



Belgian Society and Politics 2013

**As Ever,
in Between Elections**

Wim Vermeersch (ed.)

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As Ever, in Between Elections

Rudi Vander Vennet
Chairman Stichting Gerrit Kreveld

This is the seventh yearbook 'Belgian Society and Politics', entitled 'As Ever, in Between Elections'. It has been published by the Foundation Gerrit Kreveld, a Belgian study centre for social democracy and a think tank for innovative social-democratic analysis and policy. With this publication we try to provide accurate information about contemporary Belgian politics in general, and the position and beliefs of Belgian Social Democracy, chiefly from a Flemish perspective, in particular. Special thanks go to Wim Vermeersch who has served as the editor of this volume and the six previous ones. *Belgian Society and Politics 2013 – As Ever, in Between Elections* contains a wide range of articles which analyze the current events in Belgian politics. We are convinced that they will deepen your understanding of the Belgian political system and its political players ahead of the important, triple elections in May 2014.

These articles have previously appeared in the Foundation Gerrit Kreveld's monthly Journal, *Samenleving en politiek (Sampol)* [*Society and Politics*]. *Sampol* has acquired a reputation for expertise in academic circles and opinion pieces in the media. Starting point in this publication is the Belgian context. Given the asymmetry between Flanders and Wallonia and the special case of Brussels, Belgium exhibits some unique characteristics. After polls in 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2009 and 2010, once again we find ourselves in between elections: on 14 October 2012 local and provincial elections were held; on 25 May 2014 we will cast our vote for the federal, regional and European level. We have asked Belgium's finest political scientists for their views on the previous and upcoming elections. This volume also tries to shed some light on the differences between the Walloon and the Flemish Socialists. Both are partners in the Di Rupo I administration (a coalition of 6 parties), but face very different political fortunes next year.

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Belgium has regained its confidence over the last two years, following an institutional gridlock that had paralysed the political process for more than three years. Belgian politics has become polarized after the election win of the Flemish nationalist party (N-VA) in 2010. Only by sidelining the nationalist party in the Summer of 2011, the so-called 'traditional parties' (Socialists, Christian Democrats and Liberals) on both sides of the linguistic frontier succeeded in building a coalition that could tackle the fundamental issues facing all European countries. A new-found optimism now prevails. Election results will show whether the Flemish coalition parties will reap the rewards of the regained stability or whether the Flemish Nationalists (in the government at the Flemish level, but in fierce opposition at the federal level) will come out as victors. The odds don't look particularly well for the Flemish traditional parties in general and the Social Democrats (Sp.a) in particular.

With the publication of this seventh *Belgian Society and Politics*, but equally through our periodical *Samenleving en politiek (Sampol)*, the Foundation Gerrit Kreveld attempts to inform the interested readers about the political debate in Belgium and Flanders. We try to highlight views and approaches in Belgium, hoping to provide useful insights, analysis and inspiration that may be transferable to other regions. This reaffirms our ambition to be an active participant in the cross-border dialogue on the future of Social Democracy. It is also the reason why we remain a dedicated member of the FEPS, the Foundation for European Progressive Studies. We hope this volume may inform, inspire and stimulate debate.

Editor's Choice: Featured Articles Belgian Society and Politics 2013 - As Ever, in Between Elections

Wim Vermeersch

If you are able to understand Belgium, then you should be able to understand any political system anywhere on the planet. Belgium is a multinational democracy, a bipolar state without federal parties, without federal elections, without federal media ...and in the heart of the EU. That makes things rather complicated. Analyzing the local and provincial elections of 2012 and looking forward to the federal, regional and European elections of 2014, this Yearbook provides you with the necessary tools to find your way through the somewhat surrealist Belgian politics. Welcome and enjoy.

DI RUPO I ADMINISTRATION

In earlier editions, we have called Belgium a no-man's land between fact and fiction, a cold turkey of pragmatism and the sophist's nirvana. Since 1970 there has been a succession of constitutional reforms, complicated operations that have, on several occasions, nevertheless proved useful. They have even officially rebuilt Belgium into a federal state. The last few years we witnessed a major breach between the linguistic regions. The federal elections of June 2010 caused an electoral earthquake in Flanders: for the first time in living memory the three traditional political parties together failed to attract 50% of the vote, and the Flemish nationalist N-VA became by far the largest political party. Only in December 2011 the Di Rupo I administration (a coalition of 6 parties of Socialists, Liberals and Christian Democrats on both sides of the linguistic frontier) took office, closing a deal on the sixth state reform and marking the end to the longest ever government formation. This coalition government does not include the biggest party in Flanders (N-VA) and does not have a majority on the Flemish side (usually the case). Even for a politically bizarre country like Belgium, it is an unfamiliar situation. But it seems to be working: in the past two years the Di Rupo administration has built a remarkable confidence. The three Flemish governing parties are hoping it will suffice to withstand the Flemish nationalist storm in the triple 2014 elections.

NON-STOP ELECTION FEVER

The local and provincial elections of 14 October 2012 were seen by some as a mid-term election in the federal parliamentary term of 2010-2014. In 2013, as ever, we find ourselves in between elections. The election fever continuously grips the nation. It led writer and historian David Van Reybrouck to write a provocative pamphlet about this democratic fatigue syndrom (*Tegen verkiezingen* [Against Elections], 2013). He lashes out against the paralyzing effect of the many elections we hold, which hamper, not facilitate, our system of representative democracy. He has a point. Ever since September 2011 we read the first reports in the media about the local and provincial elections of 14 October 2012. And as of 15 October 2012, parties kicked off their campaign for the federal, regional and European elections of 25 May 2014. It is needless to say it makes governing extremely difficult for the Flemish Socialists, Liberals and Christian Democrats (in power at the federal level). They are in a constant state of electoral nervousness.

For journalists and commentators, of course, these are interesting times. In this publication we have gathered articles of Belgium's finest political scientists, on both sides of the linguistic frontier, in which the big trends of the 2012 elections are outlined and the political divisions of the upcoming 2014 elections are examined. As in previous editions of this Yearbook, special attention will be paid to the Socialists of the Flemish Sp.a and the Francophone PS. Although both are partners in the government (the PS, for the first time since 1973 was even able to deliver the prime minister, Elio Di Rupo), their respective situation is beyond comparison: in Flanders the Sp.a has become a small party (which, through their ministers, punches above its electoral weight), whereas the PS has been the biggest player in Wallonia for decades.

LOOKING BACK AT THE LOCAL AND PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS OF 2012

What trends can we detect from the local and provincial elections of 14 October 2012? **Koenraad De Ceuninck, Ellen Olislagers, Herwig Reynaert, Kristof Steyvers** and **Tony Valcke**, in *Politics is a Card Game*, analyse party per party how they performed. These elections were seen particularly as a test for the Flemish nationalist N-VA and the Christian-democratic CD&V, the two parties that had fought the 2006 local elections as cartel partners but six years later campaigned separately in every province and in most of the municipalities. The Christian-democratic party in Flanders traditionally dominated the local elections, but over the years it has gradually lost its monopoly and in 2012 even lost its position as the largest party. In three of the five Flemish provinces N-VA succeeded in becoming the largest party. Only in Limburg and West Flanders it just failed to beat its former Christian-democrat partners. Liberal Open VLD lost votes in every province. Socialist Sp.a's downward trend was repeated across most of the Flemish municipalities. In 2006 the Socialists had achieved their best results since the merging of the municipalities (1976), but in 2012 the party could only do well in alliance with the Greens. The best-known example is Ghent. For the extreme right Vlaams Belang the 2012 elections were a bitter pill. Plagued by internal divisions and confronted with competition from the more moderate nationalists of the N-VA, the party suffered its heaviest losses ever. The Greens made a modest advance.

The most important swing was of course the breakthrough of the Flemish nationalist N-VA in the municipalities. **Ruth Dassonneville** and **Marc Hooghe** discuss where these new N-VA voters came from, why they chose N-VA and how they could be characterized. *Determinants of Electoral Volatility. Where Did the N-VA Find its Local Support?* argues that N-VA supporters fit the typical profile of the volatile voter: dissatisfied, with little interest in and distrustful of politics, including local government. National issues were barely mentioned by N-VA voters, but the latter were certainly dissatisfied with their local councils. Contrary to what is often assumed, the party also attracted support from the left side of the political spectrum. During the 2012 election campaign, the Flemish Nationalists announced that these elections would be a referendum on the performance of the Di Rupo tripartite government (of which N-VA is not a part). There is, however, no trace of this in the responses to the exit poll survey of Dassonneville and Hooghe.

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This 'referendum argument' was one of the reasons why such a huge amount of time and energy was spent on predicting the local 2012 elections. Looking back at it now, we can see that much of the excitement was quite unnecessary, claims **Marc Hooghe** in *Political Parties in the Trenches*. On the whole the local elections followed national trends. Despite the shaky start of the Di Rupo government, some sort of stability seems to have returned to Belgian politics, but this does not seem to have made the slightest impression on the voters who continued to cast their votes as they had in June 2010. Those who were then convinced that the N-VA would bring about change still believe so, while those who then believed that political parties would, at last, take responsibility for governing the country, also still do so. At present, Belgian politics finds itself in a phase of trench warfare. In order to detect the real historical significance of the local 2012 elections, according to Hooghe, one should look at what happened in the smaller cities like Bruges and Kortrijk. These were the last genuine regional centres where the mayor was a Christian Democrat and where they lost city hall. Christian Democrats must recognise that they have lost touch with modern urban culture.

The electoral impact of the 2012 elections in Antwerp, Flanders biggest city and battlefield of N-VA chairman Bart De Wever, cannot be underestimated. Disregarding the WOII years, in 2012 Socialists have been a member of the ruling coalition for 91 years. Since 1932 (so for 80 years) they had served as mayor of Antwerp. The city elections of 2006 were a battle between the ruling Socialist mayor Patrick Janssens and Filip Dewinter from the extreme right party Vlaams Belang (former Vlaams Blok). Janssens and the Sp.a won the 2006 election by a margin. In 2012 the battle was between the so-called City List (of Socialists and Christian Democrats) and the Flemish nationalist right wing party N-VA, with respectively Patrick Janssens and Bart De Wever as mayoral candidates. De Wever has won.

Marc Swyngedouw, in his piece *Battlefield Antwerp. How Socialists Lost City Hall*, critically examined and found wanting some of the explanations for the Sp.a/CD&V City List's poor performance: the inner city is not left-wing; immigrant communities did not vote exclusively for the Left Party (PVDA+) and it is unlikely that an Sp.a/Green alliance would necessarily have defeated victor, and now Mayor, Bart De Wever of the Flemish nationalist N-VA. The Sp.a's current party model in Antwerp is under review. It no longer appears capable of conducting a grass-root campaign effectively. It is argued here that if the party is to win elections, its campaigns must target the grass roots and be marketing-driven.

The analysis of **Peter Van Aelst**, **Jonas Lefevere**, **Christophe Lesschaeve** and **Peter Thijssen**, in *Battlefield Antwerp. How Flemish Nationalists Conquered City Hall*, shows that the victory of the Flemish nationalist N-VA in Antwerp was established way before the start of the campaign and that mayor Patrick Janssens' City List (of Socialists and Christian Democrats) never posed a real threat to N-VA's lead. The N-VA not only grew at the expense of the extreme right VB party. Also supporters of the Liberal VLD-Vivant or the Sp.a-Spirit alliances in 2006 switched to N-VA in 2012. Furthermore, almost the entire rank and file of the then 'Flemish cartel' of N-VA and CD&V remained with N-VA, while only a small number of the CD&V voters dutifully supported the City List (Sp.a-CD&V). Sp.a lost supporters to the Greens and PVDA+, and the number of CD&V voters was too small to compensate for that loss on the left flank.

Janssens' centre strategy was unsuccessful in attracting many right-wing voters, while at the same time it probably alienated a proportion of his left-wing rank and file.

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Commenting on the 2012 local elections, the outgoing mayor of Antwerp, Patrick Janssens (Sp.a), remarked that they reflected a geographical divisions: *'The outcome of these elections is the creation of two large blocs in Antwerp. A fairly progressive urban bloc that did well and won a majority of votes mainly within the ring road. And a less urban, conservative bloc that has a majority outside the ring road.'* Janssens' observation fits into a long academic tradition of attempting to relate election results to social geography. Can this process of bloc-formation which he observed in Antwerp also be applied more widely to the rest of Flanders? **Frederik Veleden**, in *Town and Country. A Politico-geographical Faultline?*, draws a picture of the geographical diversity of the rank and file of the major Flemish parties. Although the differences between town and country in Flemish public debate is rarely made explicit (compared with the contrasts between left and right, Catholic and free thinking, for and against Flemish independence), some parties are nevertheless clearly associated with either town or country. The striking thing is that in 2012 this did not apply to the N-VA, the great newcomer in local politics. That party's impact was felt almost everywhere.

Not only the Flemish Socialists (Sp.a), but also the French-speaking Socialists (PS) suffered at the 2012 elections, albeit of a different order of magnitude. PS remained the biggest party in Wallonia. **Pascal Delwit** outlines the disastrous six months following the 2012 elections. The PS was plunged into chaos for a few months after the polls. Party elites were panic-stricken, trying to defuse the crisis and giving militants their marching orders for the triple 2014 elections. The PS now pursues two objectives: on the one hand, to contribute as much as possible to ensure that N-VA loses ground to the Flemish parties championing the cause of a federal state; on the other, to avoid losing political power and influence by doing so. These are nothing less than irreconcilable objectives. Francophone Socialists are pursuing a dangerous path in the run-up to the 2014 elections.

LOOKING FORWARD TO THE FEDERAL, REGIONAL AND EUROPEAN ELECTIONS OF 2014

Anyone who thinks they can forecast the coming parliamentary 2014 elections on the basis of what happened in October 2012, should better think again. Local elections follow, in a diluted fashion, parliamentary elections, and not the other way round. As early as September 2011 the media had already started to go on about the 'impending' local elections and it was striking that on the eve of the elections of 14 October 2012 it was already switching its attention to the elections of 25 May 2014. The 2012 elections meant the great local breakthrough of the Flemish nationalist N-VA. Chairman Bart De Wever aims to maintain this momentum until 2014. He speaks of historical elections, a referendum on the future of Belgium.

In recent years, mainstream media reporting as well as the dominant political discourse in Belgium have often given the impression that the conflict over institutional reform is being fought between two homogeneous blocs, the Flemish and the Francophones, with clear-cut and well-defined points of view. The idea has taken hold that on either side of the language boundary everyone is in agreement on the heart of the matter: the Flemish want as much autonomy as possible while the Francophones remain devoted to Belgium. In *Beyond the Myth of Unanimity. Opinions of Belgian MPs on Federalism and the Sixth Reform of the Belgian State*, **Dave Sinardet**, **Jérémy Dodeigne** and **Min Reuchamps** show that, as far as the Belgian MPs are concerned, this perception is far from the truth. Within the two main language groups, differences of opinion are sometimes very great, particularly on the Flemish side. Also the dominant perception of the internal homogeneity of political parties needs to be modified. Their research can be read as an incentive for political analysts and commentators to take greater account of the nuances and differences of opinion within the language groups and within the political parties.

The electoral fortunes of the Flemish Nationalists obliged the traditional parties to sharpen their ideological profile. Also the Flemish Socialists of Sp.a freshened up their 'Declaration in Principle'. In *Sp.a: Taking the Offensive*, **Carl Devos** analyses this ideological overhaul. As elsewhere in Europe, the Sp.a have been unable to frame the debates resulting from the economic collapse. That is not so much because of any intrinsic weakness in their analysis and remedies, but because they are haunted by the issue of legitimacy. The great challenge is not only or even mainly intellectual or communicative; it is emotional and, in particular, moral, claims Devos. In recent years, the Sp.a has not been losing out to the right, nor to the left. The party has lost out to itself. It became too much of everything and not enough of anything. The local and provincial 2012 elections were anything but a success for the party, and 2014 is likely to be another difficult year. But with its spruced up 'statement of principle' and the project 'Flanders of Tomorrow', adopted in June 2013, Sp.a finally choose for an offensive approach. For the first time since 2003, a path for electoral success has been mapped out.

The three final pieces in this Yearbook cast a preview on the federal, regional and European elections of 25 May 2014, from a Flemish and French-speaking perspective. For some years now, and certainly since the start of the current Di Rupo I administration, they have been regarded as critical. On that day, seats of the Flemish, Brussels and Walloon Parliament, the Federal Chamber and the European Parliament will be redistributed.

For many years now the Flemish traditional parties have been in decline. In 2010 their electoral share fell below the symbolic 50% of the Flemish community. If they sink any further and are unable to turn the tide, not only their electoral share but also their role in government will be further eroded. That is why in the last few months they have all been giving their ideologies a thorough overhaul. It was undeniably the success of N-VA, Flanders' biggest party with a clear alternative, which was the catalyst for adopting a new profile. N-VA is under assault from all sides, but **Nicolas Bouteca** and **Carl Devos** claim, in *Flemish Nationalists (N-VA) versus the Rest ... and Themselves*, that the

greatest threat lays in the doubts that may arise about precisely where N-VA is going. In the 2014 campaign the party will be forced to indicate to what extent its 'necessary socio-economic reforms' are, or are not, dependent on a 'necessary constitutional reform'. The greatest challenge to N-VA will be itself. The crucial issue is whether the voters can be persuaded that things will be better and more efficient with N-VA. Dislike of the traditional parties will not give it a solid enough victory. N-VA will have to demonstrate voters that a 'force of change' exists and that it can work. It is a difficult balancing act.

The Francophone parties are also preparing for the triple 2014 elections. The Walloon context differs fundamentally from the Flemish, which has changed radically over the past ten years. In Wallonia the political landscape has been surprisingly stable, more so even than in Brussels. In both these French-speaking regions the four major parties (Socialist PS, Liberal MR, Christian-democratic cdH and Green Ecolo) continue to dominate the political scene. **Hugues Renard** and **Pierre Verjans** however unveil, in *The Francophone Parties in Unfamiliar Territory*, the emergence in 2012 of new political groupings in Wallonia which might be the harbinger of a more volatile political landscape. The four traditional parties are now not only competing against each other but also with newcomers who might possibly be successful in 2014. On the eve of these three simultaneous elections, the Francophone parties find themselves in unfamiliar territory. Where previously it used to be the victorious Flemish party that led government negotiations and the federal government, since the rise of the N-VA this is no longer inevitable. At the federal level no one is certain about what game is being played.

In *Real European Elections at Last?*, **Hendrik Vos** looks ahead to the elections for the European Parliament. As elsewhere in Europe, European election campaigns in Flanders have seldom been dominated by European issues. It has been even more difficult than in most countries, because for a long time the political parties were largely in agreement. In essence, there was a consensus among the political elite in favour of more Europe. This could be different this time. Thanks to the euro crisis the EU is now frequently in the news. There is controversy over the decisions that have been made and the political parties have clearly differing viewpoints on cutbacks in public spending and solidarity, whether European regulation of day-to-day matters is desirable, the election of a President for the European Commission,... What position right wing, Flemish nationalist N-VA politicians will take in the debates on Europe is difficult to predict. Lately they are happy to be seen in the company of British Conservatives who are highly critical of European interference. If N-VA goes down that road, it will be the first time in Flanders that a major party will defend a programme that argues not only for a different Europe, but for a manifestly diminished Europe.

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Interesting times ahead!

PART 1

THE LOCAL AND PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS OF 2012

Politics is a Card Game

**Koenraad De Ceuninck, Ellen Orlslagers,
Herwig Reynaert, Kristof Steyvers and Tony Valcke
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The municipal and provincial elections of 14 October 2012 are now behind us. What did we wake up to the following morning? Which parties saw their political fortunes wax or wane? The first part of this article offers an analysis of these 'historic' elections. However, winning elections is one matter; winning the ensuing negotiations is quite another. Losers, yet victorious. Victors, yet losers. This has happened to so many parties. In the second part we are looking into the numerous strategic decisions that forming coalitions involves.

POLITICS IS A CARD GAME

Lisa Del Bo represented Belgium in the 1996 Eurovision Song Contest with the song: 'Love is a card game with jokers and pokers; Love is a match of giving and taking; Love is a card game of queens and kings; Love is a game of chance for winners like you.' That sounds very much like politics. The media tsunami created by the local and provincial elections has passed. The political lottery on 14 October 2012 received unprecedented media attention. The local and provincial elections promised to be extremely exciting as the political card game had been thoroughly reshuffled after the previous elections in 2006. Furthermore, the Flemish nationalist N-VA appeared to be uninterested in the municipal elections. The party's chairman, Bart De Wever, seemed to be targeting Di Rupo's federal government. The elections would be the first real test of its policies and popularity. It was a strategy that other parties had adopted in the past.

