianzola (2010) and Walgrave et al. (2009), Wall et al. (2014)

specify that a large share of VAA users is undecided in their final vote. They argue that studying volatility between elections or during the campaign might "tell us more about the type of audiences that VAAs attract than about the effects that they may be said to exert" (p. 420).

A second limitation has to do with recall error, a known risk in VAA research. We did not possess the actual VAA outcomes of the respondents, but instead relied on their memory to inform us on their VAA results. However, Wall et al. (2014) demonstrate that many VAA users do not remember their VAA party advice correctly and that recall errors are consistently biased in favour of the party the respondent voted for. While we can be more certain about vote switching, thanks to two waves of data collection, we rely on users' (potentially biased) memory to report the advice received from the VAA. Nevertheless, this issue should mainly decrease the impact of our results and make the estimates more conservative. Indeed, if one's memory is biased towards the party they voted for, we might expect switchers to (declare to) vote in line with the VAA. As our analysis shows, this is not the case. Nonetheless, those results still do tell much about VAAs' impact on vote switching, specifically among switchers.

The limitations of this study suggest the need for further research about the impact of VAAs on voting behaviour. The question of timing is crucial, and more specifically the question of the lasting VAA effect on vote preference. As of now, we do not know in detail how long the effects of VAA results on voting preferences last. Mahéo (2016) suggests that the effects of VAAs are limited in time. Therefore, one path for further analyses might be to determine when the VAA has been completed by the respondents in order to account for the lasting effect of VAAs on vote switch (e.g. does the strength of the effect change as the elections get closer?). Moreover, as our results show that a disconfirming advice increases vote switching, further analyses should enable us to address some of the abovementioned limitations. Increasing the size of our sample would also enable us to deepen our investigation. Indeed, the relatively small number of respondents that completed the VAA did not enable us to explore the vote transfer between parties. Did the VAA significantly bolster some parties compared to others? It is quite challenging to empirically establish which party or parties benefited from the VAA since the proportion of switchers is relatively low. At this stage, we can nevertheless conclude that VAA results have a significant impact on vote switching during electoral campaigns.

Notes

1 https://represent-project.be/.

2 Although the effect of VAAs on users' vote choices remains unclear, the tools are often criticised. This is also the case for the Belgian VAA, which faced criticism for being too simplistic and unnuanced due to its binary configuration (Abts, Swyngedouw & Billiet, 2005; Cedroni & Garzia, 2010; Krouwel & Fiers, 2008; Swyngedouw & Goeminne, 2005; Van Camp, Lefevere & Walgrave, 2014; *see also* Krouwel, Vitiello & Wall, 2012 for a detailed discussion).

3 We also used a correspondence table using Pearson's Chi-square measure of association (*see* Table B in the Appendix). The results are significant for both regions and confirm the direction of the percentages: users tend not to follow the advice given by the VAA.

4 NB: The independent variable included in the logistic regression models is this one. It has not been recoded into categories (as in Table A).

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Appendix

Table A *Comparison between Flemish/Walloon respondents and Flemish/Walloon users of the federal VAA.*

	Share among Flemish respondents (%) (a)	Share among Federal *Stemtest* users (%) (b)	Difference (b-a)	Share among Walloon respondents (%) (c)	Share among Federal *Test électoral* users (%) (d)	Difference (d-c)
Gender						
Women	41.9	40.4	-1.5	51.4	48.1	-3.3
Men	58.1	59.6	1.5	48.6	51.9	3.3
Age groups						
18-24	6.6	8.2*	1.6	6.6	10.3*	3.7
25-34	10.1	12.3*	2.2	17.5	18.4	0.9
35-44	15.4	14.7	-0.7	19.4	18.4	-1.0
45-54	19.4	17.9	-1.5	25.0	20.1*	-4.9
55-64	21.1	17.5*	-3.6	21.8	19.0	-2.8
65-74	22.6	25.3*	2.7	8.1	12.1*	4.0
75+	4.7	4.2	-0.5	1.5	1.7	0.2
Educational level						
Low	12.4	7.2**	-5.2	12.4	6.6**	-5.8
Full secondary	40.0	32.6**	-7.4	36.8	28.4**	-8.4
High	47.6	60.2**	12.6	50.9	64.9**	14.0
Political interest						
Low	10.2	5.2**	-5.0	16.5	6.3**	-10.2
Rather low	12.8	11.1	-1.7	17.8	13.8*	-4.0
In the middle	14.4	10**	-4.4	14.5	11.5+	-3.0
Rather high	46.7	50.8*	4.1	40.0	50.6**	10.6
High	15.9	22.9**	7.0	11.1	17.8**	6.7
Intensity with which one followed the campaign						
Very intensively	10.0	15.4**	5.4	6.0	11.5**	5.5
Intensively	32.4	39.5**	7.1	24.5	35.1**	10.6
Not very intensively	43.1	40.1+	-3.0	44.8	44.5	-0.3
Not at all	14.5	4.9**	-9.6	24.7	8.9**	-15.8

Significance level: ** <0.01; * <0.05; + <0.1.