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Although provincial elections are the best indicator of national and Flemish electoral trends, since ideological beliefs play a more important role than in local elections, they nevertheless remained overshadowed by the municipal elections again. It has always been like that. Previously, they were outshone by the parliamentary elections but since 1994, when they were first held at the same time as the local elections, media interest has been drawn to the municipalities.

The big question was what would be the local impact of the breakup of the CD&V/N-VA (Christian-democrat/Nationalist) cartel. How well would the previously junior partner, N-VA, do on its own? The youthful giant had built up an impressive regional presence. Would Bart De Wever's party be able to win over the localities as well? Everyone waited anxiously for the results. What political skies would we wake up to? Which parties would see their political influence wax or wane? The tendency to stare obsessively at national averages often obscures changes at the local level. Furthermore, floating voters create a greater dynamic than one might expect from the global percentage variations between the parties. The first part of this article will present an analysis of these factors.

Once the cards had been shuffled, the politicians could start playing. The media duly transferred their interest to the formation of local coalitions. After all, in the absence of any absolute majority the parties have to sit down at the negotiating table. It is a delicate courtship dance and far from being a stroll in the park. It has to result in the creation of a majority administration. If there is a pre-election agreement - and the voters shuffle the cards in favour of the potential coalition partners - the business can be settled quickly. In fact, there is nothing essentially wrong with pre-election agreements. But an important condition is that the parties involved make everything clear to the

voters, something that they rarely do. Transparency is nevertheless essential. It would bring these pre-election agreements out of the murky atmosphere of back-room politics. It is a pity that parties and politicians shy away from such openness. It would be to their credit and it is, after all, no secret that pre-election discussions take place. In fact it would be extremely unfortunate if the different political parties were not on speaking terms before an election.

Winning elections is one thing; winning at the negotiating table is quite another. Losing but still winning. Winning, yet losing. It has happened to many parties; the so-called 'anti-coalitions'. But there is nothing new about it. It has been going on since time immemorial. All the parties do it. They all want to be the largest, or a part of it, even though there are not often many advantages. At most it means that it is now one's turn, not that one ought to be there. Is it anti-democratic? Not at all. The parties making up a coalition do, after all, enjoy a majority. Although many voters do not seem to understand that.

There are many strategic considerations in forming a coalition. In choosing a partner there will, fortunately, be points of agreement in their respective election programmes. One wants, as far as possible, to present a coherent 'narrative', although, quite frequently that narrative is irrelevant. As long as one achieves power. However one dresses it up, politics is about power. Good personal contacts between key figures in the parties involved are important, as are positive past experiences of being in the majority. In such circumstances the coalition will usually move forward. Unknown tends to mean unloved and understandably so. After all, taking the plunge with people who have little or no experience of government is undoubtedly risky. Another element in forming a coalition is that, where possible, one wants a direct line to the political centre, "Brussels". Very often there may be unsettled business. Perhaps party X once edged us out of the majority group and now is an opportunity to take revenge. It is only what they deserve ... Finally, mathematics also play a role. A coalition often enjoys only a small majority. The fewer the coalition partners, the less one has to share out. We shall go into this more deeply in part two of this article.

ONLY WINNERS AND NO LOSERS?

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What trends can we detect from the election results of 14 October 2012?

To start with we should ask ourselves whether it makes any sense at all to talk about 'national' trends. Research shows that the motives of voters in the municipal elections are primarily 'local'. Much therefore depends on the importance attached to local issues or the relative appeal of local party leaders and so on. This explains, for instance, why different districts in Antwerp voted so differently.¹ But apart from the fact that winning parties always like to claim that their local victories have national significance, it is certainly possible to detect some wider trends. For those who are interested in national or Flemish trends, the provincial elections provide the best indicator.² In these elections, as already mentioned, not only is voting more ideological than in the municipal elections, but the technicalities of the voting system make comparisons easier. For this reason we shall begin our survey of the parties with their provincial results and we shall only discuss electoral results at the provincial level. Analysing the provincial districts would take too long and in any case comparisons are more difficult because of the redrawing of the 52 electoral districts in 2006 to the present 35 districts. In the analysis which follows we shall confine ourselves to the parties whose electoral support passed the provincial threshold.

TURNOUT

Before discussing these results, let us first consider the turnout. In Belgium voting is compulsory. Failure to vote is manifested in two ways: failure to attend the polling station and a blank or spoiled ballot paper. In October 2012 absenteeism was higher than it had been during the previous 40 years.

The figures show that in Flanders 8.5% of the voters failed to vote, with some areas like Antwerp and Ostend reaching 15%.³ In 2006, absenteeism in Flanders had been on average 5.6% for both the local and the provincial elections.⁴ Judging from the number of voters who stayed away, one must conclude that political participation was significantly lower in 2012, an aspect that has not been given sufficient attention.

Although the figures for blank or spoiled ballot papers are less clear-cut, they give the same impression. The Flemish minister for the Interior revealed that where voting was with pencil and paper, 4.28% of the papers were either blank or spoiled.⁵ That number was slightly higher than the 3.9% of the previous elections.⁶ It is noteworthy that in centres where voting was by computer there were far fewer blank votes (2.87%). Electronic voting does not allow spoiled or invalid votes. Nevertheless, in spite of a growing electorate, the total number of valid votes in 2012 was considerably lower than in 2006 because of absenteeism.

N-VA - 'NEW FLEMISH ALLIANCE' (RIGHT WING FLEMISH NATIONALIST)

The local elections of 2012 were seen particularly as a test for the Flemish-Nationalist N-VA and the Christian-Democratic CD&V, the two parties that had fought the 2006 elections as cartel partners but six years later campaigned separately in every province and in most of the municipalities. In three of the five Flemish provinces the N-VA succeeded in becoming the largest party. Only in Limburg and West Flanders it just failed to beat its former Christian Democrat partners. With 28.5% of the votes it is now the largest party in the Flemish provinces equalling its results in the Federal elections of 2010. In 2012, they obtained at least 25% of the votes in every province, but the most sensational result was the province of Antwerp with 35.9%. Incidentally, it was only in Antwerp that it was rewarded by two cabinet seats. In the four other provinces it still ended up in opposition.

In the local elections the N-VA also made the largest gains. In Flanders as a whole, it scored an average of just under 23% of the votes. In contrast to the provincial elections, the party was therefore unable to overtake the CD&V which preserved its dominant position. Nevertheless, in 47 of the 308 Flemish towns and municipalities the N-VA became the largest political formation and in over a third of the municipalities it is a member of the governing coalition and in nearly half of them there is a N-VA mayor (see below).⁷

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In the heavily publicised duel for political dominance in Antwerp, N-VA chairman and national standard bearer, Bart De Wever, obtained 37.7% of the vote against 28.6% for the outgoing mayor Patrick Janssens, who headed the 'City list' (Sp.a and CD&V). De Wever has a firm hold on the mayor's office. The party also scored well in a number of urban districts in Antwerp where there are now 82 N-VA district councillors. In Hasselt, despite competition from the sp.a-led cartel, '*Helemaal Hasselt*' [Completely Hasselt], headed by outgoing Socialist mayor, Hilde Claes, and from the CD&V headed by MEP Ivo Belet, the N-VA was able to win the support of a quarter of the voters and become the second largest party. In Bruges, it was feared that they might pay heavily for the early withdrawal of their initial leading candidate, Pol Van den Driessche, but even there they achieved 19.79%. The worst performing N-VA list was in Ghent, headed by Siegfried Bracke, who scored 17.09%.

CD&V (CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS)

The Christian Democratic party in Flanders traditionally dominated the local elections, but over the years it has gradually lost its monopoly and in 2012 even lost its position as the largest party. With 21.44% in the provincial elections it sank to an all-time low. In 2000 support for the party stood at 26.8%. Its score of 30.1% in 2006 (which was nearly as high as in 1996), was largely attributable to its cartel partner, the N-VA. In 2000, the N-VA's predecessor, the People's Union [*Volksunie*], won about 6% of the vote. So the cartel's gains in 2006 were in fact rather modest. On 14 October 2012 the CD&V held on to its leading position in the provinces of Limburg and West Flanders, which lived

up to their reputation as bastions of Christian Democracy, but even there they lost a lot of ground and only just stayed ahead of the N-VA.

The municipal elections were an important test for the Christian Democrats. It was, after all, the first time that the party had campaigned locally since its cartel with N-VA ended in 2008. In 2006 the cartel had worked well in the local and provincial elections. At both levels it emerged as the largest political grouping. The break up of the alliance at the provincial level was not always replicated locally. In some towns and municipalities (e.g. Ieper, Wielsbeke, Aalter, Overijse and Hoeilaart) collaboration between the parties continued and they again campaigned as a cartel. Possibly the presence of national leaders (Leterme in Ieper and De Crem in Aalter) also had some effect.

In Flanders, the party won 28% of the votes⁸, which was close to its score in 2000, before there was any talk of a cartel. In 2006, together with NV-A, it had won 32.5% of the votes. In 2012 it emerged from the elections as the largest party in 138 municipalities (45%) and in 52 of them (16.8%) it enjoyed an absolute majority, rather fewer than the 79 (25.6%) in 2006. Nevertheless, the Christian Democratic party, traditionally strong at the local level, is still holding its own fairly well. Its 134 mayors mean that no fewer than 43.5% of Flemish mayors are Christian Democrats.

In 205 of the 308 municipalities the CD&V is a member of the ruling coalition. But it is striking that the party continues to do better in the rural municipalities than in the regional urban centres where the picture is much more varied. Ghent is rock bottom at 9.1%. In Aalst, under mayor Ilse Uyttersprot, the party achieved 17.3% making the CD&V the second largest party after the NV-A. The party was more successful in Bruges, Dendermonde and Kortrijk. In Bruges, led by Dirk De Fauw, it won 26.6% while in Dendermonde the CD&V list headed by burgomaster Piet Buyse achieved 39.3%. An interesting exception was Kortrijk where burgomaster Stefaan De Clerck won 33% of the vote but was unable to cash in on this victory. Vincent Van Quickenborne of the Liberal Open VLD, De Clerck's main rival, was able to build up a majority in the council with a coalition of Liberals, Socialists and Flemish Nationalists. The Christian Democrats have been consigned to six years in opposition.

OPEN VLD (FLEMISH LIBERALS)

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In most constituencies the liberal Open VLD conducted its election campaign, like the CD&V, without a cartel partner. In 2006, in many municipalities and provincial districts it was allied with Vivant, a small progressive liberal party. Vivant's electoral impact, however, was very limited and the break-up of this alliance is not particularly significant. A poor showing in the opinion polls was followed by disappointing election results.

In the provincial elections of 2012 Open VLD scored 14.5% compared with 18.9% in 2006. The party lost votes in every province. In East Flanders it narrowly lost the race for second place to CD&V. The fact that it again ended up as the third largest party in Flanders as a whole is mainly because the Socialists and the far right nationalist Vlaams Belang lost even more votes.

Open VLD also lost ground in the cities and municipalities. The party has 1,234 municipal councillors and 66 liberal mayors. In 128 (41.5%) municipalities the party is a member of the ruling coalition. In 16 municipalities Open VLD has an absolute majority.⁹

Then chairman, and now minister, Alexander De Croo admitted that the election results were not good, especially in those towns and municipalities where the party had previously done badly.¹⁰ In the municipalities where it had previously been strong or had some influential members, the picture is more shaded. The electoral influence of individual party leaders did lead to favourable results at the local level. De Croo personally scored highly in his municipality Brakel (41.9%) and his predecessor as national chairman Bart Somers did the same in Mechelen (33.9%).

The electoral map of Flanders shows that the party is only holding up in East Flanders, traditionally

a liberal province. It did well in the south of that province (in for instance Oudenaarde, Wortegem-Petegem, Zwalm and Brakel) and the Waas region (Lokeren, Lochristi, Moerbeke). 25 of the 66 liberal mayors are in East Flanders where the party is part of 42 majority coalitions (out of 65 municipalities). Elsewhere in Flanders the picture is much less rosy, particularly in the city of Antwerp where Open VLD played no part of any importance in the duel between De Wever and Janssens. Heading their list was Annemie Turtelboom, a newcomer in the city and federal minister, who won a mere 5.5% of the votes.

SP.A (FLEMISH SOCIALIST PARTY)

Like the Christian Democrats and the Liberals, the Socialists have lost a great deal of support over the years. In the provincial elections of 2006 (in alliance with Spirit) the party won 3% more seats than in 2000, but on 14 October 2012 it lost 5%, dropping from 19.2 to 14.2%. The party achieved its best results in Limburg in alliance with the Greens. But although they broke through the 20% barrier they were still only the third largest party, as opposed to second in 2006. The period of success under the chairmanship of Steve Stevaert (2003-2005) seems well and truly over.

Sp.a's downward trend was repeated across most of the Flemish municipalities. In 2006, at the local level, the Socialists had achieved their best results since the merging of the municipalities. In 2012 it was notable that the party continued to do well in alliance with the Greens. The best-known example is Ghent where their joint electoral list headed by mayor Daniël Termont almost won an absolute majority and in terms of actual seats effectively did so. In other places, the party lost votes (and sometimes its absolute majority) but remained the largest party. This occurred for instance in Ostend, Leuven and Hasselt, where the Sp.a won more than 30%. In Vilvoorde, Hans Bonte won the support of a quarter of the electorate. But in most of the towns and municipalities the party suffered losses. Outgoing mayor Patrick Janssens lost his duel with Bart De Wever in Antwerp where sp.a's cartel with CD&V collapsed after the election and the party found itself on the opposition benches. Bruges was a special case where the top name on the list, MP Renaat Landuyt, won a quarter of the votes and just managed to beat the CD&V, the party of outgoing mayor Patrick Moenaert, headed by Dirk de Fauw.

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GROEN! (GREEN)

With the exception of the province of Limburg, Green campaigned on its own in the provincial elections. This makes it more difficult to interpret the provincial results for Flanders as a whole. If we ignore Limburg, Green only made a modest advance from 8.07% in 2006 to 8.87% in 2012. If we include Limburg, where in alliance with the sp.a and Spirit in 2006 they scored 30.1%, the cartel's results in 2012 were terrible, with a loss of exactly 10%. For the Limburg Socialists, their alliance with the Greens at provincial level was far from being a success story.

The municipal elections, however, paint a different picture. Green is traditionally less strongly represented at the local level but in 2012 it had better results in most of the places where it campaigned. In Antwerp and Bruges, and from Leuven and Ostend to Mechelen. Wouter Devriendt did well in Ostend (10.1% as against 4.7% in 2006). The party also enjoyed success in Antwerp where it achieved 7.9% as opposed to 4.7% in 2006. Its poor showing in 2006 was perhaps partly because the party fell between two stools, being overshadowed by the battle between Janssens (Sp.a) and De Winter (Vlaams Belang). In 2012, Green voters did not get caught up in the duel between Janssens (Sp.a-CD&V) and De Wever (N-VA). The success of its alliance with Sp.a in Ghent (45.5%) has already been mentioned. However, a look at the 2006 results shows that even separately the two parties achieved 43.7% which puts the 'monster score' of 2012 into a more realistic perspective. In Leuven, on its own, the party improved its results from 11.3% in 2006 to 15.5% in 2012. In Bruges the party produced a completely new list of candidates and improved from 6.5% to 8.8%. In Hasselt, the cartel with sp.a achieved a satisfactory score of 33% though this pales

somewhat when compared with the 48.3% which it had achieved six years earlier. Perhaps in 2012 Green simply managed to prevent further loss.

VLAAMS BELANG (FLEMISH INTEREST; FAR-RIGHT NATIONALIST)

The elections of 14 October 2012 were a bitter pill for Vlaams Belang. The party, which had been plagued for some time by serious internal divisions, suffered its heaviest loss ever. Added to this, the competition from the more moderate nationalists, N-VA, did nothing to make its electoral fortunes any better.

The results in the provincial elections speak volumes: the party lost more than half its support and ended up with 8.9% of the vote compared with 21.5% in 2006. Only in the province of Antwerp Vlaams Belang was able to reach 10%. Losses were widespread both in rural Flanders and in the towns. In Ghent its support dropped from 18% in 2006 to 6.5%; in Bruges from 16.2% to 5.4%; and in Mechelen from 26.5% to 8.7%. Even its big names (many of whom were on the Antwerp list) were unable to limit the damage. Under its leader Filip Dewinter, the party suffered a particularly damaging decline from 33.5% in 2006 to 10.2% in 2012. In the city where the party has its roots, Vlaams Belang with five seats plays virtually no role of any significance. In many rural towns and municipalities (Maldegem, Diksmuide, Torhout) the party won no seats at all. The only bright spot came from Ninove in East Flanders where it campaigned under the name 'Forza Ninove' and won 26.5% of the votes, making it the largest party on the council.

BETWEEN BIDDING AND SCORING: FORMING A GOVERNING MAJORITY

After the seats have been divided up and the results have been interpreted nationally, there comes the final stage in the municipal battle for power: the formation of a ruling majority. First of all, parties must look for a suitable partner and subsequently reach an understanding on policy (administrative agreement) and personnel (administrative team).¹¹ The importance of this proverbial 'round two' of the elections in a fragmented multiparty system like ours, can hardly be overstated: 'the voters deal the cards, the parties play them'.¹² It is even truer now that the CD&V-N-VA cartel with its many local variants has been abandoned and the N-VA has been locally so successful in its own right.

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The growth in the number of parties with seats on our local councils has naturally led to an increase in the number of different potential majorities.¹³ The trend has been strengthened by the fact that the N-VA's success has largely been at the expense of Vlaams Belang (a party that has long been excluded from local government negotiations by a '*cordon sanitaire*' imposed by the other parties). Yet there have also always been some municipalities where a single party holds enough seats to form a majority and by-pass any negotiations. Currently, this is true for about one out of four of the Flemish municipalities. Nevertheless, that number is shrinking steadily; after the last elections almost a third of all constituencies had an absolute majority.¹⁴ The decline of the Christian Democrats' electoral dominance and the emergence of cartels and new parties is largely responsible.

So in three quarters of elections a coalition has to be formed. The process of negotiation generally takes place in the period immediately following the elections. But even before that, the parties start to weigh up their options. Research into past practice shows that in at least three quarters of all the Flemish municipalities preliminary negotiations take place. Sometimes these discussions lead to formal agreements of principle even before the polling stations open. Statistics on municipal elections around the turn of the century, suggest that pre-election agreements were a regular feature in about two thirds of the municipalities¹⁵. In the run-up to 2012 too it was claimed that the practice was proliferating and its alleged victims again complained loudly. CD&V senator Schouppe estimated that pre-election agreements had been drawn up in as many as nine out of ten municipalities and

the N-VA in particular complained about being excluded from office in this way.¹⁶ There are some who argue that the parties should be more open and willing to reveal such agreements to the voters. In any case, pre-election agreements can be viewed as a way of scouting out the land before the election though, in practice, events during and immediately after the election often mean they remain a dead letter. Frequently the proposed coalition simply does not win a majority of the seats.

In general, however, the search for a majority moves along quite quickly. The above-mentioned research showed that in over 70% of municipalities an agreement in principle was already reached during election night. In 2012 too coalitions were formed at a high tempo: four out of five municipalities were able to announce a majority coalition within four days of the election.¹⁷ In most municipalities in the immediate aftermath of the elections there appears to be a clear-cut window of opportunity for coalition formation.

It is in that window that the choice of coalition partners takes place. Political scientists usually view this process from two perspectives. On the one hand, they regard the parties as players attempting to maximise their strength, based mainly on the number of seats but also on the negotiating power which their political ideology provides. Coalition formation is therefore a rational process of choice in which parties weigh up the costs and benefits of various combinations. Usually the final coalition will be one in which no partner is superfluous and/or one which comprises the minimum number of parties required for a majority. In 2012 the first situation occurred in 78% of the constituencies, the second in 64%. Given the splintering of the party landscape and bearing those conditions in mind, it is not surprising that the largest party in the chamber will usually be part of the coalition (slightly more than four out of five cases). An anti-coalition to keep the strongest party out of power is fairly exceptional, but it does happen. Coalitions of two parties are the most popular (slightly over 67%) but in a substantial number of municipalities a three party coalition is in control (just under 32%). Coalitions of four parties are very rare. In a minority of municipalities (slightly over a quarter) the coalition has only the minimum number of seats to form a majority. A larger surplus of seats is desirable for the coalition to be workable and remain stable.

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Incidentally, these figures continue a trend observable since the 1980s. It is striking that this type of 'rational' coalition is less exclusive in creating a majority.¹⁸ Together with the decline of absolute majorities, it reflects the increased range of choice and perhaps the growing importance of other factors that contribute to the formation of coalitions, if only that in many places more combinations of parties are now practicable.