Note: Construction of the independent variables from Table A:

The 2019 Represent Belgian Election Study contained the question of whether the respondents used the VAA for the federal election or not. Hence, we

Table B Switchers' vote in comparison with VAA's advice (Chi-square test).

	Flanders			Wallonia		
	Followed the VAA advice	**Did not follow the VAA advice**	**Total**	**Followed the VAA advice**	**Did not follow the VAA advice**	**Total**
Stable vote (w1-w2)	272	194	466	88	116	204
Expected n	197.7	268.3	466.0	61.6	142.4	204.0
Vote switch (w1-w2)	**91**	**136**	**227**	**41**	**103**	**144**
Expected n	118.9	108.1	227.0	53.4	90.6	144.0
Total	294	399	693	129	219	348
Expected n	294.0	399.0	693.0	129	219	348.0
	Chi sq. (1) = 20.4514	p = 0.000		Chi sq. (1) = 7.7822	p = 0.005	

compare Flemish and Walloon voters with federal VAA users in terms of socio-demographic (gender, age and educational level) and political variables (political interest and intensity with which one followed the campaign). We conducted **Chi-square tests** in order to assess significant differences between the sample of federal users and the population of respondents with certainty.

– *Political interest*: the 11-point Likert scale political interest variable was recoded into a categorical variable (five categories), sorting them in a logical order according to the scale of values to improve the readability of the table. The variable was recoded as follows (and only for the purpose of this table):
  1 Low political interest: Respondents who indicated a score of 0 (= not interested at all) or 1
  2 Rather low: Respondents who indicated a score from 2 to 4
  3 In the middle: Respondents who indicated a score of 5
  4 Rather high: Respondents who indicated a score from 6 to 8
  5 High political interest: Respondents who indicated a score of 9 or 10 (= extremely interested)
– *Intensity with which one followed the campaign*: we used a measure of campaign intensity in order to know our respondents' propensity to follow the campaign. We used it as the battery of question 'Campaign exposure' includes questions regarding newspapers. As the VAA was promoted by the media, it might cause an endogeneity problem regarding the use of the VAA. Indeed, did one use the VAA because he or she followed the media regularly and have had an incentive to do it or is it because he or she was interested in the tool because he or she followed the campaign? We therefore used another indicator: *Campaign intensity* with the following question:

  How intensively did you follow the last electoral campaign?

Note: Construction of the independent and dependent variables from the logistic regression models:

Our dependent variable 'Vote switching' was constructed as follows:

We asked respondents their *vote intention* in the first wave of the survey (a few days/weeks before the election) and in the second wave, we asked for their 'effective' vote decision. While the first question should not suffer from any bias, the second is a recall measure, which might add some noise to our measure. However, our variable was coded as 1 if the party choice between the two waves were different and 0 if they were the same.

Regarding our main independent variable, we created a measure of *confirming/disconfirming advice* from the (federal) VAA by looking at individuals' voting intentions compared to the (declared) advice given by the VAA. Moreover, we also created some measures that compare the actual (declared) vote with the VAA recommendation.

Regarding *education*, we created three categories: 1 for those who have not finished secondary school; 2 for those who have finished secondary school but not higher education; and 3 for those who graduated from higher education.

Regarding *political knowledge*, we asked six questions and attributed a score of 1 for each good answer and 0 for each bad/'I don't know' answer. The variable is the sum of correct answers and goes from 0 to 6. The questions were the following and were multiple choice question with four possible answers:

1 The following six questions assess your general knowledge on politics. If you do not know the answer, you can simply respond 'I do not know'. The federal parliament is composed of …
2 The president of the Chamber of Representatives is …
3 How many states are in the European Union?
4 Who is the Flemish/Walloon Minister of Mobility? (depending on the region of the respondent)
5 Who elects the members of the European Parliament?
6 Which political issue is primarily handled on a European level rather than on the national or regional level?

'Political interest' and 'left-right' were self-reported measures as used in the literature:

To what extent are you interested in politics in general? [0-10 scale: 0 = Not interested at all; 10 = Extremely interested] [4]

In politics people often talk of 'left' or 'right'. Can you place your own convictions on a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 meaning 'left', 5 'in the centre' and 10 'right'? [0-10 scale: 0 = Left; 5 = Centre; 10 = Right]

A measure of *frustration* was used based on one's satisfaction with the policies developed by the government. The question asked was the following:

To what extent are you satisfied with the policies implemented by the following political decision-making entities in the past few years? (The federal government)

Finally, we used three measures that capture *political trust, campaign exposure and external political efficacy*. Those variables are based on specific batteries of questions and a measure for each variable has been constructed via a PCA where the first component was used in each case.

Political trust Cronbach's alpha = 0.933	**On a scale of 0 to 10, what is your level of confidence in each of the following institutions? [0-10 scale: 0 = Absolutely no confidence; 10 = Complete confidence]** 1 Political parties 2 The federal parliament 3 Politicians 4 The European Union
External efficacy Cronbach's alpha = 0.7342	**Please indicate to what extent you disagree or agree with the following statements. [1 = Totally disagree; 2 = Somewhat disagree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 4 = Somewhat agree; 5 = Totally agree]** 1 Most citizens do not have clear political preferences. 2 Political parties do not offer real political alternatives to the people. 3 Political parties give too much freedom to campaign advisers to determine important political issues.* 4 The influence of interest groups and lobbyists on policies is too big. 5 Voting is pointless because parties do what they want anyway. 6 In general, our political system functions fairly. 7 Our political decision-making processes are sufficiently transparent. 8 In general, our political system functions in an efficient way.
Campaign exposure Cronbach's alpha = 0.8181	**For each of the following channels, how many times did you see information about politics in the past month? [1 = Never; 2 = Less than once per week; 3 = 2-3 times per week; 4 = 4-5 times per week; 5 = 6-7 times per week]** 1 Television 2 News websites 3 Newspapers (press and online) 4 Social media 5 Posters of political parties 6 Advertisements of parties or candidates (in the press, social media and/or by post) 7 Political parties' websites

RESEARCH NOTE

Caretaker Cabinets in Belgium

A New Measurement and Typology

Régis Dandoy & Lorenzo Terrière[*]

Abstract

Belgium is probably the world's best known case of where caretaker governments reside. Yet a clear scholarly definition and measurement of this concept is missing. Based on a detailed analysis of the Belgian federal cabinets, this research note explores the main characteristics and measures the length of the various caretaker periods. We find that Belgium was governed for no less than 1,485 days by a caretaker government between 2007 and 2020, which equals more than four full calendar years. This research note also presents a novel typology of caretaker periods based on the institutional and political practice within the Belgian legislative and executive branches. This typology can be used to assess caretaker periods at other levels of government as well as in other countries in order to improve our understanding of the many 'faces' that a caretaker government can take on.

Keywords: caretaker government, Belgium, cabinets, political crisis.

1 Introduction

Political scientists often use Belgium as an ideal case study for discussing processes of government formation and of caretaker cabinets. Combined with its complex multilevel institutional architecture and its enduring regionalist tensions, these processes have attracted much attention from the international community. The various episodes of the lengthy federal government formation even kept the international media in suspense over the last decade. The fact that Belgium had a caretaker government throughout its successful EU presidency term in 2010 impressed many European observers.

Caretaker periods mark the transition between the termination of one government and the start of another. If the end of a cabinet and the kick-off of a new one can be considered as gold mines for political scientists working on elections, executives and minister-

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ial careers, the inter-bellum period did not receive the same research attention. Literature on caretaker cabinets, in particular, is scarce (Boston, Levine, McLeay, Roberts & Schmidt, 1998; Courtenay Ryals & Golder, 2010; Schleiter & Belu, 2015). Yet several scholarly works on caretaker governments in Belgium have been published in prestigious journals, and it even constituted the core topic of an entire debate section of *European Political Science* back in 2012. These studies often focused on the 2010-2011 political stalemate and limited themselves to two main phenomena: (1) how can we explain these long periods of caretaker government and (2) how can we explain that the Belgian political system did not collapse – but actually did quite well – under a caretaker cabinet?

Despite these relevant academic contributions with regard to caretaker cabinets, there are no systematic data or studies available that demonstrate the different ways in which such cabinets diverge from others (Courtenay Ryals & Golder, 2010). Also, there have been no thorough attempts to disentangle the various kinds of caretaker periods. Consequently, authors have used diverse definitions of what a caretaker government actually is. Furthermore, there is no agreement on the exact moments when a caretaker period begins and ends. Therefore, this research note has two objectives. First, it explores the definition, characteristics and how caretaker cabinets are best measured timewise. Second, it provides a detailed typology of the different caretaker periods, a tool that will subsequently allow us to compare caretaker cabinets across time and space. Our assessment is based on previous academic works and on a detailed analysis of the Belgian caretaker cabinets between 2007 and 2020.