On the other hand, there is a more inductive explanatory model which sees the choice of partner as the interplay of a whole series of factors that extend beyond a simple maximising of power. They reflect, for instance, the history of a party and its experience of coalition government, the perceived inflexibility or otherwise of potential partners, the degree to which the upper echelons in a party attempt to keep control over the formation of specific local coalitions, and various characteristics of the local political landscape such as the politicisation of particular issues. The research referred to earlier shows that agreements in election manifestos, personal relationships and previous experience of a working majority were seen as the main basis for forming a coalition rather than simply the desire for political power or pressure from above.¹⁹ Positive experiences of collaboration or failure to put together an alternative majority also seem to be important conditions for the continuation of an outgoing coalition. However, in Flanders an exact duplicate of an outgoing majority is exceptional (slightly over 8%). A completely new combination is also rare (only about 13% of coalitions are made up entirely of newcomers).²⁰ That is in line with the incremental dynamic of most multi-party systems. It is therefore striking that the Flemish-nationalist N-VA as a 'new' party has been so successful in joining ruling coalitions. According to its own figures, the party will be a member of more than a third of all municipal coalitions. This puts into perspective the belief that anti-N-VA coalitions would become the norm.²¹

The core agreements which coalition parties make with each other are recorded in a local administrative agreement. As a rule it is drawn up after the agreement in principle to collaborate, although research shows that in nearly 40% of all municipalities agreement is reached during election night.²² As well as policy content, the administrative agreement usually includes an important section on personnel that may or not be a formal part of the agreement. After all, the coalition partners have to agree on who will make up the respective teams. That applies in particular to a number of key functions in the local administration such as the burgomaster, aldermen, chairman of the social services etc. A pilot study has shown that a number of executive functions are distributed among the coalition partners in proportion to their number of seats (though the largest party and/or the outgoing coalition tend to be rewarded by the mayoralty). The policies to be adopted appear to be of secondary, though not negligible, importance.²³

Once the shares have been agreed, the mandates have to be allotted to specific individuals. The most common selection criteria are personal electoral support, perceived expertise, seniority and political experience, a balanced geographical spread of the executive councillors and a relatively balanced representation of different social groups in the administration.²⁴

Participation in government is not without its dangers. Research shows that governing parties regularly experience electoral losses in the following election. However, the 'cost of ruling' is not exclusively local. Involvement in other levels of government will also be judged. Parties that are active in government at various levels (i.e. the traditional ruling parties) do not do significantly worse in local government than in opposition. The local 'cost of ruling' can often be compensated for by a kind of chancellor's bonus for the incumbent mayor's party.²⁵ Whether one can generalise about it, we will only know in October 2018.

A BRIEF POST-MORTEM: CONCLUSIONS

Anyone who thinks they can forecast the coming parliamentary elections in 2014 on the basis of what happened in October 2012, should better think again. Local elections follow, in a diluted fashion, parliamentary elections, and not the other way round.

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The formation of ruling majorities is becoming steadily more important. Although the potential number of majorities has increased in step with the number of parties in our municipal councils, in the next six years a quarter of these councils will still be controlled by a single party. The remaining three quarters will tend to reflect the traditional image of a rational coalition of a few parties, with a small but practicable majority of seats. That picture, however, is less common than it used to be. Programmatic agreement, good personal relations and experience of coalition government complement or even overwrite the traditional criteria for the choice of partners. As a rule, administrative agreements are drawn up quickly and implemented by an administrative team. Party membership of a coalition depends on electoral weight. The choice of specific individuals continues to depend on the number of personal votes they receive. Whether government is rewarding or not, whether the house of cards will remain standing or collapse, we will find out in the next six years.

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Translation: Chris Emery.

Endnotes

- 1/ Swyngedouw M. (2012), Over het verdriet van Janssens. *Samenleving en politiek*, 19, 10 (December), pp. 4-14.
- 2/ Valcke T., Reynaert H., Steyvers K. & Ackaert J. (2007). De provincieraadsverkiezingen van 8 oktober 2006. Electorale tendensen in Vlaanderen en Wallonië. *Res Publica*, 3, pp. 440-472.
- 3/ Steeds minder Belgen gaan stemmen. *De Morgen*, 8 November 2012, p.10.
- 4/ Valcke T., Reynaert H., Steyvers K. & Ackaert J. (2007). De provincieraadsverkiezingen van 8 oktober 2006. Electorale tendensen in Vlaanderen en Wallonië. *Res Publica*, 3, 443 ; Ackaert J., De Ceuninck K., Reynaert H., Steyvers K. & Valcke T. (2007). De gemeenteraadsverkiezingen van 8 oktober 2006. Evolutie sinds 1976. *Res Publica*, 2-3, 412.
- 5/ Dobbelaere B. (2012). Minder blanco en ongeldige stemmen bij digitaal stemmen. *De Standaard*, 19 december 2012.
- 6/ In the provincial elections of 2006 5,9% of the ballot papers were blank or invalid.
- 7/ These figures come from the party itself and are published on its website. See www.n-va.be/resultaten, consulted on 18 December 2012.
- 8/ Figures from the party itself, published in *Ampersand*, November 2012.
- 9/ These figures cover local cross-party lists on which Open VLD candidates stood, as for instance in Ardoie (List Groep '82), Koksijde (List Burgemeester) en Kluisbergen (Lijst Gemeentebelangen [Local Interests]).
- 10/ Press announcement: 'Open VLD does an analysis of the local elections', 16 October 2012.
- 11/ Steyvers K. & Reynaert H. (2010). De gemeenteraadsverkiezingen als brandpunt van de lokale representatieve democratie. In Reynaert H. & Steyvers K. (Eds.), *De kerktorenpolitiek voorbij? Lokale politiek in Vlaanderen* (pp. 95-126). Brugge: Vanden Broele. This publication contains reference material and figures for local elections between 1976 en 2006.
- 12/ Ackaert J. (1996). The voters deal out the cards, the parties play them. In Buelens J. & Deschouwer K. (Eds.), *De dorpsstraat is de wetstraat niet* (pp. 49-74). Brussel: VUB Press.
- 13/ The information on the municipal elections of 2006 en 2012 is from the doctoral research of Ellen Olislagers (*Rekensom of relatiegeschenk? Partnerkeuze bij coalitievorming op lokaal vlak*) unless stated otherwise. Her research shows that after the 2012 elections in the 308 Flemish municipalities, 4885 possible majorities could have been formed compared with 3542 in 2006. At the time of completing this article, a majority had been constructed in 305 of the 308 Flemish municipalities. This has formed the basis for our analysis.
- 14/ It was not until the 1990s that the majority of Flemish municipalities had coalitions, see Ackaert J., Dumont P. & Dewinter L. (2008). Hoe oude vormen en gedachten overleven: lokale coalitievorming. In Buelens J., Rihoux B. & Deschouwer K. (Eds.), *Tussen kiezer en hoofdkwartier. De lokale partijafdelingen en de gemeenteraadsverkiezingen van 2006* (pp. 111-138). Brussel: VUB Press. The percentages relate to those constituencies where a party with a potential absolute majority also effectively governs on its own. In a number of municipalities the majority party increases its majority by working with other partners. We have treated such situations with a 'surplus' majority as coalitions. In total therefore in 79 Flemish municipalities a single party has a majority, while in their 226 counterparts a majority of two or more parties are in power (calculated on the 305 known majorities; in the as yet unknown constituencies there have always been coalitions of two or more parties.).
- 15/ Ackaert J. (1996), *op.cit.*, pp. 53-54. Ackaert J., Dumont P. & Dewinter L. (2008), *op.cit.*, pp. 115-122.
- 16/ Winckelmans W. & Brinckman B. (2012). Iedereen heeft voorakkoorden, ook N-VA, *De Standaard*, 26 September 2012.
- 17/ Kidr (2012). Ex-kartelpartners N-VA en CD&V laten elkaar vallen. *De Standaard*, 18 October 2012. Of course, the coalition is only definitive at the moment when the nominations are approved by the council. A number of announced coalitions never get that far, having meanwhile been scrapped, modified or replaced by another combination.
- 18/ Boute S. (1988). De vorming van coalities in de Belgische gemeenten. *Tijdschrift voor Sociologie*, 1/2, pp. 138-179. Ackaert J., Dumont P. & Dewinter L. (2008), *op.cit.*, pp. 124-128. In 2006 the number of coalitions without surplus partners, with the fewest possible parties, the smallest possible majority of seats, or where the largest party was a partner was repeatedly and systematically higher. The first two factors increased by between two and four times the chance that a potential coalition would become the effective one. Olislagers E. & Steyvers K. (2011). *Rekensom of relatiegeschenk? Partnerkeuze bij coalitievorming op lokaal vlak. Burger, Bestuur & Beleid*, 7(2), pp. 91-104.
- 19/ Pridham G. (1986). *Coalitional behaviour in theory and practice: an inductive model for Western Europe* (pp. 26-31). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Ackaert J., Dumont P. & Dewinter L. (2008), *op.cit.*, pp. 133-135. Pressure from above is certainly not absent. Deals are often made at the regional level. Nevertheless, the fact that only about 3% of local coalitions reflect those at the regional or federal level says much about its limitations.
- 20/ In 2006 the figure for the whole of Belgium was still around half and *incumbency* (together with the other *minimal* criteria) was the most accurate means of distinguishing actual from potential majorities. Olislagers E. (2012). Kiezen voor continuïteit? Waarom veel coalities een voortzetting zijn van hun voorgangers. *Vlaams Tijdschrift voor Overheidsmanagement*, 4, pp. 5-17. For Flanders alone the figure was 36,8%.
- 21/ See www.n-va.be state of affairs, 14 December 2012). In total 113 instances of power sharing are mentioned (or nearly 37%). The party calculates generously: also cartels and/or election lists with a local name are described as N-VA councils.
- 22/ Ackaert J., Dumont P., De Winter L. (2008), *op.cit.*, pp. 119-122.
- 23/ Doctoral research by Ellen Olislagers (*Rekensom of relatiegeschenk? Partnerkeuze bij coalitievorming op lokaal vlak*).
- 24/ Ackaert J., *op.cit.*, pp. 63-66.
- 25/ Vermeir J., Heyndels B. (2007), Loont besturen? Electorale voor- en nadelen van bestuursdeelname bij gemeenteraadsverkiezingen. *Res Publica*, 1, pp. 113-131.

Determinants of Electoral Volatility

Where Did the N-VA Find its Local Support?

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The most important swing in the municipal elections of 14 October 2012 was the dramatic growth in local support for the Flemish Nationalist party N-VA. An initial analysis of the data from the PartiRep exit poll on 14 October 2012, indicates that the party attracted votes from both the left and the right. However, the N-VA supporters seem to fit the typical profile of the volatile voter: dissatisfied, with little interest in and distrustful of politics, including local government. National issues were barely mentioned by N-VA voters, but they were certainly dissatisfied with their local councils.

THE 2012 PARTIREP EXIT POLL

The local council elections of 14 October 2012 represented in many municipalities a partial breakthrough for the Flemish nationalist party, the N-VA. Whereas in 2006 the party was virtually absent at the local level, or only survived because of Christian democrat support, in 2012 it won a large number of seats and in some places even the Mayor's office. Although the local level in Belgium is where voting behaviour is fairly stable and national trends and swings are extremely slow to take effect, between 2006 and 2012 a large number of electors switched their allegiance to the nationalist N-VA. The questions this raises are: where did these new N-VA voters come from, why did they choose N-VA and how can we characterize these voters?

Those questions cannot be answered by a quick glance at the election results; they require proper analyses based on serious and methodologically sound scientific research. For this reason, the interuniversity research consortium PartiRep organised a nationwide survey of voters at the time of the municipal elections of 14 October. For this survey an exit poll format was chosen, in which voters were interviewed as they left the polling booth. In this way, they could be questioned about their voting behaviour and motivation before any results or media analysis could affect their responses. We know that once the outcome of an election is known, voters tend to adapt their answers to what they have heard in the media. Furthermore, surveying voters soon after the act of voting reduces the possibility of memory problems affecting their replies.

In designing the exit poll, strict scientific principles were followed and the results of the poll enable us to draw reliable conclusions about voting behaviour. This kind of research contains far more methodologically reliable information than unfounded speculation based solely on, for instance, press reports. For the PartiRep Exit Poll 2012, voters were interviewed in 40 randomly selected Belgian municipalities of which 23 were in the Flemish Region.

In the first stage of a two part selection process municipalities were chosen by applying the typology developed by the Dexia bank which specialises in the financing of local councils. This was used to ensure sufficient variation in terms of population, region and economic activity for the various municipalities. Subsequently a number of polling booths in each of the municipalities were selected randomly. The number of voting locations covered by the exit poll depended on the number of inhabitants. The purpose of this approach was to interview a representative sample of Belgian voters on 14 October 2012. Analysis shows that there was a slight over-representation of men, young people and Brussels voters in the data set. More information about the methodology and representativeness of the poll can be found in the technical report.

This article is the first to provide an analysis of voting behaviour in the elections of 14 October 2012. On the francophone side, the elections were relatively predictable without any big swings. The most important swing was of course the breakthrough of the Flemish-nationalist N-VA in the municipalities. Therefore, for this initial analysis we shall confine ourselves to the 2,557 voters who were questioned in one of the 23 Flemish municipalities. An encompassing analysis of the data from the exit poll was published in the autumn of 2013 by the VUB Press and the Editions de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles (PartiRep series).

WHERE DO THE NEW N-VA VOTERS COME FROM?

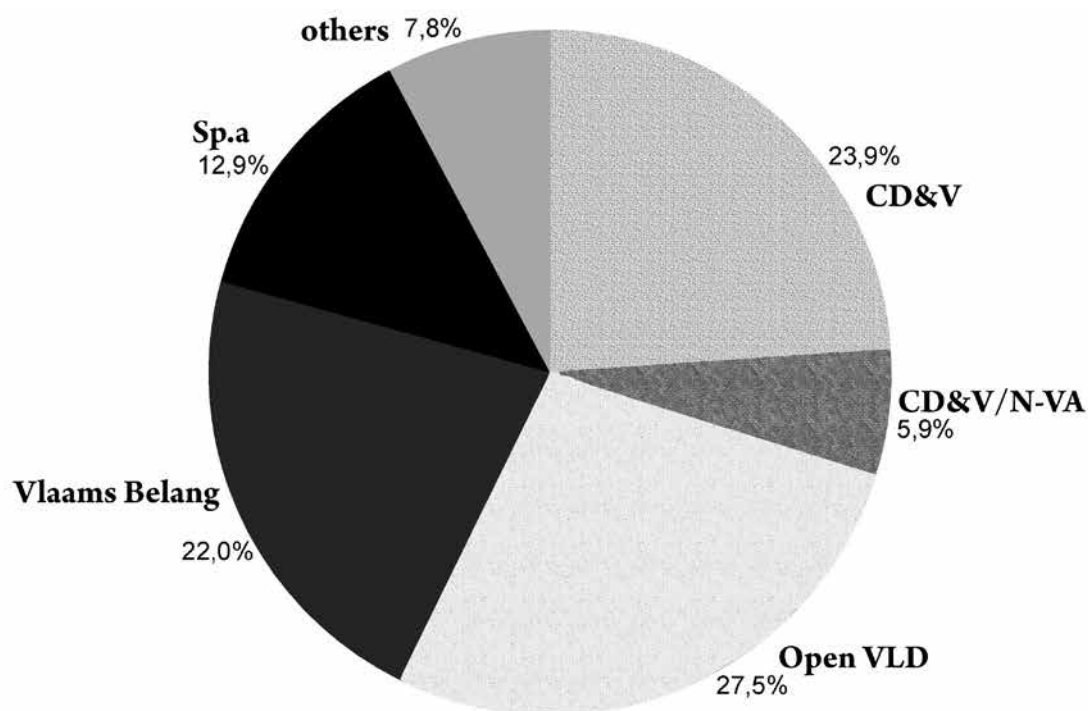
In many municipalities the N-VA campaigned on its own for the first time on 14 October 2012. Yet many electors cast their vote for this new local player. To obtain some insight into this voting pattern, the respondents in the PartiRep Exit Poll were asked which party they had voted for in the previous local elections of 2006.

This kind of 'recollection' naturally creates methodological problems. It is extremely difficult to remember which party one supported six years before, especially at the local level. Furthermore, in the intervening period three other elections had been held at different administrative levels in 2007, 2009 and 2010. In consequence, voters tended to exaggerate the degree to which they had voted for the same party in the previous municipal elections. Nevertheless, such a 'recall question' does tell us something about the nature of movements towards or away from different parties. In the media it is frequently claimed that N-VA voters come primarily from the far-right nationalist Vlaams Belang and the liberal Open VLD. The figures allow us to see whether this assumption is in fact true.

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The N-VA was the largest party among the Flemish respondents, 501 of whom said they had voted for it. Furthermore, the fact that a considerable number of them (255) remembered having voted for a different party in 2006 allowed us to study the N-VA's new support. A glance at Figure 1 shows clearly that the new N-VA voters come from across the ideological spectrum. About 30% of the new N-VA-voters stated that in 2006 they had voted for the Christian Democrats of CD&V or for the CD&V/N-VA cartel while over 25% had voted for the liberal Open VLD. The fact that N-VA is also an alternative for extreme right-wing electors is shown by the fact that over 20% of the new N-VA voters came over from Vlaams Belang. However, contrary to what is often assumed, the party also attracted support from the left side of the political spectrum. About 13% of the new N-VA supporters stated that six years earlier they had voted for the socialist sp.a. Voters who previously preferred a left-wing party therefore also showed that they were not impervious to the attractions of nationalism. The N-VA was the undisputed victor in these elections. On the one hand, the party could not lose any votes because six years earlier it hardly ran in the elections under its own name. On the other hand, the party attracted support from all sides, not only from the right and extreme right, but also from the centre and the left.

Figure 1. Voting behaviour in 2006 as recalled by the new N-VA voters in 2012.



Source: PartiRep Exit Poll 2012.

VOTING MOTIVES

The great swings in voting behaviour between 2006 and 2012 and sizable vote flow towards N-VA raise the question of what voting behaviour on 14 October 2012 was based on. To answer this question we should turn to an open-ended question about voting motives included in the exit poll survey. Respondents were asked to explain in their own words what the most important reason was for voting for a particular political party. The answers were then coded in three voting motive categories.

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Analysing the answers clarifies that local issues predominated. (Table 1). Among the reasons given for voters' party choice, the most common were knowing the candidate personally, their opinion of the performance of the local administration during the previous 6 years, and various specifically local issues. The motives mentioned on 14 October 2012, therefore, confirmed the old saying: *all politics is local*. It is in the interests of every political party to bring out their strongest local candidates. National issues, such as the administrative scission of electoral district Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde (BHV) or constitutional reform, were hardly mentioned as influences on voting on 14 October. Furthermore, attitudes towards the federal government or national politicians played a negligible role in the choices made by Flemish voters in the local elections. During the election campaign, some parties announced that these elections would be a referendum on the performance of the Di Rupo tripartite government (of which N-VA is not a part). There is not a trace of this in the responses to the exit poll survey.

The same pattern also applied to the N-VA itself, the party wanted to turn the local and provincial polls into a plebiscite on the federal government. If we focus solely on the N-VA voters, the picture of primarily local motives persists. Among N-VA voters the most common reason given for their vote choice referred to the local administration, with specifically local issues coming second. Knowing the candidates was considerably less important for supporters of the N-VA than for the other parties. Although the N-VA, as one of the successors to the People's Union [Volksunie], did have local roots

in some municipalities, the party's local presence is more limited than the average. National issues, national politicians and opinions about the federal government were mentioned by N-VA voters slightly more than the average, but they did not predominate. Local issues were clearly the most important reason for the vote choice on 14 October 2012, even for N-VA voters.

Table 1. Most important reason for choice of vote by category.

	All voters	Only N-VA voters
(I know) a local politician	20.2%	12.4%
Local government and opposition	17.9%	22.0%
Local issue	13.9%	15.5%
Party, general	8.7%	12.3%
Ideology of this party	8.1%	6.4%
Anti: against something or somebody	5.7%	6.1%
I am member of a particular organisation	5.6%	7.2%
Habit	4.7%	1.3%
Followed peers	3.7%	3.0%
Politician (general)	3.6%	2.2%
National issue	2.7%	4.0%
Constituency service	1.4%	0.2%
Size of the party (large or small)	1.2%	1.0%
Media influence	1.1%	1.6%
National government / opposition	0.9%	2.9%
Influence of a national politician	0.6%	2.1%

Source: PartiRep Exit Poll 2012. Open question about voting motivation (more than one answer possible).

EXPLANATIONS FOR VOTE SWITCHING

The increase in volatility and the great electoral swings that have occurred in various western countries in recent years have received considerable attention from academics. A trio of possibilities have been given systematic attention as a potential breeding ground for electoral volatility: 1) dissatisfaction with government policy, 2) political interest (or lack of it), and 3) disenchantment with politics in general. We shall see whether these motives also played a role among those who switched party allegiance on 14 October 2012.