2 Caretaker Cabinets: Definition and Characteristics

In order to prevent a void in political decision making between two different governments, countries have implemented various procedural strategies aimed at bridging such a gap. In presidential regimes, for example, the newly elected president does not take up power immediately after the elections but rather enters into executive office a few weeks later. This period varies from country to country. For instance, in the USA, Donald Trump took the oath of office on 20 January 2017, i.e. no less than 73 days after the presidential elections, and 32 days after the actual vote of the electoral college. This time interval is deemed necessary to prepare for the transition between the two administrations and cabinets. On the other hand, in parliamentary regimes the new cabinet usually takes power only after its investiture vote in parliament. Yet this investiture usually takes place a few days or even weeks after the elections. This custom affects both Westminster and consensus democracies but is more frequent in countries with proportional representation (Boston et al., 1998). Moreover, there coexist subnational variations of these caretaker conventions, for example in Australia (Davis, Ling, Scales & Wilkins, 2001; Tiernan & Menzies, 2007). But, overall, it is this specific period in the lifetime of a government, located in between the

former and the new cabinet, that is called a 'caretaker' government.[1]

After its resignation or its removal by parliament, a cabinet is supposed to cease its activities immediately. The reasoning is that the dismissed cabinet cannot take any further decisions or actions that would compromise the future responsibilities of the next cabinet. However, it is necessary to avoid a complete absence of the executive power, as this could be detrimental to the country. Therefore, the resigning or removed cabinet cannot immediately leave office and instead needs to remain in power until its successor is appointed (Schleiter & Belu, 2015). This is the first characteristic of a caretaker government, which ensures that there is continuity and that the country is never without a functioning executive. In that respect, some authors have described caretaker cabinets as fulfilling a 'bridging role' between duly mandated governments and have referred to them as 'interim governments' (McDonnell & Valbruzzi, 2014).

In that sense, caretaker cabinets have to be distinguished from those cabinets that are specifically appointed to bridge the transition between two cabinets or when their sole purpose is to bring the country to (early) elections: these are considered as interim or transitory cabinets.[2] Many examples of such transitory cabinets can be found in semi-presidential systems and in Central Europe (Amorim Neto & Strøm, 2006; Courtenay Ryals & Golder, 2010; Hloušek & Kopeček, 2014; Muller-Rommel, Fettelschoss & Harfst, 2004). In Sweden, the transitory cabinets are supposed to be apolitical and non-partisan and are therefore composed of technocrats (Beckman, 2007; Larsson, 1994). Non-partisan transitory governments have also been observed in Bangladesh, Bulgaria and Italy and, to a lesser extent, in Finland and Portugal (Courtenay Ryals & Golder, 2010; Hloušek & Kopeček, 2014; Magone, 2000; McDonnell & Valbruzzi, 2014; Zafarullah & Yeahia Akhter, 2000).

A second important characteristic of a caretaker government concerns the limited scope and range of actions of the executive. According to Van Aelst and Louwerse (2014), it is a situation in which the active government can do little more than handling 'current affairs'. The government is only 'taking care' of the cabinet functions and duties whose continuity seems essential. The basic principles a caretaker government adheres to are twofold. First, the cabinet refrains from taking decisions that may burden the incoming government, whereby it restricts itself to preserving the 'policy status quo' (Boston et al., 1998; Davis et al., 2001; Schleiter & Belu, 2015). Given that a change of government is probably imminent, it is considered inappropriate to bind the incoming government by committing to significant new political initiatives. Second, the caretaker cabinet does not undertake new political initiatives and simply postpones all significant decisions until the new government takes over. Depending on the country, the caretaker government can undertake actions within a larger or smaller range of policies.

Several scholars have outlined additional characteristics. In their works on minority governments, Herman and Pope (1973) remark that caretaker governments have not only limited freedom of action but also a

limited life span. They regard caretaker governments as 'default administrations' that remain in power for just a limited and prearranged period of time. Yet the issue of a time constraint that actively limits the life span of the cabinet is not present in later academic works. Moreover, this feature actually seems contradictory to the initial definition of a caretaker government. Indeed, the notion of a caretaker government rests on the idea that this government remains in power until its successor is finally appointed. In the words of Hooghe (2012), "No matter how long that might take, the earlier government simply has to soldier on."

In some countries, such as New Zealand or the UK, underdeveloped caretaker conventions can leave the country vulnerable to political crisis and controversy (Boston et al., 1998; Schleiter & Belu, 2015). Take, for instance, Australia where caretaker conventions are not legally binding rules (Davis et al., 2001). An additional problem is that caretaker governments do not enjoy sufficient political legitimacy. First, caretaker cabinets may have lost the vote of confidence in parliament, which means that their ministers do not enjoy the trust of the MPs anymore. Second, the cabinet parties have not yet gone through a new ballot box verdict and/or through a new vote of confidence in parliament. This lack of political control then conflicts with the core democratic principle of the political accountability of ministers vis-à-vis the legislative assembly. Indeed, since the former government has already resigned or has been removed, its actions can no longer be controlled by parliament (Baeselen, Toussaint, Pilet & Brack, 2014). Thus, the legislative power can no longer cast a vote on a motion of no confidence against an – already – removed executive. But even if parliament cannot sanction the caretaker government as such, it can still control it in principle. For instance, it is not rare to see their ministers being questioned publicly during plenary or committee meetings. Parliamentary consent is also still needed to pass any new legislation.

3 Measuring Caretaker Cabinets in Belgium

Rather surprisingly, there is no formal definition of a caretaker government within the Belgian legal framework. As in many other parliamentary regimes (Boston et al., 1998), the concept of caretaker government or cabinet is not present in the constitution, even though the Belgian constitutional framework is quite robust in ensuring the continuity of the governmental function (Hooghe, 2012). In regard to budgetary issues, a complete governmental deadlock, as happens in the United States, is virtually impossible in Belgium. Caretaker governments are only briefly mentioned in the special Law on Institutional Reforms (d.d. 8 August 1980), which stipulates that "as long as it has not been replaced, the demissionary cabinet remains caretaker".

Thus, the definition of a caretaker government is determined by customary law and practice. These conventions are legally enforceable by the Council of State: cabinet's administrative acts that do not respect these conventions run the risk of being annulled (Brans, Pattyn & Bouckaert, 2016). A common standard acceptance is that a

caretaker government limits itself to just three main types of policies: daily matters, ongoing matters (i.e. policy continuity) and urgent matters. Hooghe (2012) adds to this a fourth set of policies that ensures the country's stability and fulfils its international obligations. Also, the range of actions of the caretaker cabinet is sometimes further 'specified' by means of own public communication. This was the case during the 2010-2011 political crisis, when the services of the prime minister and the minister of Budget released a circular letter on 7 May 2010 on the future responsibilities of the caretaker government (Brans, 2012).

While there is a consensus among scholars on the conceptual definition of a caretaker government in the context of Belgium, expert opinions are divided when it comes to the exact measurement of caretaker periods. Following the works of Courtenay Ryals and Golder (2010), we understand that the exact duration of caretaker cabinets depends heavily on its actual measurement. When does this caretaker period start, and when does it end? Is the start of the time interval located before or after a general election, or does it cover both periods? Does it also include the process of government formation, or can a caretaker government be in place independently of parallel party negotiations?

In brief, to determine the date of commencement of a caretaker period, we observe that there are generally three events to consider: (a) the King's acceptance of the government's resignation (Bouckaert & Brans, 2012; Brans, 2012), (b) the sitting government loses a vote of confidence (Schleiter & Morgan-Jones, 2009), or (c) the parliament is dissolved (Davis et al., 2001; Schleiter & Morgan-Jones, 2009). There is an ongoing debate as to whether the formal announcement of new elections should be added to this list as a fourth relevant moment (Boston et al., 1998). The end date of a caretaker period is shaped by distinct events such as (a) new elections (Schleiter & Morgan-Jones, 2009), (b) the end of negotiation talks producing a new coalition government (Bouckaert & Brans, 2012), or (c) the formal appointment of new ministers by the King (Hooghe, 2012).

In fact, a large array of phenomena and events might classify as reference points for a 'caretaker government'. For instance, Brans et al. (2016) distinguish between two archetypes of caretaker periods: (a) between the parliament's dissolution (or when an incumbent government loses a vote of confidence in parliament) and a general election and (b) between a general election and the formation of a new government. On the other hand, Boston et al. (1998) identified two alternative types of caretaker periods: (a) between an election and the swearing-in of a new government and (b) between a government resigning or losing a vote of no-confidence in parliament and the formation of a new government.[3] Finally, the most developed typology of caretaker periods is probably the one Baeselen et al (2014) proposed as they distinguish between four types of periods: from the cabinet resignation until the dissolution of parliament; between the dissolution of parliament and the elections; between the elections and the installation of the new parliament, and between the installation of the new parliament and the swearing-in of the new cabinet.

These aforementioned procedural typologies diverge from the formal judicial interpretations of this uncategorised political phenomenon. This comes as no surprise, since the actual dynamic of caretaker governments is also heavily shaped by political evolutions in practice. If we apply a too narrow definition in the study of this phenomenon, we may fail to detect some valuable information about this political concept. Therefore, in this research note we call for a broader and more comprehensive understanding of this 'moving target'. Indeed, we believe that enlarging our conceptual scope of attention will improve our abilities to effectively analyse and explain the political relevance of caretaker governments. More specifically, we consider a caretaker period as the interval during which either of the two branches (executive or legislature) does not enjoy its full powers. The exact caretaker period then possibly starts on the day of two distinct phenomena: the resignation of the cabinet or the dissolution of the parliament (if the cabinet still enjoys its full capacity). It ends on three possible occasions: the withdrawal of the resignation of the cabinet, the vote of confidence of the new cabinet or the installation of a new parliament (provided that the cabinet still enjoys its full capacity).

In other words, we opt for a more all-encompassing definition of what a caretaker cabinet comprises, i.e. a more generous measurement in comparison with previous works. Take, for example, the famous caretaker period[4] at the end of the Leterme II cabinet in 2010-2011. Some scholars calculated that it lasted for 541 days (see, for instance, Baeselen et al., 2014) between the elections on 13 June 2010 and the oath of the new cabinet in the hands of the King on 6 December 2011, whereas others found that it lasted for 589 days (see, for instance, Bouckaert & Brans, 2012) between the King's acceptance of the cabinet resignation on 26 April 2010 and 6 December 2011. In contrast, our measurement then leads to an even longer caretaker period: 597 days, from the day of the government's resignation (22 April 2010) up to the vote of confidence of the new cabinet in parliament (10 December 2011).