In many municipalities, compared with 2006, the swings were considerable. That this happened at the local level, where personal contacts with politicians are crucial and where national trends have trouble getting a foothold, is striking and theoretically relevant. Many voters changed parties between 2006 and 2012 and most of them moved towards the N-VA. Local issues were the dominant voting motive for all voters, including those who voted for the N-VA. If we want to understand electoral volatility and, in particular, why so many voters supported the N-VA for the first time, we must look first at the local level.

In the following paragraphs, we shall look in turn at each of the factors that have been seen in the literature as reasons for switching parties. We shall consider whether dissatisfaction, political interest or lack of it, or an aversion to politics at the local level can explain the shift to the N-VA. We shall do this by analysing voters' satisfaction with local government, their interest in local politics, and the level of political trust at the local level.

DISSATISFACTION WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The most common reason given for voting N-VA was the performance of the local council. Were most of these voters dissatisfied and did they vote for a new party at the local level because it campaigned for 'change'?

The exit poll survey attempted to gauge the respondents' level of satisfaction with the local policies. Respondents were asked to score their satisfaction with governance for nine policy areas on a scale of 0 to 10, in which 0 meant extremely dissatisfied and 10 extremely satisfied. These policy areas were traffic and mobility; road maintenance; safety; involvement and participation; taxes; social housing; immigration and integration; environment; youth policies. The information on the respondents' satisfaction with these nine issues can be combined on a single sum scale.¹ This gives us an idea of the overall level of voters' satisfaction with how the municipality is being run.

In Table 2 we can see the average level of satisfaction with local government on a scale of 0 to 10. It is shown for all the voters combined and for voters of each of the national parties, including the N-VA, separately.²

Table 2. Satisfaction with local government (on a scale of 0 to 10).

All Voters	5.6
Open VLD (Liberal)	6.2
CD&V (Christian Democrat)	5,9
Groen (Green)	5,6
Sp.a (Socialist)	5,6
N-VA (Flemish Nationalist)	5,1
Vlaams Belang (Far right)	4,6

Source: *PartiRep Exit Poll 2012*.

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On average, Flemish voters give their municipalities a score of 5.6 out of 10 on the satisfaction scale. The most satisfied are voters from Open VLD (6.2) followed by CD&V with 5.9. For sp.a and Green voters, satisfaction equals the overall average (5.6). Those supporting N-VA on 14 October were considerably less satisfied with how their municipality was run. Their satisfaction rating of 5.1 out of 10 was well down the list; only the Vlaams Belang voters scored lower with 4.6. The N-VA voters therefore criticize the functioning not only of the national government but also of local government irrespective of its political make-up.

Academic research shows that especially voters who are dissatisfied with local policies and their administration are most likely to change parties from election to election.³ Focusing on voter dissatisfaction is therefore a good strategy for parties looking to expand and hoping to attract new support. A glance at the satisfaction ratings of respondents to the exit poll suggests that taking advantage of, or even encouraging, dissatisfaction might help to explain the growth of the N-VA at the local level. Those who were persuaded to vote for the N-VA in the local elections of 14 October 2012 appear to have been considerably less satisfied with the way their municipality was being run.

POLITICAL INTEREST

Researchers are not agreeing on the relationship between 'political sophistication' on the one hand and volatility on the other. Political sophistication can be interpreted as a combination of political

knowledge and interest, and staying abreast of political news. One group of researchers argue that a certain level of political literacy is required in order to acquire enough information before deciding to switch parties. This group assumes that voters who know absolutely nothing about politics will, from sheer force of habit, always vote for the same party.⁴ A second group of researchers has a totally different view on the link between political sophistication and volatility. According to them, political sophistication is exactly what is needed to develop stable party preferences, and in contrast, it is the uninterested voters who are volatile because they are more easily seduced by media campaigns or a charismatic leader.⁵

How can we characterize the large group of electors who supported the N-VA on 14 October 2012? Are they voters with a deep interest in local politics who have made the informed decision that the local council needs a change? Or did the switch towards the N-VA reflect a lack of interest in local politics and weak loyalties to local political parties?

In the exit poll survey, voters were asked to give a score between 0 and 10 to rate their interest in local politics in their municipality. A score of 0 meant no interest at all while 10 meant a great deal of interest in local politics.

In Table 3 we compare the degree to which voters of various parties are interested in local politics. The average score for the Flemish Region was 5.7 out of 10. Open VLD voters have the highest level of interest in local politics (6.0), closely followed by voters of sp.a and Groen who also have a higher than average interest in local politics. CD&V voters have an average interest (5.7), but N-VA and more particularly Vlaams Belang supporters clearly have less interest in local politics than the average Flemish voter.

Table 3. Interest in local politics (on a scale from 0 to 10).

All voters	5.7
Open VLD (Liberal)	6,0
Groen (Green)	5.9
Sp.a (Socialist)	5.9
CD&V (Christian democrat)	5.7
N-VA (Flemish Nationalist)	5.5
Vlaams Belang (far right)	5,1

Source: *PartiRep Exit Poll 2012*.

A comparison of the level at which voters of different political parties rate their interest in local politics shows that N-VA voters are less interested than the average. The results reflect no pattern at all of those with a strong interest in politics at the local level voting for the N-VA. On the contrary, those who supported N-VA show less interest in local politics than the average Flemish voter.

POLITICAL TRUST

A third political attitude often associated with changing parties from one election to another is a more general aversion to politics. Trust in politics can function as a useful indicator. In the literature, it is generally assumed that particularly those voters with little trust in the political system tend regularly to switch between different parties.⁶ Particularly in a political system with compulsory voting and where a large proportion of the electors do cast their votes⁷ a change of party from election to election is a potential way to express their mistrust of the political system.

To measure the level of trust in local politics, respondents to the exit poll survey were asked how much trust they had in a number of local institutions. They were asked how much they trusted the mayor and his cabinet; the mayor himself; the local council; the council administration and the local police, once more on a scale of 0 to 10. The respondents' level of trust in the five institutions proved quite consistent.⁸ Consequently we can combine the scores into a single sum scale of political trust at the local level. It is important to note that it relates exclusively to the respondents' own municipality. In no way does the scale refer to regional or federal politics.

Flemish electors have a fairly high level of trust in local political institutions. The average was 6.3 on a scale of 0 to 10 (see Table 4). Similar to what we saw with satisfaction and political interest, levels of local trust varied considerably between the different parties. Open VLD voters have the highest level of trust (7.0) in local political institutions and the level of trust of CD&V voters (6.9) is also higher than average. For sp.a and Green voters the level of trust is about average. The most distrustful are voters of Vlaams Belang (4.9) but N-VA voters (5.8) are also lower than average.

Table 4. Trust in local politics (on a scale from 0 to 10).

All voters	6.3
Open VLD (Liberal)	7.0
CD&V (Christian democrat)	6.9
Sp.a (Socialist)	6.3
Groen (Green)	6.2
N-VA (Flemish nationalist)	5.8
Vlaams Belang (far right)	4.9

Source: PartiRep Exit Poll 2012.

The N-VA was supported by voters on 14 October who had less trust in local institutions than the average Flemish voter. Consequently, the supporters of the Flemish nationalist party N-VA are not only less satisfied with the way the municipality is governed, but this feeling goes deeper and is reflected in a lack of trust in local political institutions. The figures therefore suggest that the votes that the N-VA received on 14 October may be regarded as an expression of political distrust. The political distrust of N-VA voters, therefore, does not only relate to the federal government as is often thought but is also definitely observable at the local level.

THE VOLATILE PROFILE OF THE N-VA VOTERS

Those who voted for the N-VA on 14 October 2012 fit perfectly the textbook profile of the volatile voter. In the first place they are dissatisfied with the way the municipality has been run during the past six years. Furthermore, they have less trust in local political institutions and are less interested in local politics. The N-VA was able to obtain support not only from voters who wanted to see changes in the local council, but from those whose dissatisfaction was even more profound. In the municipal elections the N-VA attracted the votes of those with an aversion to politics, with little trust in politics, and a limited interest in politics. This sense of dissatisfaction can be clearly observed at the local level.

CONCLUSION

Somewhat surprisingly, on 14 October 2012 the N-VA broke through locally in many Flemish

municipalities. Given that the party wanted to declare the municipal elections a referendum on the federal tripartite Di Rupo government, the success of the Flemish nationalists was indeed interpreted as a national protest against the government, an interpretation that was eagerly taken up by journalists of all persuasions.

The data of the PartiRep Exit Poll 2012 show that such an interpretation is incorrect. Local motives dominated the choice of party among all voters. Even among N-VA voters, local arguments predominated. Those voters, incidentally, came from all sides of the political spectrum. But if the lurch towards the N-VA was not driven by national considerations, how should we interpret the party's break-through at the local level?

The N-VA voters are primarily dissatisfied voters. This sense of dissatisfaction, moreover, is not fed by a strong interest in, or great knowledge of, local politics. On the contrary, the N-VA's supporters have rather less interest in local politics than the average Flemish voter. Their dissatisfaction is fairly fundamental, since their trust in the local institutions is also considerably lower than the average. It seems, therefore, that the N-VA on 14 October succeeded in winning over voters who were dissatisfied. They are dissatisfied with how they are governed and with the political system in general. That sense of dissatisfaction is observable at the local level and the N-VA cleverly exploited it with a campaign for change. The fact that the party attracted mainly dissatisfied voters also explains why the influx was so wide. Discontent is not limited to any particular ideological movement or group; it can be present across the whole ideological spectrum. Not only voters from the right and the centre, but also from the left, changed parties to the N-VA in 2012.

Taking advantage of local discontent has not done the N-VA any harm. The party has won a large number of seats on local councils. However, the sense of dissatisfaction of the N-VA voters could also be the party's weakness, because discontented voters are exceptionally volatile. The newly-elected N-VA council and committee members consequently face the difficult task of holding on to the support of their dissatisfied and mistrustful rank and file. It remains to be seen whether in six years

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that dissatisfied group is still dissatisfied and therefore susceptible to the attractions of a new challenger. The Leuven sociologist, Luc Huyse, claimed recently that elections are no longer used to reward good governance, but that we are moving towards a system of disposable elections. Dissatisfied voters use the polling booth to send their governors home, regardless of what they might have achieved. This first analysis of this PartiRep Exit Poll confirms that diagnosis of the 2012 municipal elections. The question is whether such disposable elections can contribute to better and more stable government at the local level.

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Translation: Chris Emery.

Endnotes

1/ Unidimensional: Self-evaluation: 4.45, Declared variance: 0.50, Cronbach's α : 0.87.

2/ We have only included those parties in the comparison that campaigned under their national party name and did so alone. The Antwerp City List, for instance, an alliance between the Sp.a and the CD&V, has not been included.

3/ Hooghe M., Marien S. & Pauwels T. (2011). Where do Distrusting Voters Turn to if there is no Viable Exit or Voice Option? The Impact of Political Trust on Electoral Behaviour in the Belgian Regional Elections of June, 2009. *Government and Opposition. International Journal of Comparative Politics*, 46(2), pp. 245-273.

4/ See e.g. Dalton, R. (2013). *The Apartisan American: Dealignment and Changing Electoral Politics*. Washington: CQ Press.

5/ The pioneers of this viewpoint are undoubtedly Berelson B., Lazarsfeld P. & McPhee W., 1963. *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

6/ See e.g. Zelle C. (1995). Social Dealignment Versus Political Frustration: Contrasting Explanations of the Floating Vote in Germany. *European Journal of Political Research*, 27(3), pp. 319-345.

7/ In Flanders the turnout on 14 October was 91.5% (www.vlaanderenkiest.be).

8/ Unidimensional: Self-evaluation: 3.45, declared variance: 0.69, Cronbach's α : 0.88.

Political Parties in the Trenches

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The local elections of 14 October 2012 did not lead to any great political swings. After almost a year of the Di Rupo government the positions of the parties remain unchanged and the latest polls do not suggest any major swings in the future. Despite the shaky start of the Di Rupo government, some sort of stability seems to have returned to Belgian politics. At the present moment, Belgian politics finds itself in a phase of trench warfare. Compared with 2010, all the parties have stuck to their positions.

TRENCH WARFARE

A huge amount of time and energy was spent on predicting the local elections of 14 October 2012. The archives of *De Standaard* show that as early as September 2011 articles were appearing about the election issues, the candidates and the potential political consequences. If the media in this country do anything well, it is the constant whipping up of election fever. Looking back on it now, we can see that much of the excitement was quite unnecessary. On the whole, as might be expected, the local elections followed national trends. The results of the municipal elections of October 2012 largely confirmed the federal elections of June 2010. The N-VA scores rather less than in 2010 while the CD&V traditionally does better in local elections. On the francophone side there is very little change at all.

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It is a pattern that one often sees when comparing successive election results. Some elections do lead to spectacular shifts which pose a real challenge to the traditional balance of political power nationally. Yet in the following election there is a loss of momentum and the parties stabilise themselves at a new level. This is what happened here. The results of 2010 were indeed fairly spectacular with a historically unprecedented victory for the nationalist N-VA in Flanders. Between June 2010 and October 2012 Belgian politics underwent huge changes. One has only to think of the long drawn-out government formation which in December 2011 ultimately led to the Di Rupo six party coalition of Socialists, Christian Democrats and Liberals from the two language communities – but excluding the main victor on the Flemish side, the N-VA. This government has set about reforming pensions and reorganising the public finances although it should be noted that the stagnation of the Belgian economy has rendered it extremely difficult for the government to keep in line with the European budget rules. All these developments, however, do not seem to make the slightest impression on the voters who continued to cast their votes as they had in June 2010. Those who were then convinced that the N-VA would bring about change still believe it, while those who then believed that political parties would, at last, take responsibility for governing the country, also still do so.

At the present moment, Belgian politics finds itself in a phase of trench warfare. The coalition parties and the opposition have entrenched themselves into their respective positions and are unable to move forward. There are many parallels with 1914 when the German army overran the whole of Belgium like an express train between 4 August and 12 October. It is similar to the way in which the N-VA grew into the largest political party in Flanders. After 12 October 1914 the Germans were halted

at the gates of Ypres and in the ensuing four years they hardly gained a further metre of territory. Belgian politics too seems to have entered a comparable period of trench warfare and, unfortunately, the consequences could again be extremely damaging.

FIGURES AND PERCEPTIONS

Although in the days following the local and provincial elections of 14 October 2012 many weighty explanations were given, no-one can seriously argue that they brought about any great changes. It has been argued by some that the political groundswell in Flanders is conservative and nationalist. But in reality, that is doubtful. Even in the city of Antwerp the progressive and left-wing parties together have won almost 46% of the votes and in Ghent the result is broadly similar. The most important difference between them was that in Antwerp the left's campaign was 'scattered', and they ended up as the 'big losers'. In Ghent, on the other hand, they worked as a cartel and their 45.5% was enough for a majority on the council. Yet it is now being suggested that Antwerp represents a wide right-wing conservative groundswell while apparently Ghent forms a progressive island. But one only has to look at the figures to see that there is little difference in the balance between left and right in the two cities. The real difference is that the progressive politicians in Ghent adopted a more sensible approach with a socialist/Green cartel, whereas in Antwerp the sp.a's alliance with the Christian democrats lost quite a few voters to other left-wing parties.

Antwerp attracted most attention both before and after the elections and rightly so since it is our largest city. But we should not forget that 96% of the Belgian population do not live in Antwerp. And there is also another reason not to take Antwerp as the great role-model for the rest of the country. The big problem with Antwerp is that, perhaps because of its size, it is extremely volatile in its political preferences. In 2000, the leader of the far-right Flemish Interest party, Filip Dewinter, was the most popular politician; in 2006 it was the Socialist Patrick Janssens and in 2012 it was the moderate nationalist Bart De Wever of the N-VA. That is not a clear line. The political preferences of the Antwerp electorate are so unpredictable that the most we can say is that in six years time someone else will be in favour.

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CD&V: THE FUTURE OF THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS

It seems rather less obvious, but the real historical significance of these elections rests rather in what happened in the smaller cities like Bruges and Kortrijk. At first sight they do not appear to be the most spectacular of towns, but they were the last genuine regional centres where the burgomaster was a Christian Democrat. Now even they have gone. In Bruges because the CD&V had no-one capable of filling the shoes of the outgoing burgomaster Patrick Moenaert and in Kortrijk through an effective coalition by the opposition. In short, this means that the Flemish Christian Democrats have entirely disappeared from the administration of the regional centres. For a party that until relatively recently could claim with justice to reflect the mainstream of Flemish society, that is serious. The Christian Democrats have to recognise that they have lost touch with modern urban culture. Of course, they are still strong in the dormitory towns and rural communities, but it would be hard to argue that that is where the real heart of Flanders lies. The chairman of CD&V, Wouter Beke, admitted during the campaign that his party no longer had a genuine 'narrative', which seems to be a way of avoiding the use of the word 'ideology'. The distribution of its results show that the party still has an ideology, but that it is facing resolutely to the past. The ideology of CD&V fits perfectly into the societal model of villages like Torhout, Tielt and Meeuwen-Grutrode. That is not, however, the model of the future that one encounters in the cities of Brussels, Antwerp or Ghent. Christian Democracy has played an extremely important part in the political history of Belgium and it would not be an exaggeration to say that its ideology has to a large extent shaped the Belgian model. It is, however, not so evident

that Christian Democracy can continue to survive as an ideology. In the Netherlands, the Christian Democratic CDA has all but disappeared. The Flemish Christian democrats, if they want to avoid becoming totally irrelevant, will have to come up with some answers to the problems of modern urban society. The burgomaster of, say, the small village Ledegem will probably always be a Christian Democrat, but that is not a basis for a long-term political future. The Christian Democrats are now trying to sharpen up their ideological profile, but it remains to be seen whether the operation will bear fruit. The documents published so far have not removed the initial impression of a rather old-fashioned, cautious middle-of-the-road approach.

SP.A: STRONG MAYORS

On the whole, the opposite is true of the socialist sp.a. The party systematically focuses only on its urban strongholds. The number of rural constituencies where the Socialists campaigned independently has declined steadily. In the short term, that may seem to be a sensible decision: traditionally the Socialists do badly in the countryside, and one ends up investing a relatively large number of resources in local campaigns which lead to few seats and usually a place in the opposition. In the longer term, however, it is also an admission of weakness. Left-wing voters who live in the rural areas end up voting for other parties and are given the impression by the leaders of their own party that their votes are not important. It is certainly true that more voters are switching between parties, but the Sp.a is possibly the only party in Western Europe to encourage its voters to do so by offering no alternative during local elections. One can hardly expect loyalty to a party that cannot provide even the most basic organisation for its voters.

The strategy, moreover, has a further disadvantage: the sp.a is holding up relatively well in a few of the regional centres, but that has largely been due to the personality and input of local burgomasters. The party is clearly having problems in attracting efficient and motivated members, and it is not at all certain that the next generation will necessarily be able to take over from the present leadership. In Ghent, burgomaster Daniel Termont (60) will be retiring, and in Leuven, burgomaster Louis Tobback (75) cannot go on for ever. Has the party a new generation to hand ready to plunge into local politics with the same degree of energy and commitment?

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The odd thing about the pattern for both the Socialists and Christian Democrats is what it says of the claim that in Flanders there is no longer a clear divide between town and country, that the countryside has been built over and everyone lives less than an hour from Brussels. The election results show that the boundaries between town and country are sharper than ever, and suggest that a process of self-selection is taking place. There is a particular group in society who have opted for an urban lifestyle and in general it is made up of people who can accept having neighbours with a different cultural background and do not mind not being able to park both family cars outside their front door. Those who think that it is important for their quality of life to have their own driveway, move out to the affluent suburbs. Despite the short distances involved, it creates a clear geographic dichotomy in our society.

RESPONSIBILITY AND MEDIA FRENZY

As early as September 2011 the media had already started to go on about the 'impending' local elections and it was striking that on the eve of the elections of October 2012 it was already switching its attention to the elections of May 2014. This behaviour is totally irresponsible. By giving the impression that our politicians are continually rushing from one campaign to the next, it creates a climate in which there is no time left for real policy-making. Between now and May 2014 a number of important things have actually got to be done about social security, employment, taxation and the budget deficit. Are we going to waste all that time on petty electoral political games and squander

the future of our society? All in all, the local elections can hardly tell us anything meaningful about the elections of May 2014. After all, compared with 2010, all the parties have stuck to their positions. The Di Rupo coalition has clearly not yet won everyone over, but the coalition parties are not being punished for it. Everyone is remaining in their own trenches.