When using this definition for the whole period under study, it means that Belgium was governed by a *de facto* caretaker cabinet during no less than 1,485 days between 2007 and 2020. In other words, this corresponds to more than four (!) full calendar years, or to 29.04% of the entire period between 1 January 2007 and 31 August 2020. Indeed, we argue that observing such a longer interval will allow for a more complete analysis of the political dynamics that are at play here. Table 1 presents the duration of the different Belgian coalition governments from 2003 to 2020, including the duration of the respective caretaker periods (in days).[5] For instance, of his 1,026 days as Belgian prime minister, Yves Leterme spent more than half (59.55%) as the head of a caretaker cabinet. Far behind this dubious record, Charles Michel and Elio Di Rupo spent, respectively, 17.26% and 16.73% of their prime ministership in a caretaker period. On the contrary, Herman Van Rompuy spent only three days as prime minister of a caretaker cabinet.

Table 1 Belgian cabinets (2003-2020)

Cabinets	Cabinet duration (in days)	Caretaker period (in days)
Verhofstadt II	1,623	233
Verhofstadt III	90	2
Leterme I	285	16
Van Rompuy	330	3
Leterme II	741	595
Di Rupo	1,040	174
Michel I	1,520	5
Michel II	322	313
Wilmès I	142	142
Wilmès II	Ongoing	2
Total		1,485

Note: Our analysis ends in August 2020.

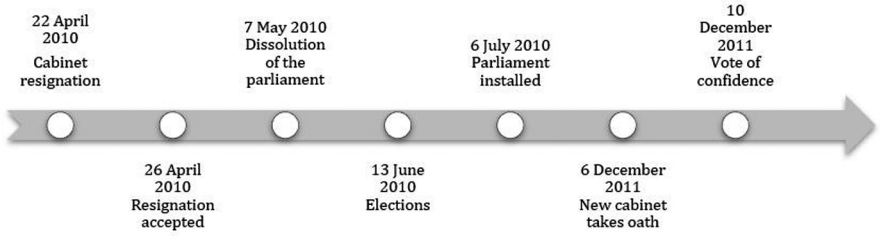

Figure 1 Timeline of the 2010-2011 caretaker government

4 A Typology of Caretaker Periods

To map the whole universe of caretaker cabinets in Belgium, we initially relied on the typology built by Baeselen and his colleagues (2014). To this we add two important insights. In this novel typology, we distinguish seven different types of caretaker periods (named A to G) depending on different scenarios: pre- and post-election periods, parliament being dissolved or in place, resignation accepted by the King, a new cabinet being sworn in. For the sake of clarity, we present this typology in a chronological sequence, hereby using the well-known example of the 2010-2011 political crisis (see Figure 1).

The first type of a caretaker period (Type A in our typology) is initiated by the resignation of the cabinet, generally owing to internal dissent. In the Belgian political system, however, the resignation of the cabinet is effective only after the King/Queen has formally approved it. Usually, the prime minister presents his or her resignation to the sovereign who accepts this. Yet it may well happen that the King/Queen does not directly accept the resignation of the cabinet (which is increasingly the case in Belgian politics). Instead, (s)he may take a few

days to consult political leaders or simply to 'cool things down'. The resigning prime minister can then seize this opportunity to try and solve once more the rising political crisis that has led to the resignation of the cabinet. The reality of being at the brink of political deadlock may also be used as a leverage tool during negotiation talks. Later on, the sovereign may decide to finally accept the resignation (e.g. the Michel II cabinet in 2018) or to refuse it (e.g. the Leterme I cabinet in July 2008). During this reflection period, parliament remains in its full legal capacity. This type of caretaker period may seem anecdotic, but it actually concerns four different cabinet episodes during the observed time frame: it lasted for a total of 12 days between 2007 and 2020. Other countries, such as the Netherlands, have witnessed similar types of caretaker periods, where cabinets are labelled '*demissionaire*' as soon as they have offered their resignation to the King/Queen (Otjes & Louwerse, 2014).

The second type of a caretaker government concerns the interval that starts when – for whatever reason – the life of the cabinet is ended before the end of the legislature and whereby the King/Queen accepts this (Type B). This premature end of the cabinet may be due to a resignation of the government because of internal disagreements or after it lost a confidence vote in parliament. During this interlude, parliament remains in its full legal capacity. This kind of caretaker period typically ends with the dissolution of parliament (e.g. the Leterme II cabinet in 2010) or the swearing-in of a new government (e.g. the Leterme I cabinet in 2008). A telling example of this type of caretaker government lies in the period of 125 days of the Michel II cabinet that followed the acceptance of its resignation by the King on 21 December 2018 until the dissolution of the federal parliament on 25 April 2019. In total, this type of caretaker period lasted for 145 days between 2007 and 2020.

The third type of caretaker period (type C) may chronologically follow the previous type and concerns the time segment between the dissolution of parliament and the conduct of new elections. Since the incumbent cabinet was already in caretaker mode at the time of the dissolution (e.g. the Michel II cabinet in 2018), the calling of new elections does not affect its actual working: it was already bereft of full control by parliament since its formal resignation. This delicate transition period is constitutionally bound and extends to a maximum of forty days. For example, in 2019 parliament was dissolved on 25 April and elections were conducted on 26 May. Overall, this type of caretaker period lasted for 68 days between 2007 and 2020.

It may also happen that the coalition government does not resign before the end of its actual term (this happened twice during the 2007-2020 period) and enjoys its full powers at the time of the dissolution of parliament. This fourth kind (Type D) is different from the previous one in that the executive is not demissionary here but becomes caretaker just because the dissolved parliament can no longer control the government's actions. This was, for instance, the case of the Di Rupo cabinet in 2014, which automatically became a caretaker government, and this from the day of the dissolution of the federal parliament onwards (24 April). The

two episodes that correspond to this type of caretaker period together account for 70 days between 2007 and 2020.

The fifth (Type E) period resembles the two previous types of caretaker periods but can be differentiated by the fact that it immediately follows upon new elections. The elections deliver a renewed set of representatives and may alter the balance of power in parliament. But the key issue for this period is that the new parliament has not been installed yet and therefore cannot exercise its controlling duties on the actions the cabinet undertakes in the meantime, no matter whether the cabinet was demissionary or not before the elections. During this post-election period, negotiations to form a new cabinet are initiated. In the recent political history of Belgium, no federal cabinet has been formed before the installation of the newly elected parliament. Usually, this period between the elections and the first gathering of the parliament lasts for three to four weeks (from 18 days in 2007 to 25 days in 2019). Within the time frame of our study, this period lasted for 91 days in total.

The installation of a new legislature is a key moment in the lifetime of a caretaker government. Even if it does not directly impact the power of the executive, it means that parliament now re-enjoys its full legal capacity to control the actions of the caretaker cabinet. In addition, the new balance of power in the legislative branch can affect the number of seats on which the cabinet coalition relies. For instance, the minority cabinet Michel II could rely on fifty-two seats before the elections and merely thirty-eight afterwards. These electoral changes affect the capability of caretaker cabinets to pass new legislation. In brief, the sixth type of caretaker period (Type F) concerns the time span between the installation of a new parliament and the swearing-in of a new government. During this period, parties and their delegates discuss the new coalition formula, the content of the coalition agreement, the appointment of the new ministers and other key issues such as state and constitutional reforms. This extensive political agenda partly explains the length of these caretaker episodes, such as in 2010-2011, where it lasted for 518 days. This is by far the most frequent type of caretaker period in Belgian political history as it corresponds to no less than 1,079 days between 2007 and 2020.

The last type of caretaker period (type G) corresponds to the interval between the swearing-in (the new prime minister and the new ministers take oath in the hands of the King/Queen) and the vote of confidence in parliament. Even if the new cabinet is installed thanks to a political agreement, it will only enjoy its full legal capacity after it has been formally approved by an absolute majority in parliament. This period may take a few days as the newly appointed prime minister needs to present his or her government declaration in parliament, followed by an investiture debate as well as a confidence vote. In 2014, it took no less than five days between the swearing-in of the Michel I cabinet (11 October) and the actual vote of confidence in the federal parliament (16 October). In total, this type of caretaker period accounts for 20 days during the time frame we investigate.

Table 2 Typology of caretaker periods

Period type	Begin	End	Days (%)
A	Resignation presented	Resignation accepted	12 (0.81)
B	Resignation accepted	Parliament's dissolution	145 (9.76)
C	Parliament's dissolution (Government is demissionary)	Elections	68 (4.58)
D	Parliament's dissolution (Government is not demissionary)	Elections	70 (4.71)
E	Elections	Parliament's installation	91 (6.13)
F	Parliament's installation	Swearing-in	1,079 (72.66)
G	Swearing-in	Vote of confidence	20 (1.35)

In total, we observe no less than twenty-seven episodes of caretaker government during the period 2007-2020 in Belgium. Table 2 categorises these into seven types of cabinets. On average, a caretaker episode lasts for 55 days, ranging from small periods of merely two days (for instance, in 2020 between the Wilmès II being sworn in and the vote of confidence in parliament) to a period of 518 days in 2010-2011 between the installation of the newly elected parliament and the swearing-in of the Di Rupo cabinet. The most frequently employed caretaker period (72.66%) concerns episodes taking place after the renewal of parliament and before the appointment of a new cabinet. This comes as no surprise since the most important and delicate steps in the negotiations for the formation of a new coalition government take place during those moments.