Although all kinds of exaggerated claims are now being made about ‘the mother of all elections’ in May 2014, the real test will come in the months following those elections. It is most unlikely that a single party or even an alliance of parties will win an absolute majority, so once again there will be lengthy coalition negotiations. Some parties will no doubt again be tempted to raise the question of constitutional reform. The difference from the previous long drawn-out crisis, however, is that we have signed a stringent stability treaty which has set clear targets for the 2015 and 2016 budgets. The Di Rupo government will not do the opposition the favour of drawing up a 2015 budget before the elections of May 2014, so it will be a new team that will have to complete that particular chore before the agreed deadline of October 2014. All the political parties are talking of safeguarding the wellbeing of the Belgian population. In the summer of 2014 they will have to face the ultimate test: either they will again plunge into a dead-end crisis with dire consequences for our economy, or a government will be formed relatively quickly which will carry out our obligations under the European Stability Mechanism. Until the summer of 2014, everyone can go on sitting in their own trenches; but after that the parties will have to face up to reality and their responsibilities.

BATTLEFIELD ANTWERP

How Flemish Nationalists Conquered City Hall

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In the wake of the local elections of 14 October 2012 there has been no shortage of analyses and speculations about what happened. They often rest on personal impressions of the campaign and the election results. In this contribution we should like to supplement these analyses with some empirical research in which the same group of voters was interrogated three times. Over 700 respondents took part in two surveys which were conducted before the local elections of 14 October 2012 and a third one in the weeks following. We hope that the results, will provide a clearer insight into the opinions and final party choice of Antwerp voters, and where possible how they developed in the course of the campaign.¹ We shall first look at changes in voting patterns and then more closely at the importance of the 'list leader', the main candidate on a party's electoral list, and the policy preferences of different groups. Our analyses shows that the victory of the Flemish nationalist N-VA was established way before the start of the campaign and that Mayor Patrick Janssens' City List (Sp.a-CD&V) never posed a real threat to the N-VA's lead.

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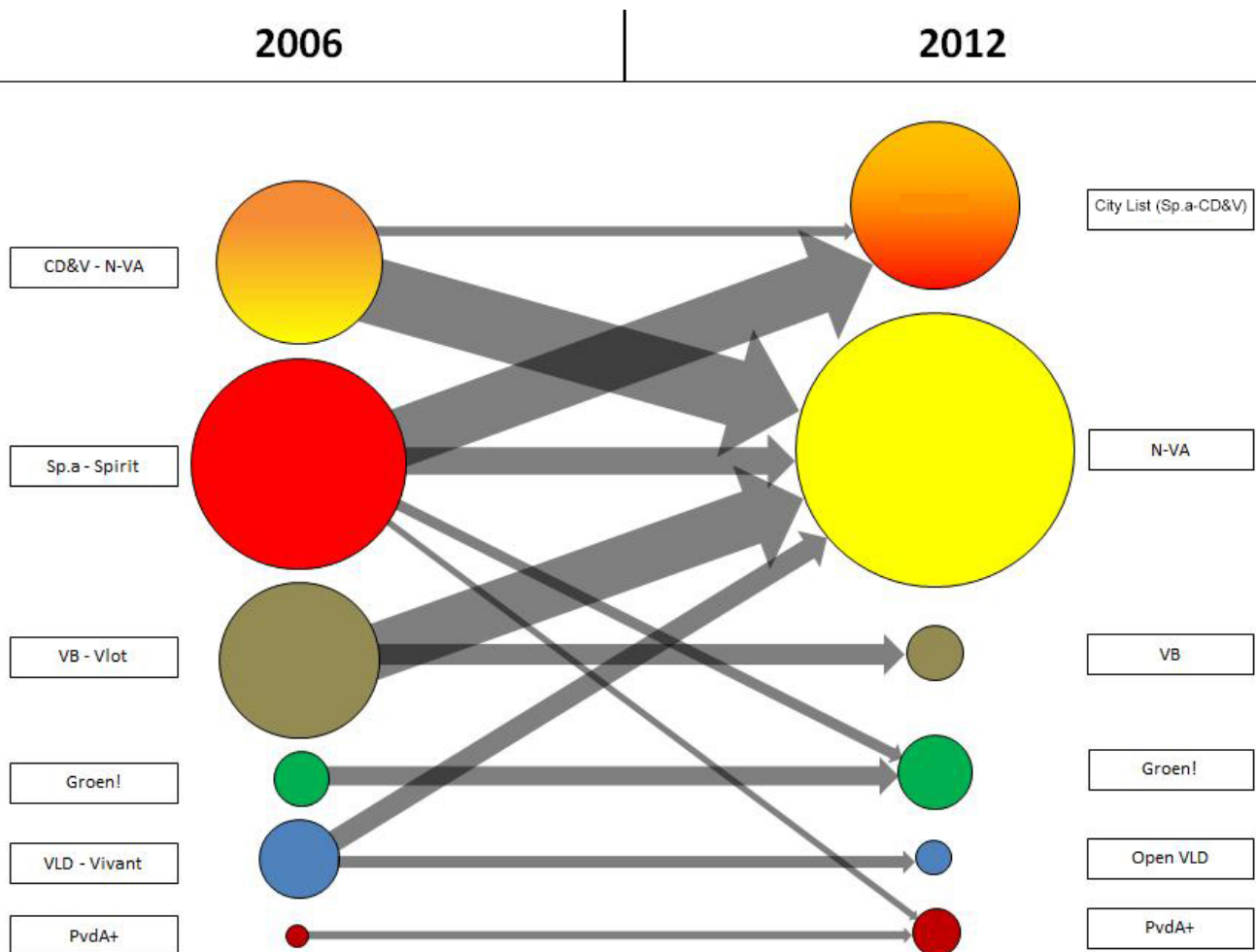
SHIFTING VOTING PATTERNS IN THE ANTWERP LOCAL ELECTIONS

The Antwerp results soon made it clear that, since the land slide victory for the Antwerp Socialists in 2006, many voters had changed their allegiance. The main question was where the support in 2012 for the moderate Flemish nationalist N-VA had come from? The panel structure of our research project provides a good insight into the way voters changed their party loyalties. We shall begin by comparing voting behaviour in 2006 and 2012 and then analyse the changes in voting preferences between the first survey in early September 2012 and the actual results on polling day.

Long term changes: 2006 – 2012

In the first survey, in September 2012, we asked our respondents which party they had voted for in 2006. We had to bear in mind that six years had passed since the last local elections and that three other elections had been held in the meantime, in 2007 (federal), 2009 (regional and European) and 2010 (federal), which would make it much more difficult to remember clearly. But it was the only possibility of creating a point of comparison with the previous local elections. In Figure 1 we show the changes in party support. The size of the circles reflects the relative size of the parties in our sample.² The thickness of the arrows reflects the size of the shift: the thicker the arrow the greater the number of voters who changed parties. To reduce the margin of error we only include significant moves of more than ten respondents. Where there is no significant shift from one party to another, there is no arrow.

Figure 1: Shifts in voting between 2006 and 2012 in Antwerp.



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Figure 1 allows us to evaluate the main trends. Firstly, the Flemish nationalist N-VA held on to most of the former supporters of its cartel with Christian-democratic CD&V, while relatively few followed the CD&V to support its alliance with the Social Democrats of Sp.a. The second major movement was away from the right-wing nationalist Flemish Interest (VB), traditionally strongly represented in Antwerp. Within our panel of respondents the VB's leader Filip De Winter and his team lost more supporters to the N-VA than they were able to hold on to. This also applied to the Open VLD Liberals, who in Antwerp have now been reduced to a 'mini-party'. Political scientist Marc Swyngedouw notes in this publication that 'it was almost inevitable that a proportion of the centre-right voters who supported Janssens (Sp.a) against Dewinter (VB) in 2006, would go over to De Wever and the N-VA in 2012'. That appears to be confirmed by our figures: the Social-democratic Sp.a also lost a large number of votes to the N-VA between 2006 and 2012.

A second trend seems to be the 'left-wing' outflow from the Sp.a-Spirit list: although a large number of voters transferred to the City List of Social Democrats and Christian Democrats, there are also arrows pointing to the Greens and the Left party (PVDA+). Seeing that Sp.a-Spirit had an enormously high score in 2006, some drop in support was to be expected, but it is quite clear that whereas Mayor Patrick Janssens had been supported by the bulk of progressive voters in 2006, by 2012 some of them had switched to other left-wing parties (Groen and PVDA+).

Shifts during the campaign

When we look at the number of voters who switched parties during the last six weeks before the 2012 elections, it is striking how small that number is. From our sample, it appears that the race had

been run before it had even started. N-VA's position was already extremely strong at the time of the first survey and it remained so during the final six weeks before the elections. At the start of the campaign 7 out of 10 respondents were certain that they would vote for N-VA, 2 out of 10 had a slight preference for the party. Scarcely 1 out of 10 voters who opted for N-VA at the start of the campaign, hesitated between other parties. The City List (Sp.a-CD&V) too had a large number of committed supporters. The undecided voters in our sample were mainly to be found among those who voted for the Greens, Open VLD (Liberals) and PVDA+ (Left). That does not mean that there were no significant shifts in our sample during the campaign. There were substantial movements in both directions between the moderate Flemish nationalist N-VA and the extreme right Flemish nationalist VB, but because they were evenly balanced the net effect was virtually nil. It again shows that the N-VA provided an alternative for the VB voter, and vice-versa. One notable feature is that during the last weeks of the campaign, about 5% of voters in our sample switched from the N-VA to the City List. The Greens also lost a number of voters to the City List on polling day. These movements were comparable to 2006 when the Sp.a enjoyed a massive following among left-wing voters. But since the gap between the Sp.a and N-VA was already so great these shifts in voting behaviour were not enough to turn the tide. In short, the election campaign never became really exciting because the N-VA had built up such a head start before it even began.

MUNICIPAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS VERSUS DISTRICT COUNCIL ELECTIONS

In Antwerp, the voters not only elect the municipal council but also, at the sub-local level, the so-called district councils. The districts have limited powers to deal with such things as roads, youth and culture. Elections for district councils are regarded by political scientists as 'second order' or, less respectfully, 'second class' elections where the results tend to be dictated by what happens in the 'first order' elections, in this case the municipality. Most voters vote for the same party at both levels. But there are exceptions: sometimes for strategic reasons voters do not vote for their first choice at the higher level, as for example when it becomes obvious that it has become a contest between two parties. In such a situation, voters often vote for one of them even when it is not their first choice. The second-order elections then become particularly interesting because voters are more inclined to vote for their real preferences. In the recent Antwerp elections we found evidence of this kind of strategic voting behaviour. Furthermore, voters are sometimes faced with different combinations of parties at the district level which can also affect voting behaviour. As this tends to make an exact comparison between municipal and district council elections rather difficult we shall limit ourselves to the more striking differences.

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One in four of those who voted for the Sp.a-CD&V City List at the municipal level, where you elect the Mayor, voted for the Greens at the district level. From the district perspective (Antwerp, Ekeren and Wilrijk), where Green had a separate list of candidates, half its supporters voted for the City List at the municipal level. This indicates that the duel between (then Mayor) Janssens and (now Mayor) De Wever exerted a strong influence on the voting behaviour of a large number of left-wing voters. Moreover, this number appears to have grown steadily in the course of the election campaign, especially in the final weeks. In early September, only 15% of those who intended to vote for the City List said that they would vote Green at the district level. By October this percentage had risen to 17% and rose still further to 27% by the actual elections. This also involved voters who previously would have voted Green at the municipal level. Many voters resolved the dilemma of Janssens (and therefore against De Wever as Mayor) or Green by 'splitting' their votes at the two levels.

The comparison with the districts also reveals that the Christian-democrat contribution to the City List (Sp.a-CD&V) was extremely modest. Overall only 16% of those who voted for the City List voted for CD&V at the district level (in 8 of the 9 districts the party campaigned independently). So proportionately fewer supporters of the City List voted for them than for the Greens. Sp.a did significantly better with 60% (in three districts it campaigned alone).

With the N-VA there was a strong uniformity of voting patterns in the city and the districts. No less than 85% of supporters at the city level also voted for the party at the district level. The Liberal Open VLD and extreme right Vlaams Belang were also stable at 82% and 86% respectively, but in absolute terms they lost voters at both levels and were reduced largely to a small hard-core of support.

LOCAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS VERSUS FEDERAL ELECTIONS

The above results are also reflected in the choices that the Antwerp voters said they would make if, at the end of October 2012, federal elections were to be held. Here too those who voted for N-VA at the city level would vote for them again *en masse* (91%) at the federal level. No other party achieved this level of consistency. Only the Greens at 84% could be similarly confident in a federal election. The City List (Sp.a-CD&V), which has since fallen apart, in the end consisted mainly of Sp.a supporters, since at this time hardly 1 in 10 electors would vote for CD&V. Just as in the district elections, we see that the City List at the municipal level managed to attract a considerable number of Green voters. Finally, we should note that the liberal Open VLD supporters, a very small party in Antwerp, did not automatically vote for their party at the national level.

**For which party would you vote if federal elections were held today (October 2012)?
Divided by party choice for the municipal council (3rd Sample).**

Final vote in local election	Hypothetical party choice for federal Elections								
	Green	Open VLD	CD&V	Sp.a	N-VA	PVDA+	VB	Other	
Green	84%	8%		2%	2%	2%		2%	100%
Open VLD	5%	71%	10%		14%				100%
City List (Sp.a-CD&V)	20%	4%	10%	55%	4%	4%		3%	100%
N-VA		3%	2%	1%	91%		1%	2%	100%
PvdA+	6%			12%	2%	68%	4%	8%	100%
VB		2%		2%	15%		78%	4%	100%

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THE LIST LEADERS

The importance of the names at the head of each list of candidates is beyond dispute, but their precise importance can vary considerably between the parties. For all the parties, between just under half (the Left PVDA+ and the Liberal Open VLD) and three-quarters of the voters gave the list leader their preference vote. Moreover, it turns out that for the City List in particular the list leader was the decisive factor in the choice of party. At least two thirds of the City List voters would have followed list leader and then Mayor Patrick Janssens to another party, probably in part because of his non-party style as burgomaster. We cannot exclude the possibility that some of the City List voters in our sample would consider the Sp.a and CD&V as a different party if they were not in alliance. Furthermore, it is striking that half of the N-VA voters would also have followed list leader and now Mayor Bart De Wever to another party. That indicates that he is clearly more important to the N-VA than the list leaders for the Open VLD, PVDA+ and the Greens.

Would you still vote for the list leader if he stood for a different party? Divided by final vote.

Final vote	Did you vote for the list leader?	Would you still vote for the list leader if s/he was on a different list?	
		Yes	No
Open VLD	48%	30%	70%
N-VA	78%	50%	50%
VB	58%	45%	55%
City List (Sp.a-CD&V)	75%	65%	35%
Green	61%	10%	90%
PvdA+	45%	24%	76%

The precise reasons for supporting a list leader also varies between the parties. Not surprisingly supporters of all parties thought their list leader's programme was important. Those who voted for ex-burgomaster Patrick Janssens did so mainly because of his administrative qualities: he has done a great deal for the city and is obviously a good candidate for the position of burgomaster. A remarkable number of voters also indicated that their vote for Janssens was partly to prevent another list leader from receiving more preference votes. In De Wever's case, it was his closer links with the voters that were more important: he understands their concerns and is able to explain things clearly. The campaign once again does not seem to have shown up any great differences between the various candidates, although it seems that Janssens' campaign had less impact than in 2006. Our research showed that Janssens' supporters mentioned 'the campaign' much more often than the supporters of other list leaders.³

How important were particular characteristics of a list leader important in giving a preference vote? (1 = very unimportant - 5 = very important)

List leader (party)	Reasons to give preference vote to list leader			
	Good mayoral candidate	Has done much for Antwerp	Waged a strong campaign	Aware of people's concerns
Meyrem Almaci (Green)	3.6	3.6	3.6	4.1
Annemie Turtelboom (Open VLD)	3.7	2.9	3.3	3.9
Patrick Janssens (City List)	4.7	4.8	3.4	4.2
Bart De Wever (N-VA)	4.6	3.6	3.9	4.4
Peter Mertens (PVDA+)	3.0	3.3	3.8	4.4
Filip Dewinter (VB)	4.3	4.2	3.8	4.6

List leader (party)	Reasons to give preference vote to list leader		
	Explains things well	The political programme	Prevent another list leader from getting more preference votes
Meyrem Almaci (Green)	4.0	4.3	2.4
Annemie Turtelboom (Open VLD)	3.8	4.3	2.7
Patrick Janssens (City List)	3.8	4.3	4.3
Bart De Wever (N-VA)	4.2	4.3	3.6
Peter Mertens (PVDA+)	3.5	4.0	3.0
Filip Dewinter (VB)	4.4	4.2	3.4

THEMES AND POINTS OF VIEW

After many decades of a more or less centre-left administration, a centre-right coalition with Bart De Wever as Mayor has come to power in Antwerp. The three majority parties – the Flemish nationalist N-VA, the Liberal Open VLD and the Christian-democratic CD&V (which, after the elections, split from the City List with Sp.a) - have based their coalition agreement as much as possible on their own programmes, hoping in this way to reflect the preferences of their voters and ensure their continued support in the next election. Although there is an unequivocal centre-right administration, we got a much more complex picture from our respondents who revealed a number of contradictions within each party. Neither were the rank and file of the opposition parties always of one mind.

What are the views of our sample's N-VA voters on a number of important issues? The extension of Local Authority Sanctions [GAS boetes], fines that the local authority can impose for minor infringements of local regulations, is supported by most N-VA voters. About 65% were in favour; 14% were against. More uniforms on the street are also very popular. Over 80% of N-VA supporters in our sample wanted more police officers in Antwerp and hardly anyone wanted fewer.

To what extent are you for or against the following proposals? (Scale of 1 to 5)

Proposal	Open VLD		N-VA		VB		Sp.a-CD&V		Green		PvdA+	
	For	Against	For	Against	For	Against	For	Against	For	Against	For	Against
Extension of Local Authority Sanctions	50%	31%	65%	14%	60%	21%	45%	23%	26%	51%	33%	49%
More uniformed police on the street	75%	13%	82%	3%	95%	0%	40%	1%	25%	10%	39%	11%
Extension of 30kph zones	19%	44%	23%	53%	29%	45%	47%	30%	62%	18%	51%	30%
More social housing	38%	31%	43%	18%	54%	7%	68%	4%	70%	3%	79%	5%

The percentages do not add up to 100%; the remainder represents those who are neutral. The questions are treated more fully in the appendix.

These results certainly reflect a preference for a more right-wing administration and so coincide with the coalition agreement that was reached in Antwerp. On the question of security we reach similar conclusions when we look at the preferences of all the Antwerp voters: a majority is in favour of extending Local Authority Sanctions [GAS boetes] and expanding the police force. Only among the supporters of Green and PVDA+ do those who oppose extending the Local Authority Sanctions outnumber those who are in favour. Also on the question of extending the 30 kph zones, the coalition agreement was narrowly in accord with the majority of N-VA voters. More than half of them do not want any expansion, while a quarter of them are in favour. Also within the Liberal Open VLD and the extreme right VB, there is greater opposition to extending these zones than before. Among the left-wing parties a majority is in favour of extending these 'Zones 30'. Nevertheless, among most of the parties opinion remains divided.

On social housing, the coalition agreement seems to go against majority opinion. Left-wing voters, not surprisingly, are in favour of more social housing but in our sample a majority of N-VA supporters were also in favour. But in the coalition's administrative agreement the proportion of social housing is to remain constant for the next six years. Our results indicate that a substantial number of respondents, including the VB supporters, do not agree with this.

CONCLUSIONS AND INTERPRETATION

Since the elections in 2006, large numbers of Antwerp voters have switched party allegiance. However, it appears to have happened mainly before the actual election campaign. It is difficult to say exactly when it took place, but it looks as if support for the N-VA grew strongly during the regional and federal elections of 2008 and 2010 and that this trend continued in the course of the Antwerp local elections of 2012. Our data indicate that the N-VA not only grew at the expense of the extreme right VB party. Also supporters of the Liberal VLD-Vivant or the Sp.a-Spirit alliances in 2006 switched to the N-VA in 2012. Furthermore, almost the entire rank and file of the then 'Flemish cartel' of N-VA and CD&V remained with the N-VA, while only a small number of the CD&V dutifully supported the City List (Sp.a-CD&V) in Antwerp.

According to our data, then Mayor Patrick Janssens' City List never posed a threat to the N-VA's lead. The sp.a lost supporters to the Greens and PVDA+, and the number of CD&V voters was too small to compensate for that loss on the left flank. In the final weeks, the City List did get some support from Green voters who voted specifically for Janssens, but it was too little and too late. This time there was no inspirational campaign able to win over undecided voters. Janssens' defeat, however, was more than a campaign effect or the consequence of the wrong cartel partner. Two other more fundamental factors were involved. Firstly, Janssens and his team were unable to attract the extreme right VB voters who had made up a third of the Antwerp electorate in 2006. Although they gave their policies a more right-wing emphasis, such as the head-scarf ban, it was not enough. Neither was Janssens' conciliatory and non-partisan style able to change much. The second factor is closely linked to the first. For the first time, right-wing voters were offered an attractive alternative. The N-VA was in full flight at the national level and the most popular politician in Flanders, Bart De Wever, threw himself wholeheartedly into the contest. The VB supporters who had remained remarkably loyal even though they were excluded from power by the '*cordon sanitaire*', were finally given a chance to be represented in Antwerp's city hall. Janssens' centre strategy was not enough to attract many right-wing voters, while at the same time it probably alienated a proportion of his left-wing rank and file.