5 Conclusion

This research note was aimed at building upon the study of the world's best known case of caretaker governments, with a view to improving the definition and the main characteristics of the concept. We developed a novel typology of the different caretaker periods based on the electoral calendar and on the moments when one of the two branches (executive or legislature) does not enjoy its full powers. This operationalisation allowed us to measure how Belgium was governed by a caretaker cabinet for no less than 1,485 days between 2007 and 2020. An exploration of the Belgian federal case for this time frame enables us to identify no less than seven different types of caretaker periods. Not only the total length of the caretaker governments but also each specific subperiod was precisely measured. In a next phase, this new typology and the distinction made between different types of caretaker periods can be highly useful in the evaluation of the quality of executive-legislature relations and of the overall quality and stability of the Belgian institutions and their democratic settings.

Another possible next step is the validation of this typology in other countries and/or subnational contexts.

In Belgium, for instance, it can be tested at the regional and community levels of governments. Many other parliamentary democracies, such as the Netherlands or Iceland, do also witness periods of caretaker government and could likewise make use of the distinction between different types of caretaker periods. The typology is particularly applicable in countries such as Australia and New Zealand, where the political leadership acts differently depending on the kind of transition period (for instance, before or after elections are announced – see, e.g., Simms, 2011). Furthermore, it could be analysed how governmental policy making and performance are affected during caretaker periods. To what degree are caretaker cabinets extending their own powers over time and across different types of caretaker periods? Last but not least, this custom of a caretaker government and its different appearances could be compared with the dissimilar political practice in countries such as Spain or Israel, where there is an automatic call for new elections after a given period of time has passed without forming a new cabinet. Similarly, the same custom could be compared with the situation in many Central European countries, where caretaker cabinets rather take the form of transitory or interim cabinets.

Notes

1 The concept of 'caretaker government' is the most widely accepted term in the literature but may take different names in different countries; for example 'interim government' in Iraq, 'demissionary cabinet' in the Netherlands, 'government in functions' in Spain or 'government of current affairs' in Belgium.

2 Courtenay Ryals and Golder (2010) label these cabinets 'new caretaker' governments, while the type of cabinets studied in this note corresponds to what they call 'continuation caretaker' governments.

3 These authors are less clear about the presence of a caretaker cabinet in two other possible scenarios: (a) the period between the dissolution of parliament and the following general election (provided that the government still enjoys the confidence of parliament) and (b) the period between the announcement of an election and the dissolution of parliament (see, for instance, Simms, 2011 for a discussion of variants of political leadership during this period in Australia and New Zealand).

4 This period was labelled in the international media as the 'world's longest government formation period in modern history'.

5 For the clarity of the argument, we included the whole period of the Verhofstadt II cabinet (2003-2007) in this table. In the remainder of the research note, we focus solely on the 2007-2020 period.

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Appendix

Table A.1 Detailed periods of caretaker governments (2007-2020)

Cabinet	Type	Period	Days
Verhofstadt II	D	02 May 2007 to 10 June 2007	39
Verhofstadt II	E	10 June 2007 to 28 June 2007	18
Verhofstadt II	F	28 June 2007 to 21 December 2007	176
Verhofstadt III	G	21 December 2007 to 23 December 2007	2
Leterme I	G	20 March 2008 to 22 March 2008	2
Leterme I	A	14 July 2008 to 17 July 2008	3
Leterme I	A	19 December 2008 to 21 December 2008	2
Leterme I	B	21 December 2008 to 30 December 2008	9
Van Rompuy	G	30 December 2008 to 02 January 2009	3
Leterme II	G	25 November 2009 to 27 November 2009	2
Leterme II	A	22 April 2010 to 26 April 2010	4
Leterme II	B	26 April 2010 to 07 May 2010	11
Leterme II	C	07 May 2010 to 13 June 2010	37
Leterme II	E	13 June 2010 to 06 July 2010	23
Leterme II	F	06 July 2010 to 06 December 2011	518
Di Rupo	G	06 December 2011 to 10 December 2011	4
Di Rupo	D	24 April 2014 to 25 May 2014	31
Di Rupo	E	25 May 2014 to 19 June 2014	25
Di Rupo	F	19 June 2014 to 11 October 2014	114
Michel I	G	11 October 2014 to 16 October 2014	5
Michel II	A	18 December 2018 to 21 December 2018	3
Michel II	B	21 December 2018 to 25 April 2019	125
Michel II	C	25 April 2019 to 26 May 19	31
Michel II	E	26 May 2019 to 20 June 19	25
Michel II	F	20 June 2019 to 27 October 2019	129
Wilmès I	F	27 October 2019 to 17 March 2020	142
Wilmès II	G	17 March 2020 to 19 March 2020	2
Total			**1,485**