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There are many who wonder if Bart De Wever as Mayor will be able to live up to the high expectations. Our data indicate clearly that his supporters stand solidly behind the party. The respondents in our panel who voted for N-VA in the council elections also did so at the district level. At the national level hardly anybody would have voted differently, and no other party scored particularly well when we asked who else they might have voted for. This suggests that the party's success is more than merely a De Wever effect. Obviously, the list leader is extremely important and 80% of N-VA voters gave him their preference vote, but for many it was not the only reason for voting N-VA. Nevertheless, half of them would follow De Wever to another party. That is a high proportion but still considerably fewer than among the supporters of the City List Sp.a-CD&V, where the figure of Patrick Janssens had become more important than his party. The N-VA also appears to have largely met the demands of its rank and file in the coalition's administrative agreement. On matters such as public nuisance, crime and mobility it looks as if their preferences will become council policy. The question still remains whether this will be enough to impress the former, and current, rank and file of the extreme right VB. For the past twenty years they have systematically opposed the local councillors in City Hall; could they now within a couple of years begin to identify with Antwerp's city council?

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Translation: Chris Emery.

Endnotes

1/ This initial analysis should, as with any electoral research, be interpreted with the usual caution. We are basing it on a sample from the internet panel that had been set up by Ivox (see the commentary below). That does not remove the chance of distortions. In terms of political preference, our panel contained an over-representation of N-VA voters and an under-representation of supporters of the Antwerp City List (Sp.a and CD&V). On the other hand, the size of a small party like the PVDA+ was correctly assessed.

2/ The graph shows that N-VA voters were over-represented in the sample and City List (Stadslijst) voters were under-represented.

3/ Van Aelst P. & Nuytemans M., 2007, 'Het Succes Van Patrick. Op zoek naar bewijzen en verklaringen van het Janssens-effect in Antwerpen', *Res Publica*: pp. 150-172.

Method

Use was made of an online questionnaire. The respondents were contacted by an external company (Ivox), and the actual research was controlled by the Antwerp research group 'Media, Civil Society and Politics' (www.M2P.be). The respondents were selected at random from the panel of Ivox respondents and contacted with a request to take part. There was a 22% response for the first survey which amounted to a sample size of 1077. For the second and third questionnaire only those who had taken part in the first were contacted. 788 respondents took part in the second survey, a response of 73%. For the third, there were 746 respondents, a response of 69%. Because some respondents do not answer every question, the final value of N in the analyses is sometimes lower. Although the N-VA was over-represented in the sample it was decided against any further weighting. Firstly, evaluating the population as a whole is impossible since only 85% actually voted. Consequently, the division of diverse socio-demographic characteristics across the actual electorate is uncertain since we have no data on it. Secondly, because it was an internet survey, re-weighting could not take into account the absence of respondents who have no internet access.

Appendix: formulating the questions on policy implementation

Social Housing

Affordable housing is not available to everyone which is why the city council provides social housing. Some parties argue that under the present city council there should be less social housing, while other parties argue that there should be more. Where do you stand on this issue? Would you prefer less or more social housing? (scale of 5).

Criminality

The parties have different views on how to deal with public nuisance and crime in Antwerp. Some parties argue that the number of police officers should be reduced while others argue that it should be increased. Where do you stand on this issue? Would you prefer to see more or fewer police officers? (scale of 5 points)

Local Authority Sanctions and 30 kph zones

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statements below? (5 point scale from totally in favour to completely against)

- The system of Local Authority Sanctions should be extended.
- The 30 kph zones should be extended

BATTLEFIELD ANTWERP

How Socialists Lost City Hall

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This contribution is an analysis of the 2012 local elections in Antwerp. Some of the many explanations for the Sp.a/CD&V City List's poor performance are examined critically and found wanting: the inner city is not left-wing; immigrant communities did not vote exclusively for the Left Party (PVDA+) and it is unlikely that an Sp.a/Green alliance would necessarily have defeated victor, and now Mayor, Bart De Wever of the Flemish nationalist N-VA. In spite of a good campaign and good results compared with its performance elsewhere in the major cities, the Sp.a's current party model in Antwerp is under review because it appears no longer capable of conducting a grass-root campaign effectively. It is argued here that if the party is to win elections, its campaigns must target the grass roots and be marketing-driven.

DOES THE INNER CITY VOTE FOR THE LEFT AND THE SUBURBS FOR THE RIGHT?

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Without research this question cannot properly be answered since there is no single district that is entirely inner-city, or *intra muros*, which most Antwerp residents consider to be the area within the ring road and on the right bank. The district of Antwerp (20 to 24% *extra muros*) also includes the left bank; the districts of Borgerhout (33% *extra muros*) and Berchem (63% *extra muros*) have a significant number, if not the majority, of voters outside the walls.¹ So there is little point in talking about an inner or outer city. So should we then distinguish between left-wing and right-wing districts and ignore that unfortunate distinction, so popular with election analysts, between Antwerp within and without its walls? It appears that when analysing Antwerp's municipal election results one is sometimes forgetting that there is such a thing as the political centre in between left and right. Let us first look at the results from the perspective of 'left-centre-right'. Table 1 provides a start.

This division naturally raises the controversial question of whether the Sp.a/CD&V City List should be regarded as a centre grouping. The answer is clearly yes. CD&V is still more than simply an umbrella for the Christian Employers Organisations. And former Mayor Patrick Janssens' book *Voor wat hoort wat* [*You get nothing for nothing*] made it quite apparent that he was not trying to create a left-wing cartel.

So what should we note? The first thing is that where the Sp.a and the CD&V did not collaborate, the centre was marginalised. Next, whereas the majority in the town as a whole can be regarded as being in the political centre, there are different divisions in the districts. In the district of Antwerp there are clearly three blocs (left-centre-right). The Berchem and Hoboken districts are polarised between left and right. Borgerhout is clearly left-wing but with a strong right-wing bloc. In Berendrecht-Zandvliet-Lilli (B-Z-L) there is no left-wing and the electorate is divided between the right and the centre. In Deurne, Merksem, Wilrijk and Ekeren a right-wing bloc has almost an absolute majority but

Table 1: Election results for the city of Antwerp (town council) and by district (district councils) divided between left, right and centre*.

District/town		left	right	centre	Total	sp.a's share	Cartel name
Town	%	15,9	43,3	28,6		28,6	SP.a CD&V (City List)
	Seats	8	25	17	55		
Antwerp	%	23,5	37,5	29,6		29,6	SP.a CD&V (City List)
	Seats	8	12	10	33		
Berchem	%	40,9	43,7	7,8		34,8	SP.a Green
	Seats	10	11	2	25		
Borgerhout**	%	53,2	29,9	7,8		36,1	SP.a Green
	Seats	13	8	2	25		
Wilrijk	%	31,0	46,3	9,0		16,3	SP.a
	Seats	6	12	2	23		
Hoboken **	%	37,2	40,7	6,1		20,8	SP.a Green
	Seats	9	9	1	23		
Deurne	%	33,7	45,4	5,5		23,9	SP.a Green
	Seats	10	14	1	29		
Merksem	%	27,2	47,6	8,1		22,5	SP.a Green
	Seats	7	12	2	25		
Ekeren	%	25,6	47,9	8,0		14,6	SP.a
	Seats	5	10	1	19		
B-Z-L	%		38,6	32,0		32	SP.a/Green CD&V/Open-VLD
	Seats		6	5	15		

* Only includes parties with at least one seat (i.e. of any political relevance). The extreme right-wing Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) party is omitted. Left-wing: Sp.a, Sp.a-Groen, PVDA+; Right-wing: N-VA, Open VLD; Centre: CD&V, SP.A-CD&V City List. B-Z-L: Berendrecht – Zandvliet – Lillo (rural area north of Antwerp adjoining the harbour). Beside the city of Antwerp, there exist the district of Antwerp.

** Borgerhout: PVDA+= 17,1%; Hoboken PVDA+=16,4%

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between a quarter and a third of the voters are left-wing. Deurne and Merksem were bulwarks of the extreme right-wing Flemish Interest [Vlaams Belang] in 2006. In Ekeren in 2012 the Flemish Interest and the Open VLD Liberals were wiped out by the moderate Flemish nationalist N-VA. In Wilrijk rather surprisingly the Liberals have held onto their position.

Let us be quite clear about it: the notion of a left-wing inner city and the right-wing suburbs is simply misleading. There is only one left-wing district and that is Borgerhout.

REDISTRIBUTION ON THE RIGHT

The redistribution of right-wing seats clearly went further in the province of Antwerp than in the other provinces. It is no coincidence that the extreme right VB (Flemish Interest) has always had most support in the province of Antwerp and the redistribution had its greatest impact in the VB's home base, Antwerp City. In a sense, the Socialist/Christian democrat City List became a victim of the successful *cordon sanitaire* which the parties had imposed on the VB. The N-VA offered an alternative to Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) supporters that was unaffected by the *cordon sanitaire* but still sufficiently anti-immigration. The previously ever-loyal VB voters changed their coats without much apparent difficulty. Furthermore, it was almost inevitable that a proportion of the centre-right voters who supported Patrick Janssens (Sp.a) against Filip Dewinter (VB) in 2006 would also go over to Bart De Wever and the N-VA in 2012.

It is therefore not surprising that the N-VA's electoral map in Flanders looks like a carbon copy of the Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) map from the period 1995-2007. It raises a crucial question about the future: whether the N-VA can continue to grow outside the province and city of Antwerp and follow the example of the VB which expanded out from Antwerp in the direction of Ghent and Brussels. The results of the 2012 provincial elections show that the N-VA has expanded rapidly in the province of Antwerp but in Flanders as a whole it has not done much more than maintain the status quo since the federal elections of 2010. In contrast, between 1991 and 2004, the Vlaams Blok/Belang (Flemish Bloc/Interest)² was able to make gains in every election at every level.

DIVISIONS ON THE LEFT

It is constantly claimed in the press that (then Mayor) Patrick Janssens might have been able to beat (now Mayor) Bart De Wever if he had not shifted towards the centre by allying with the Christian Democrats, but instead had moved in the other direction by making an alliance with the Greens. The success of the Sp.a-Green cartel in Ghent is produced as evidence.³

However, the results of the district council elections suggest otherwise. In three districts, the Sp.a and Green did in fact collaborate in both 2006 and 2012. And the outcome? In Merksem a loss of 5.1 percentage points or 18% of the voters; in Borgerhout 6.4 fewer percentage points or 15% fewer votes; and in Deurne a drop of 7.5 percentage points or 24% fewer voters. Also in the other districts support for the individual Sp.a and Green electoral lists was consistently lower in 2012 than in 2006. Only in Ekeren was the status quo maintained, and that is a district where the Left party (PVDA+) only attracted 2.7% of the vote. If one studies the results of the PVDA+, it is hard to avoid the impression that, with the possible exception of Merksem where it only won 4.7% of the vote, its success had its impact on the support for the Sp.a and Greens, both together and separately. There are other arguments to support the notion that a move to centre-left would not necessarily have led to a Janssens victory. Whereas in 2006 all left wing voters, from centre-left to the radical-left, supported Janssens against Dewinter, this clearly did not happen in 2012. Well-known figures from the art world either stood for the PVDA+ or publicly supported it; even an elected member of the Sp.a became one of their candidates. It is highly unlikely that this did not attract some of Janssens' previous supporters to the PVDA+. In the three districts where the Greens campaigned separately (Antwerp, Ekeren and Wilrijk) and in the city of Antwerp, they were very successful.

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Left-wing voters simply spread their votes across the various possible parties and did not regard a strategic vote for the 'City List' to keep out De Wever as a worthy alternative.

THE IMMIGRANT VOTE

While nobody dares to state publicly that pre-election opinion polls by telephone and over the internet are credible and reliable, oddly enough they suddenly do become credible when applied to the Greens. The Greens, we are told, did worse than expected (by the same polls that did not see the success of the PVDA+).⁴ Even though in retrospect it turned out that one of the two last minute polls was closer to the actual outcome than the other, such surveys are still of little use because at the moment of publication (just before the elections) this is still not clear. They give little guidance to either voters or politicians. Nevertheless, it is generally assumed that both the Greens and the City List cartel lost immigrant votes to the PVDA+ whose success is thereby reduced to 'the immigrant vote'. Note that this kills two birds with one stone. It marginalises the PVDA+ to the status of an immigrant party, and marginalises the immigrant vote to the extreme left.

Of course, Janssens lost some immigrant support compared with 2006. We do not need research to see that. After all, the battle was no longer against Dewinter and the anti-immigrant Flemish Interest [Vlaams Belang] and while in office Janssens had forbidden the wearing of the head scarf in public functions. Both these factors played a part, although it did not mean that no immigrants supported Janssens and that all PVDA+ supporters are immigrants.

There are further indications to support this. Research shows that among second generation Moroccan and Turkish voters, between 70% and 80% voted for Patrick Janssens in 2006 and that around 33% and 65% respectively voted for a candidate of ethnic origin (Swyngedouw et al, 2010). In Antwerp the Belgian natives very rarely votes for ethnic candidates. Furthermore, many ethnic minority voters go for so-called block-voting, whereby they give a preference vote for every candidate on the list of the same ethnic origin. We can therefore assume that ethnic candidates are elected mainly, though not exclusively, because of the immigrant vote.

Jan Hertogen, a sociologist and activist, has calculated the percentage of elected representatives of immigrant origin per list, both for the districts and the city as a whole, using the rather unreliable system of name recognition. Nevertheless, it does provide some indication.

Table 2: Percentage estimate per electoral list of elected district and city councillors of ethnic origin in the districts and for the city of Antwerp as a whole.

% seats	Open VLD	N-VA	VB	Sp.a+cartel	CD&V	Green	PVDA+	Other	Total
Antwerp		11%		40%		40%	67%		27%
Berchem				22%					8%
B-Z-L									0%
Borgerhout		29%		56%	50%		25%		36%
Deurne		15%		43%			67%		24%
Ekeren				0%					0%
Hoboken				60%			50%		22%
Merksem		9%		17%			100%		12%
Wilrijk				25%			0%		4%
Total Districts	0%	7%	0%	36%	9%	22%	47%		17%
City Antwerp	0%	9%	0%	35%		25%	50%		20%

* Example: 11% of the N-VA elected councillors for the Antwerp district are of ethnic origin. Sp.a and Green has formed cartel lists in 6 districts, but not in the districts of Antwerp, Ekeren and Wilrijk. Name recognition method employed.

Source: Jan Hertogen BUG 175, November 2012.

Expressed in relative percentage terms, the Left Party PVDA+ has the most immigrant councillors (between 25 and 100% of all the elected) but in absolute terms (number of voters), more immigrants voted for the Sp.a-CD&V cartel of Social Democrats and Christian Democrats. At the city level this meant 8% for the PVDA+ and 28% for the cartel's City List, about 3.5 times as many. Naturally this is no hard evidence, but as indicative figures they are a sufficiently strong reason to assume that the PVDA's success was not exclusively due to the immigrant voter. Sp.a and the Greens were able to attract a very significant level of immigrant support in October 2012.

URBAN RENEWAL ONLY IN THE INNER CITY?

It is striking that after the elections there were suddenly complaints that between 2006 and 2012 urban renewal only took place in the Antwerp district. Of course it is true that the new MAS [Museum Aan de Stroom/museum at the river] museum is located there and that the renewal of the surrounding old harbour district attracted a great deal of media attention. But the upkeep and construction of public spaces happens to be one of the few powers that were passed down to the district councils. Considerably more money has been made available to the districts for public works than before 2006. Furthermore, there is also the District Development Fund in which the city matches district investments Euro for Euro. Larger projects are, where possible, financed with European money (for example, the renewal and street reconstruction of the shopping street Drie Koningenstraat in Berchem).

So it is by no means clear that resources allocated to the districts for public works have gone disproportionately to the inner city, i.e. the Antwerp district. I am not aware of any complaints from any district that the formula used for distributing resources is unfair or that the city has discriminated against the districts in any way. A quick hunt through the Flemish press archives produced no hits that could be read as complaints from district councils that they had been disadvantaged in their plans for the public space. Admittedly, not every project was completed before October 2012, but that is equally true for the Antwerp inner city district.

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WAS THE CARTEL'S CAMPAIGN CONDUCTED BADLY?

Only compared with Ghent, where the Sp.a-Green cartel did very well, was the Antwerp result rather poor. Table 3 compares Antwerp with other major cities in Flanders and shows the differences in percentage points and losses and gains in percent. These figures are the most relevant because they show how many voters the Sp.a has lost or gained since 2006.

The first observation is that Ghent is an exception among the major centres. The second is that the Antwerp City List of Social Democrats and Christian Democrats is still among the five highest Sp.a scores in the Flemish major cities. The third is that, except for Ghent and Bruges, the Sp.a lost votes in all of them. The unweighted average for Sp.a voters in 2012 was 23.1% which, in comparison with 2006 meant a loss of a good 23.3% of its electoral support in the major cities. The great leap forward in 2006 was cancelled out and the Sp.a is back to where it was in 1994 and 2000.⁵

A closer look at Sp.a's win in Ghent shows that compared with the Sp.a-Spirit cartel in 2006, the Sp.a in 2012 gained 44%. But compared with the total of Sp.a-Spirit together with the Greens, that gain is reduced to 4.1%. The real success of the Sp.a in Ghent is that the cartel with Green in 2012 did not lead to a net loss of voters although the increase was modest. In contrast, the Sp.a's losses in Antwerp were certainly real. Compared with the sum total of Sp.a-Spirit and the 'Flemish Cartel' CD&V/N-VA in 2006, it lost a net 38.5% of its voters in 2012.

In summary, Sp.a suffered a serious setback in Antwerp but compared with the other regional cities it did not do badly. In the results table, Antwerp came 5th out of 13. The quality of what was achieved

Table 3: Sp.a results in October 2012 (in cartel or alone) for the 13 regional centres in Flanders compared with the local elections of 2006.

City	Electoral list	% 14-10-2012	+/- percentage points	+/- percent
Antwerp	Sp.a-CD&V City List	28,6	-6,7	-19%*
Mechelen	Sp.a	18,2	-1,8	-9,00%
Turnhout	Sp.a	11,4	-5,3	-22,7%
Roeselare	Sp.a	14,2	-1,6	-6,70%
Ostend	Sp.a	32,1	-13,6	-29,8%
Bruges	Sp.a	26,8	+2.5	+9,30%
Hasselt	Helemaal Hasselt	33,0	-15,3	-31,7%
Genk	PROgenk	16,8	-6,8	-28,8%
Aalst	Sp.a	16,4	-2.8	-14,6%
Ghent	Sp.a-Groen	45,5	+13,9	+44,0%*
St-Niklaas	Sp.a-Groen	25,7	-9,7	-27,4%
Leuven	Sp.a	31,4	-6,7	-17,6%

* If we add in Antwerp the results of the cartels, Sp.a–spirit and CD&V/N-VA for 2006 then a loss of 17.9 percentage points or 38.5% is showing up. In Ghent, when comparing with the sum of Sp.a-Spirit and the Greens in 2006, there is a gain of 1.8 percentage points or 4.1%.

under Janssens - acknowledged by friend and foe - and the election campaign will certainly have played a part.

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Nevertheless, the question must be asked whether the cartel's campaign itself did not contribute to its losses. A number of reasons have been suggested. Firstly, that the City List cartel was very late in starting its campaign. Bart De Wever and the N-VA had the field to themselves for several weeks before the elections. This argument may not hold much water but an unbelievable amount has been written and said about Janssens and the City List and their failure to mount a campaign.

Secondly, that the campaign was actually no more than Patrick Janssens magazine⁶, which appeared a few weeks before the election. This is partly true. But there were also numerous debates and interviews with him and other candidates as well as the limited campaigns conducted by others such as the notable YouTube films of Marc Van Peel (CD&V) which attracted a great deal of media attention in the final week before the elections. It is striking that the campaign for the Antwerp city council was mainly played out in the national media. Advertising was hardly needed since the two main protagonists were constantly in the media. Of course, there were problems with the Sp.a's campaign and its personnel. The fact that one of the Sp.a aldermen only received a miserable, for Antwerp, 991 preference votes speaks volumes.

Two factors, however, warrant closer attention.

1. The programme of what the City List (Sp.a-CD&V) would do when re-elected boiled down to 'we'll carry on doing what we are already busy doing'. Of course, there was an Sp.a programme that could be downloaded from the internet. But anyone who took the trouble to look at 2006 would have found Janssens' fully worked-out programme, *Het beste moet nog komen* [*The Best is yet to Come*], containing concrete answers on every aspect of policy. It was an ambitious programme that aroused

genuine enthusiasm. In 2012, there was the pre-campaign book *Voor wat hoort wat* [You get nothing for nothing] which defends a policy of getting those receiving unemployment benefit back to work. *The Sp.a campaign pays relatively little attention to concrete plans for the future*. ‘Proof of the pudding’ was the only guarantee offered for more of the same which certainly did not have the same impact as the 2006 campaign. It is however a general wisdom in campaigning that “you win elections with what you are going to do, not with what you have already done” (the last one is taken for granted).

2. A grass-roots campaign by the Sp.a hardly existed. There were few if any house-to-house visits; little if any presence in the city’s market-places. There were no public meetings, no party get-togethers related to the elections, no striking recruitment drives or cultural activities; and there were relatively few party posters hanging in people’s front windows. The situation in the stately belle-époque Cogels-Osylei near the Berchem railway station is a case in point. In 2006 it was full of posters with ‘Patrick’ [Janssens]. In 2012, a week before the elections, there were virtually no posters of the City List or its candidates to be seen. In 2012, the cultural world, which in 2006 had stood *en masse* behind Patrick Janssens, was either absent or supported the left party PVDA+ or the Greens.

Both elements are in complete contrast to the N-VA. It is absolutely clear what Bart De Wever stands for. ‘The city does not belong to everybody’⁷, ‘the automobile is wrongly condemned’⁸, ‘criminality and certainly drugs will be dealt with mercilessly’⁹ and ‘foreigners must adapt to our society and, in particular, learn to speak Dutch’¹⁰. Whether you agree or disagree, the message is certainly clear. The national campaign conducted by the N-VA ran perfectly because of the (disproportionate) attention which the media gave to the person of De Wever and the party. But above all, as well as de Wever’s carefully planned national campaign, there was a strong local grass-roots campaign. House to house visits (learned from Sp.a Minister Johan Vande Lanotte, according to the newspaper *De Morgen*), a range of memorable public events and, what was most striking, an unbelievable number of posters of De Wever, the N-VA and its local candidates in the windows and facades of private houses.

THE ANTWERP SP.A PARTY ORGANISATION: THE CRUCIAL EXPLANATION?

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Could Patrick Janssens have conducted a grass-roots campaign even if he had wanted to? We believe not, and it has everything to do with the sort of party that the Antwerp Sp.a has become in recent years. Janssens has never made a secret of the fact that he no longer believes in the mass party that the Sp.a once was. This reflects current social changes. Not only are all parties losing members, but the function of a political party has changed entirely under the influence of the mass media and the new media. The mass party was necessary when politicians did not have direct access to the voter and had to spread their message through activists and party members. In the mid-1980s this model reached a high point but subsequently went into decline. It had been necessary to be able to mobilise and indeed demobilise on a massive scale. With the arrival of the mass media this changed. A political campaign has increasingly taken on the characteristics of a marketing-based publicity campaign. Janssens, as an ex-marketing man, appreciated this as no other.

Under a previous Antwerp Socialist Mayor, Bob Cools (1983-1994), the rule was ‘whoever controls the party, controls the city’. There was an antiquated but active party, and no sign of a modern party and campaign organisation. Today we have almost the opposite: an extremely up-to-date campaign organisation, but little or no party structure. It is an understatement to say that the life of the Antwerp Sp.a is impoverished. Members and activists are involved in little or nothing, there is no culture of debate, local district branches might still exist but compared with ten years ago they are hardly, if at all, active. Most of the district branches are dying or dead. The activities of some branches are limited to an annual general meeting; for some, the new year’s reception is actually the most important political event of the year. It is revealing that the party programme for the local elections was the work of a few closed committees.

Such a situation has consequences. The most important is that the members and activists can no longer function as the party's antennae. Whereas in 1986-87 the young socialists of the time could meet burgomaster Cools and warn him of the threat posed by the extreme right Vlaams Blok [Flemish Bloc] because of the open racism that was rife in working-class districts - a warning that he dismissed as irrelevant - in 2012 the Sp.a received no warning that the Left Party PVDA+ was making inroads into various districts. Local concerns are no longer being heard. The electorate do not take the district councils seriously (cf. Dierickx, Doctoral Thesis, UA). Opinion polls are not a substitute. A town monitor is a policy instrument not a political instrument. There is no local interaction with other political organisations. The political education that the party once offered is now left in the hands of the (predominantly liberal-conservative) media. This in turn leads to a shrinking recruitment pool for new party personnel and supporting professionals. There is the further danger that the party leadership ends up in splendid isolation with no-one around to question it. And finally, a political philosophy question: who is there to monitor the party leadership between elections?

Is one solution then a return to the mass party of the 1980s? That seems to me to be neither realistic nor desirable. But if a party wants to build a reserve of activists who can be mobilised when necessary, it will have to develop modern channels of participation that make discussion and meaningful input possible. In a city like Antwerp it must be possible to set up high-quality debating societies on political themes; to stimulate moderated participation in party affairs through the social media; to organise local party campaign teams in support of, and within the framework of a modern marketing election campaign. Participation need no longer mean long-term, all-embracing party involvement, but rather temporary and repeated participation in causes and activities that interest the particular members concerned. Neither do they always have to be highbrow activities. Some members are more comfortable doing practical organisation work than with a political debate. Not everything in a political party needs to be professionalised. A pool of available volunteers will become increasingly important if billboard displays are banned¹¹, if compulsory voting is not enforced or is actually abolished¹², or if the restrictions on the funding of political campaigns continue.¹³

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The ultimate question is naturally whether the City List of Social Democrats and Christian Democrats might have defeated De Wever and the N-VA with such a modern party organisation at its disposal. Probably not. The neo-liberal (judging by the anonymous press advertisement by so-called employers¹⁴), conservative, nationalist and ethnocentric (ex-members of Vlaams Belang) electoral coalition which De Wever forged would not have been affected by it. And it remains the question whether the PVDA+'s attraction would be easy to counter in a period of crisis and whether the Sp.a can afford to ignore the Greens if it is to present a credible policy for urban mobility and milieu protection. Nevertheless, Obama and his supporters will bear witness that without the grass-roots campaign in the US swing states, the White House would now have had a different occupant.

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Translation: Chris Emery.

Endnotes

- 1/ The city of Antwerp in figures: <http://www.antwerpen.buurtmonitor.be/>.
- 2/ When convicted on the basis of discrimination in 2003 the Vlaams Blok [Flemish Bloc], changed its name to Vlaams Belang [Flemish Interest].
- 3/ Note that in Ghent, Daniel Termont and the Sp.a did not repel the centre voter by allying with the Greens, in spite of the efforts of the N-VA to brand them as left-wing extremists. It is therefore too simplistic to label the Sp.a-CD&V cartel in Antwerp as 'right-wing' and the Sp.a-Green cartel in Ghent as 'left-wing'. Locally the leading candidate plays a decisive role in how the list is perceived. From that perspective, local Sp.a-Green cartels seem to me to offer a better chance throughout Flanders.
- 4/ The VRT-*De Standaard* poll gave the N-VA a lead of around 10 percentage points over the Sp.a-CD&V City List; the *Gazet van Antwerpen* (GvA) gave them a lead of 0.8 percentage points. Although the two polls were conducted at different times, this was not made clear and both were published a week before the elections in October 2012. Both polls gave the PVDA+ about 3.1%, 'just not enough votes for a seat on the council' concluded the GvA (6 October 2012).
- 5/ See Ackaert, J., *De Socialisten te velde, Samenleving en politiek*, September 2012, p. 5.
- 6/ The City list of Sp.a-CD&V main campaign element was a magazine posted in each letterbox of the city with the title "Patrick", the sitting mayor of Antwerp.
- 7/ This is a reaction against the official city slogan at that moment "the city belongs to everybody".
- 8/ This is at odd with the city policy of reducing parking places in public areas.
- 9/ N-VA claims with this that the city policy towards criminality and drugs was too soft.
- 10/ N-VA claims that new arrived immigrants were not hard enough pushed to assimilate by the sitting coalition.
- 11/ A decision taken by the ruling coalition before the elections of 2012 but rejected by court after complaints by small parties.
- 12/ In Belgium voting is still compulsory, but no fines are given if one does not show up.
- 13/ In Belgium strict limitation of campaign budgets are in force.
- 14/ Some days before election day a group of anonymous persons claiming they were employers issue an advertisement in support of the N-VA and De Wever in the newspapers.

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Town and Country. A Politico-geographical Faultline?

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Commenting on the local and provincial elections of 14 October 2012, the outgoing mayor of Antwerp, Patrick Janssens (Sp.a), remarked that they reflected a geographical fault line: 'The outcome of these elections is the creation of two large blocs in Antwerp. A fairly progressive urban bloc that did well and won a majority of votes mainly within the ring road. And a less urban, conservative bloc that has a majority outside the ring road'.¹ His comment was probably made in the context of exploratory coalition discussions rather than as an objective analysis. But Janssens' observation also fits into a long academic tradition of attempting to relate election results to social geography. Since then, in response to these remarks, several more analyses of Antwerp have appeared. But can this process of bloc-formation which he observed in Antwerp also be applied more widely to the rest of Flanders? This article discusses the political geography of Flanders after the elections of 14 October 2012.

INTRODUCTION

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The local elections of 14 October 2012 provide a good opportunity to map out the electoral geography of Flanders. In Belgium, the local elections choose councils in 10 provinces, 589 municipalities and 9 Antwerp city districts. For electoral geographers, the municipalities are the most interesting level because in Flanders alone it involves 308 electoral constituencies.

The geographical and sociological diversity within Flanders can most clearly be seen when individual municipalities can be compared with each other. However, at the municipal level there are a number of obstacles to tracing their electoral geography.² The traditional 'Flemish' parties sometimes campaign under different names or as part of a cartel or prospective coalition. Furthermore, the popularity (or otherwise) of local politicians often cuts across national political trends.

Between the municipalities and the federal and Flemish regional levels, the Flemish parties also compete for votes at the rather neglected provincial level. Nevertheless, the provincial council elections provide a much better basis for comparing electoral performance with the federal and Flemish regional results. At the provincial level the electoral bonus of a popular burgomaster is removed and the traditional parties generally campaign under their own names and not as cartels. The provincial elections form a good indicator of underlying national trends.

Furthermore, a recent revision of Flemish electoral law introduced an important change in the way provincial results are published. With the Local and Provincial Electoral Decree of 8 July 2011, the Flemish government replaced the electoral district by the municipality as the unit for counting votes and announcing results. Ballot boxes no longer have to be transported to district headquarters after polling.³ The intention of the legislation was certainly to simplify the logistics, but the decree has unintentionally made the provincial elections extremely interesting from the perspective of electoral cartography. Provincial council elections now offer the best of both worlds: a result for each of the 308 Flemish municipalities and a 'national' electoral battle without the confusion of municipal cartels or local lists.

THE ELECTIONS OF 14 OCTOBER 2012

The local and provincial elections of 14 October 2012 had the appearance of a mid-term election in the federal parliamentary term of 2010-2014. The political issues in these elections were closely linked to the unprecedented political situation which arose after the federal elections of June 2010. The 2010 elections not only caused an electoral earthquake in Flanders, where for the first time in living memory the three traditional political parties together failed to attract 50% of the vote, and the Flemish nationalist N-VA became far and away the largest political formation, but the time taken subsequently to create a governing federal coalition broke all records. It finally resulted in Di Rupo's 'traditional' three-part coalition of the main parties (but excluding N-VA), though how 'traditional' it really is could be open to doubt, considering that on the Flemish side the coalition no longer represents the majority.

After 2010 it was clear that the main issue would be the N-VA's ability to anchor itself at the local and provincial levels. Would the N-VA be able to match its historic achievement of 2010 or even move beyond it towards 40%? Whatever the outcome, their results would inevitably be interpreted as a judgement on the Di Rupo government.

The political forces which fought the elections of 2010 were again in action in October 2012, but with a few differences. The Flemish right-wing liberal party, LDD, decided not to field any candidates for the provincial elections. It objects in principle to the provincial level of administration, but the poor state of its party organisation and a shortage of political personnel in the constituencies doubtless also played a part in the decision. Incidentally, the LDD fights elections in only a handful of municipalities even though it has no objections in principle to towns and municipalities. In the province of Limburg the Socialists (Sp.a) and Greens formed an alliance in every constituency which makes a comparison with previous elections more difficult. Finally, in a number of federal electoral districts there were no provincial elections. The Brussels Capital Region, which is not part of any province, contains 8 of the 208 electoral districts. In the following comparison of results for the Flemish parties from the 2006 (provincial), 2010 (federal) and 2012 (provincial) elections the 8 Brussels districts have been ignored. In other words, Table 1 only refers to the results of the five Flemish provinces.

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Table 1⁴

Party	2006	%	2010	%	2012	%
N-VA (Flemish Nationalist)	*	*	1 125 798	27,79%	1 167 677	28,54%
CD&V/(N-VA) (Christian Democrats with N-VA)	1 232 506	30,21%	699 856	17,28%	877 253	21,44%
Sp.a (Socialist)	785 830	19,26%	592 860	14,64%	472 274	11,54%
VLD (liberal)	773 216	18,95%	552 214	13,63%	596 181	14,57%
VB (far right nationalist)	864 314	21,18%	498 700	12,31%	366 085	8,95%
Groen (Green)	312 056	7,65%	277 949	6,86%	314 953	7,70%
LDD (right wing liberal)	*	*	149 124	3,68%	*	*
PVDA (labour)	31 404	0,77%	54 955	1,36%	63 037	1,54%
Others	81 122	1,99%	99 196	2,45%	79 080	1,93%
Sp.a/Groen (Sp.a/Green cartel)	*	*	*	*	108 748	2,66%
Sp.a and Groen in total	1 097 886	26,91%	870 809	21,50%	895 975	21,90%

The overall picture of the electoral fortunes of the most important Flemish parties again illustrates the upward progress of N-VA. The party which emerged in the provincial elections of 2006 as the junior partner in a cartel with the Christian Democrats, was able to equal its performance of 2010 even

though it only managed to attract about 40,000 new voters. But even that is a result that the other Flemish parties can only dream of. However, the 40% which some commentators have suggested is possible remains a long way off.

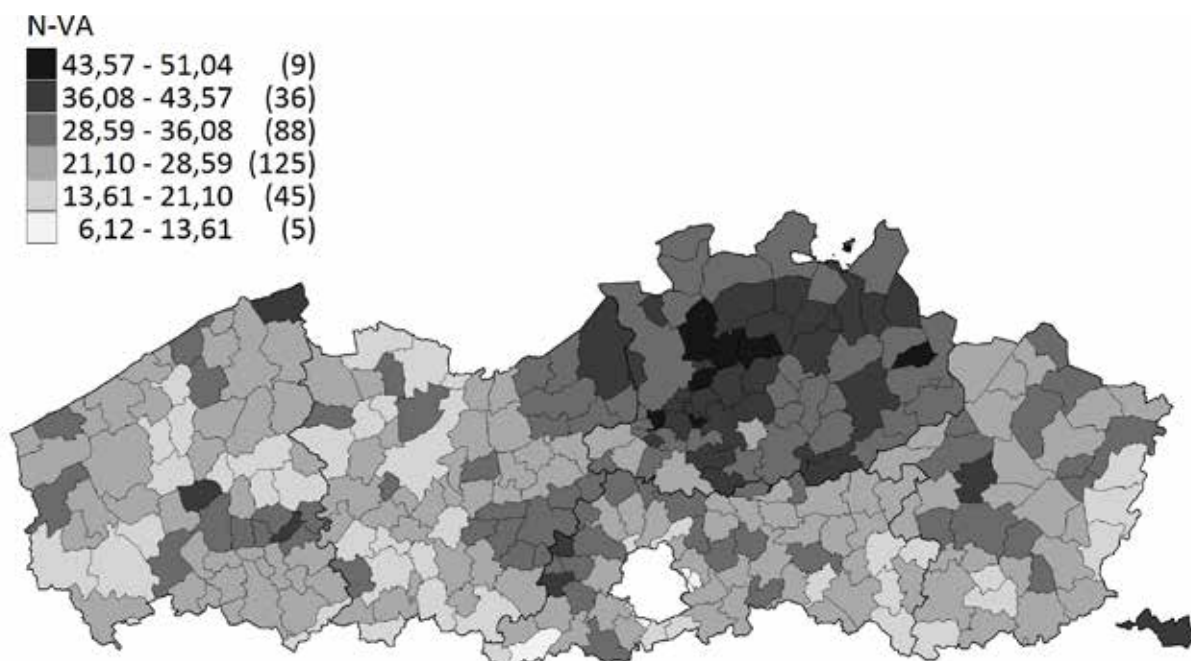
Of the traditional parties, in comparison with 2010, the Christian Democrats and to a lesser degree the liberal Open VLD saw some improvement. Perhaps the difference for both parties lay in the fact that the 2012 elections were local and provincial. The CD&V in particular has traditionally been regarded as the party with local roots, the party which has by far the most burgomasters in its ranks. Among the parties on the left, Sp.a and Groen, comparisons are more difficult because in 2012 they formed an alliance in Limburg. The Greens on their own, in the four remaining provinces did better in 2012 than they had in the five Flemish provinces in 2006 and 2010. For the Socialists things are not going well. Sp.a and the Limburg sp.a-Green cartel together won 14.2% of Flemish votes in 2012 where only six years earlier the sp.a on its own had attracted over 19% of the vote. The more extreme nationalist party Vlaams Belang has even less reason to be satisfied but the change in its fortunes had already begun between 2006 and 2010. The far left Belgian Workers' Party (PVDA) received more media attention than usual during the elections of 2012 and its results in Antwerp were remarkable. However, Table 1 shows that this was merely a local phenomenon, though compared with 2010 it was still able to win another 8,000 votes. ⁵

THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE FLEMISH PARTIES IN 2012

After the above global survey of the party landscape following the provincial elections of 2012, we shall consider the strengths and weaknesses of the individual parties, down to the level of the 308 Flemish municipalities. First on the list is the N-VA, the great unknown of the major parties during these elections.

Map 1: N-VA (Flemish Nationalist)

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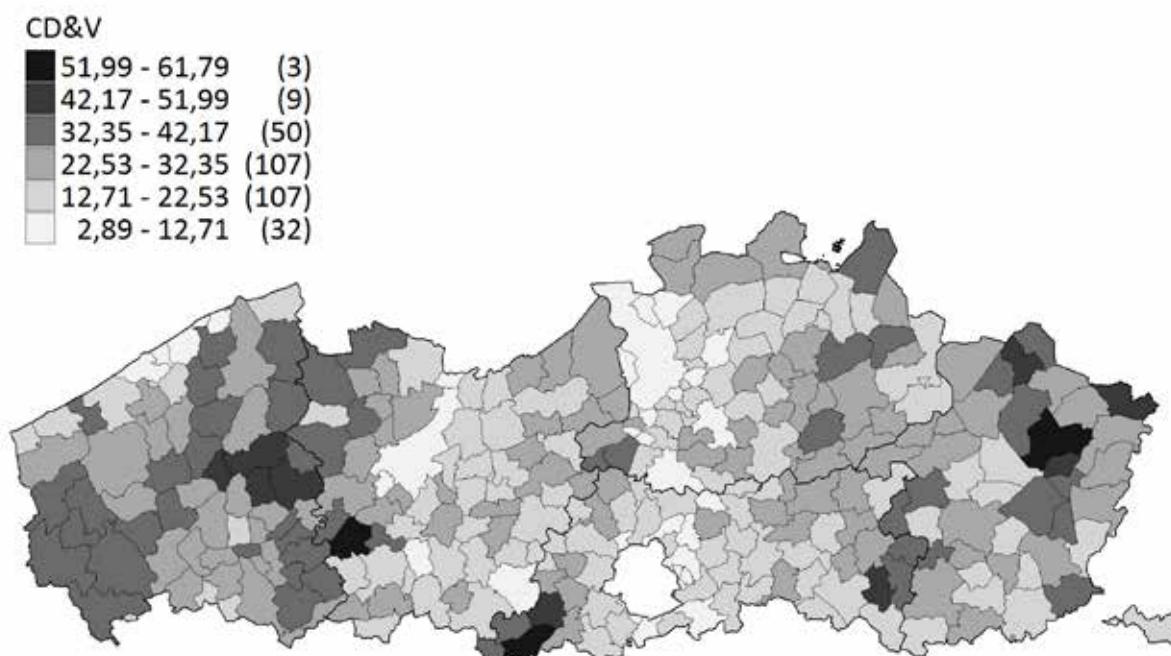


N-VA (Map 1) has broken through nationally as a major party in Flanders. In only about fifty (or 1 in 6) municipalities, did the party fail to reach the 20% mark. Its national success, however, should not conceal the regional differences. The party was most successful in Antwerp where results of over 30% were the rule rather than the exception. Its best scores were in the Antwerp municipality

of Dessel with 51% (its predecessor the People's Union [Volksunie] party had also always done well in this municipality) and in the outskirts of the city of Antwerp. There were other highlights in the Waasland, Halle-Vilvoorde and the area around Roeselare and Izegem. The party's worst results were in the rural areas, particularly in the provinces of West and East Flanders. But overall it goes without saying that the party made a quantum leap in the number of its local representatives.

The Christian Democrats had most to fear from the N-VA at the local level since it had most to lose. Table 1 shows that globally they did better than expected with 21% of Flemish votes. The geographical spread of the CD&V rank and file can be seen in Map 2. As always, CD&V is still strong in West Flanders, Limburg and Antwerpse Kempen. In 2012, the Christian Democrats also remained the party of rural Flanders though they no longer enjoy their former hegemony. All in all, the CD&V achieved 45% or more of the vote in 7 municipalities. But in the heavily populated Antwerp-Brussels axis and in the metropolitan areas of Ghent and especially Antwerp their results have been depressing. In the city of Antwerp the party has dropped to under 6% of the vote.

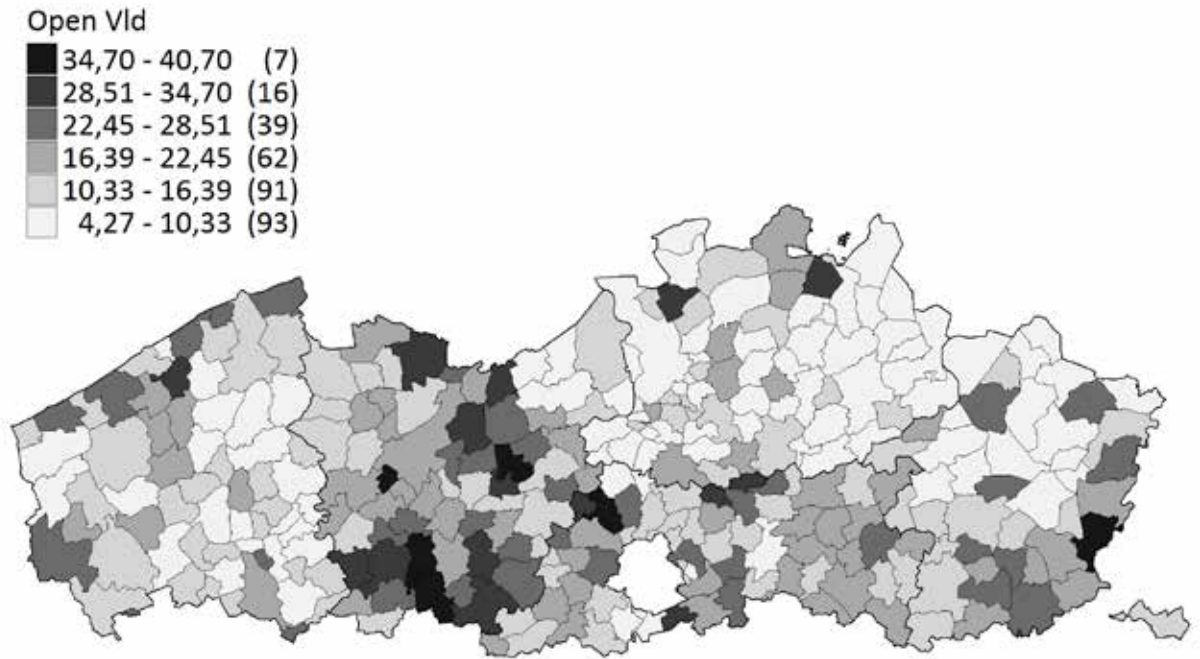
Map 2: CD&V (Christian Democrat)



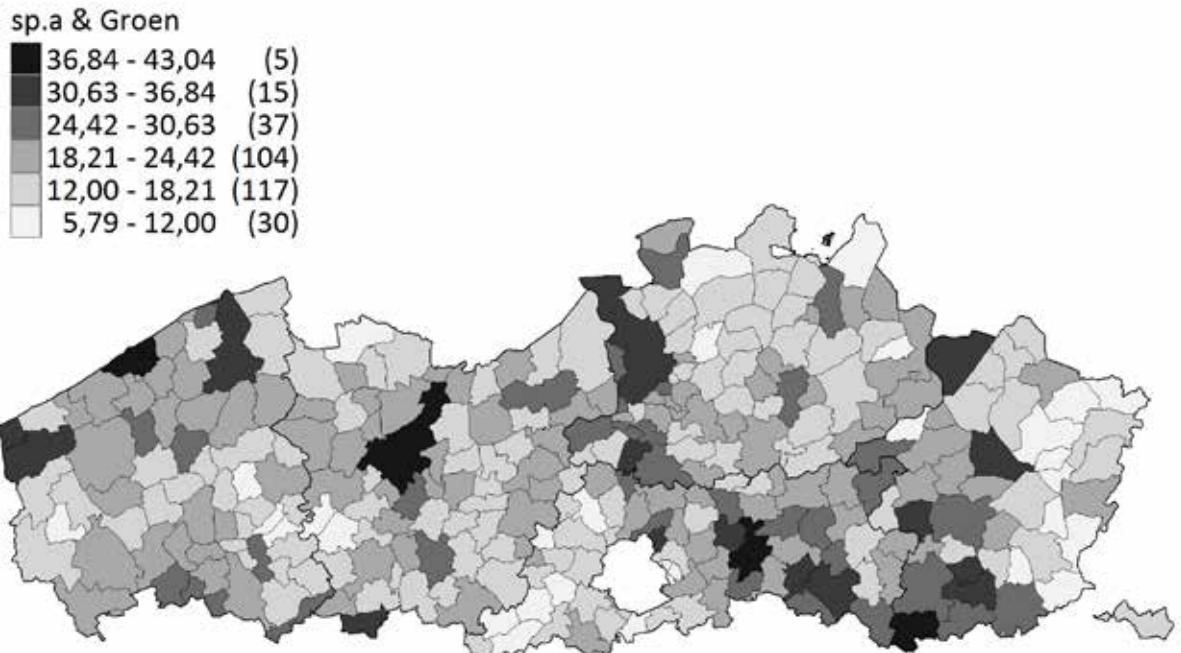
The geography of the liberal Open Vld party (Map 3) is equally unsurprising. The party achieves its best results primarily in (the south of) East Flanders where it wins over 30% of the votes. It is also strong locally in Flemish-Brabant, on the coast and in the south of Limburg province. It often achieves local successes in municipalities with the help of well-known national figures such as the Minister for Asylum and Immigration Maggie De Block in Merchtem, or MP Marino Keulen in Lanaken. Their fortunes in the towns is mixed. Although the Open VLD portrays itself as an urban party, the map shows clearly that it does not find much support in the towns. Its best results are in municipalities such as Horebeke, Zwalm or Merksplas, places that are hardly urban.

Because of the Limburg cartel, the results of sp.a and Groen in Map 4 have been combined. Electoral support for the two parties combined is geographically less widely spread than that of N-VA, CD&V or Open VLD. In 259 of the 308 (or 8 out of 10) Flemish municipalities the two parties together won less than 25% of the vote. Map 4 shows that support for the Sp.a and Groen combined is primarily metropolitan, with the addition of places like Leuven, Ostend and Ghent.

Map 3: Open VLD (Liberals).



Map 4: Sp.a & Groen (Sp.a & Green)

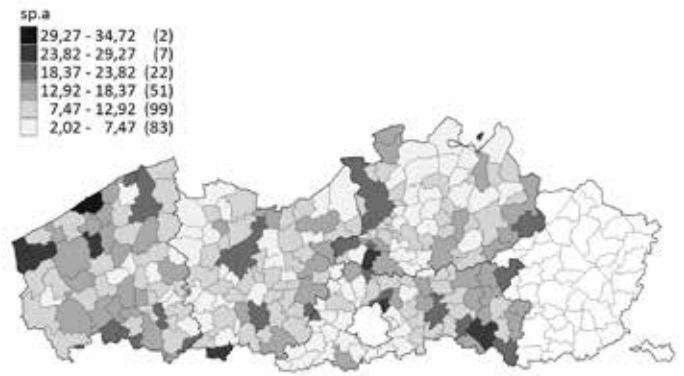
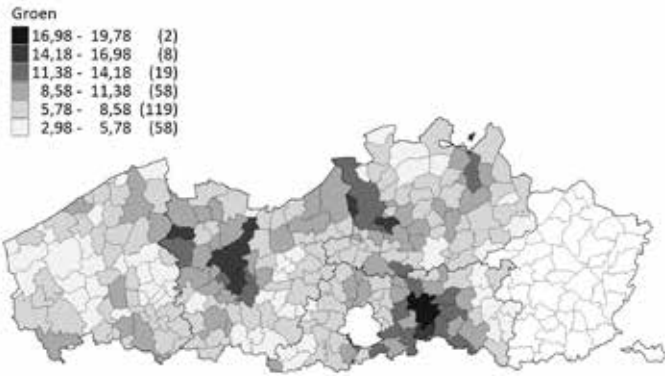


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The results in the four provinces where Groen and Sp.a campaigned separately give one a clearer idea of the geographical spread of their rank and file. Map 5 shows that the Greens are strong particularly near Ghent, Leuven and Antwerp (all of them university towns). This urban profile stands out even more clearly in the case of Sp.a (Map 6) which does relatively well in Ghent, Leuven or Antwerp but far less well in the surrounding municipalities.

Map 5: Green

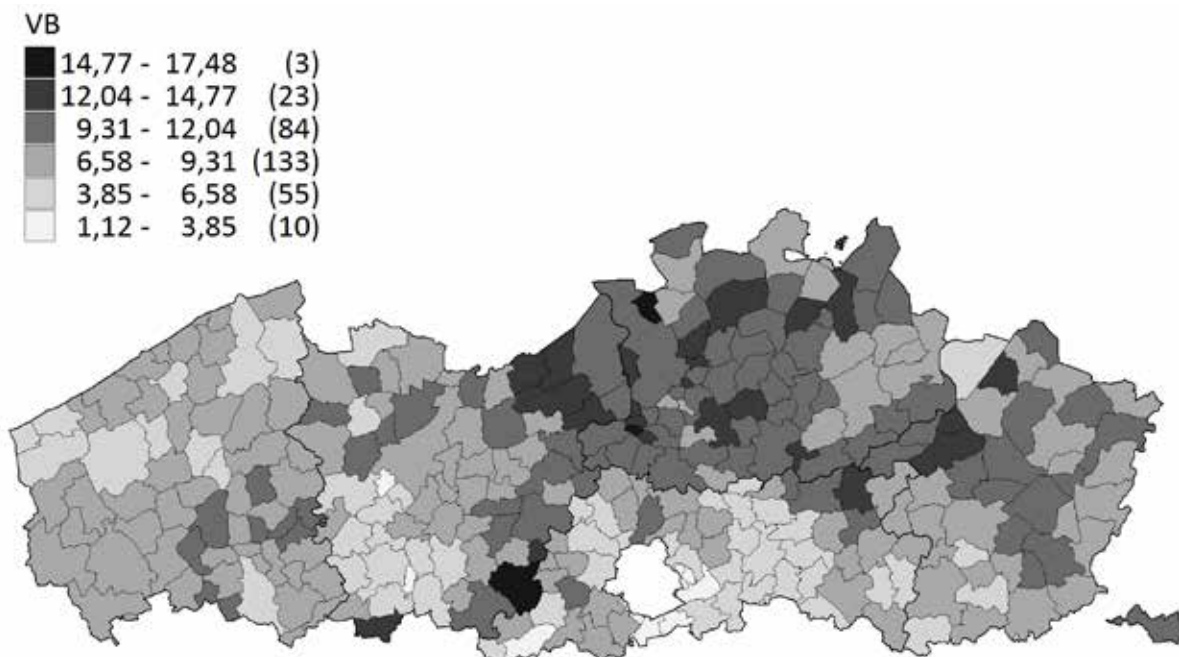
Map 6: Sp.a



The urban nature of the Greens' rank and file is not really surprising. This relatively young party is firmly associated with urban themes such as diversity and mobility. The key players in Agalev (Groen's predecessor) and Groen have as a rule come from Ghent or Antwerp. The predominantly urban character of Sp.a is possibly more problematical because the Socialists, as one of the three main traditional parties, once enjoyed much wider support. The narrowing of the socialist base to a purely urban party goes back some time. In 2006, commenting on the municipal elections, the political scientist Johan Ackaert remarked that the sp.a 'is becoming an urban party with little appeal for rural voters'.⁶ Just before the elections of 14 October 2012 a newspaper article put it even more bluntly: the Sp.a has 'never done well in the countryside and the Socialists are not doing much to change it'.⁷

At the Sp.a-Visie congress in early December 2012 the talk was all about the failure of the Antwerp 'City list' of Socialists and Christian Democrats and how the party was being forced to look for voters outside the towns.⁸ If until then the Sp.a had in effect an explicitly urban strategy in mind, it makes the failure of the Antwerp City List even more painful. In fact, the position of the Sp.a is now coming under pressure even in the cities. In Ghent and Antwerp, in the provincial elections, the party only attracted a fairly modest 22% and 19% respectively of the vote.

Map 7: Vlaams Belang (far right Flemish Interest)



The big loser in 2012 - certainly compared with the previous local elections of 2006 - has been Vlaams Belang. In three quarters of Flemish municipalities it could not rise above 10% of the vote and nowhere did it reach 20%. Its electoral decline seems to be driving the party back to its earlier core areas of support such as Antwerp, Waasland and Beringen. The geography of the VB is much like that of the Vlaams Blok in the mid 1990s. The most striking result was in Ninove where the party in the provincial elections possibly benefited from the panache of the municipal ticket 'Forza Ninove' with federal representative Guy D'haeseleer.

TOWN VERSUS COUNTRY

In the previous section, allusion was made to a possible contrast between town and country being reflected in the election results, with Sp.a and Groen clearly urban organisations and the Christian Democrats as the party of rural Flanders. Seeing a connection between electoral results and socio-economic areas is one of the classic dreams of political geography. Already various agencies of the Flemish administration have done a great deal of work breaking down the 308 Flemish municipalities into socio-economic categories. One study by the Institute for Agricultural and Fisheries Research into the demarcation of the Flemish countryside includes a survey of several socio-economic classifications.⁹ Until recently, however, this was not directly useful for electoral geography because the results were released by electoral district. However, some useful work has been published based on the domicile of standing and elected candidates.¹⁰

Table 2.

Area	CD&V	VLD	PvdA	N-VA	VB	Sp.a + groen
Metropolitan areas	7,01%	11,68%	6,50%	29,35%	10,24%	33,31%
Regional capital	20,07%	11,67%	1,59%	27,32%	8,73%	28,40%
Smaller towns	23,16%	15,79%	1,04%	26,56%	9,38%	21,54%
Suburbs	19,57%	12,92%	0,66%	29,85%	8,53%	20,03%
Outskirts	22,59%	15,09%	0,91%	31,82%	9,24%	18,11%
Countryside	29,01%	17,74%	0,84%	25,56%	7,69%	17,51%

But in October 2012 the results were published for the first time at the municipal level. That makes it much easier to correlate a party's results with a municipal typology. Table 2 does this on the basis of the classification described in the chapter 'New Urbanism' in the Flemish administration's survey of Flanders, *Vlaanderen gepeild [Flanders surveyed]* (2005).¹¹ Naturally, the categories employed do not all carry the same electoral weight. The first two categories, the major cities of Antwerp and Ghent (the Brussels municipalities have not been included) and the 11 other Flemish regional centres together represent 23% of the Flemish electorate. The last two categories together, the outskirts and the countryside represent 41%. So these 'outer areas' in fact carry far more weight than the cities.

Table 2 confirms a number of conjectures raised by Maps 1 to 7. CD&V is well ahead in the rural areas of Flanders with 29% of the vote. But in the two major cities, Antwerp and Ghent, the party hardly reached 7% in the last provincial elections. The Catholic element in politics has long been associated with an anti-urban mentality, partly because of its encouragement of property ownership in the countryside.¹² Nevertheless, during the local elections of 2012 the CD&V campaigned on a seriously urban manifesto which was tailored to the metropolitan and city voter.¹³ Its results in the regional centres and smaller towns was not nearly so bad as in the two metropolitan areas (20-23%). CD&V is certainly most effective in the countryside, though that does not make it a purely rural political party.

The figures for CD&V are as one would expect: weak in the large towns and strong in the countryside. Open VLD, however, follows a similar pattern and that is much less what one would expect. The Liberals picked up 17% in areas normally classified as rural but were stranded on 11% in the larger towns and cities. Open VLD is much less associated with the countryside than the Christian Democrats, if only because it presents itself as an urban organisation, as for instance in the series of books *Stadslucht maakt vrij* [*City air is liberating*] by Sven Gatz and Christian Leysen, who were the VLD representatives for the cities of Brussels and Antwerp. In 2005, in the framework of a liberal urban policy and charmed by the American sociologist Richard Florida, they appealed for the 'mental urbanisation' of Flanders.¹⁴ Nevertheless, in 2012 the party performed most strongly in the countryside.

The combined results of Sp.a and Groen (combined to take account of their alliance in the province of Limburg) were as expected. The two left-wing parties together are the most important political force in the large cities and regional centres, but in the suburbs and the rural areas they score significantly less well. But as we have seen, the larger towns and cities carry less electoral weight than the countryside and the outskirts of the towns. The two parties can perhaps console themselves by the expectation that demographic evolution is making the urban areas more important.

The results for N-VA show little variation by socio-economic area. The nationalists, in fact, score well everywhere. It is striking that their (relatively) poor results are in the rural areas, though still with about 25% of the votes. The electoral losses of the Vlaams Belang have driven it back to its roots as the Vlaams Blok whose first big successes were in the towns.¹⁵ With the electoral success of the party, which peaked in the years 2004-2006, the Vlaams Blok/Belang came increasingly to be seen as an anti-urban party with a focus on the suburban middle class.¹⁶ In 2012 the VB once again scored highest in the metropolitan areas.

IN CONCLUSION

Most attention before, during and after 14 October 2012, has been given to the municipalities, which are administratively far more important than the provinces. However, the results of the provincial elections also warrant attention because they closely approach those of the regional and federal elections. Simulations on the basis of the provincial elections will undoubtedly be scrutinised very closely.

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In Flanders the provincial elections offered the extra bonus that the results were announced at the municipal level for the first time. This now makes it possible to link the results of individual parties to the socio-economic profile of municipalities without the added complication of numerous electoral alliances and local electoral candidates' lists.

This exploratory analysis of the provincial elections has drawn a picture of the geographical diversity of the rank and file of the major Flemish parties. Although the differences between town and country in Flemish public debate is rarely made explicit (compared with the contrasts between left and right, Catholic and free thinkers, or for and against Flemish independence), some parties are nevertheless clearly associated with either town or country. The striking thing is that in 2012 this did not apply to the N-VA, the great newcomer in local politics. That party's impact has been felt almost everywhere.

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Translation: Chris Emery.

Endnotes

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- 3/ Craeghs, J., Wegwijs in het nieuw lokaal en provinciaal kiesdecreet, *Binnenband*, October 2011, 5-6.
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- 8/ 'Buiten de steden zoeken naar kiezers', *De Standaard*, 3 December 2012.
- 9/ Lenders S., *Afbakening van het Vlaamse platteland*, ILVO, 2006, pp. 9-22. The various divisions of the land can be found on the Flemish government's website: http://aps.vlaanderen.be/lokaal/lokale_statistieken.htm.
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PS: The Tentative Steps of the Parti Socialiste

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After the October 2012 the francophone Parti Socialiste (PS) ran into trouble following a series of unfortunate events. The first unfortunate episode started with the local and provincial elections of 14 October 2012. The PS did not perform badly in these elections, but nevertheless had mixed feelings about it. The second episode included a series of tricky issues in the aftermath of the elections and the losses- both symbolic and real – which the party suffered in the process of forging coalitions deals. The PS was plunged into chaos for about two months. Party elites were panic-stricken in the third episode, trying to defuse the crisis and giving militants their marching orders for 2013 and the ‘mother of all elections’ in 2014. An analysis of a disastrous six months following the elections of 2012.

A DEFINING MOMENT

When the present federal government took office on 6 December 2011, the PS was facing an exceptional situation. First of all, (then) PS party leader Elio Di Rupo was appointed as prime minister. Although the PS has sometimes been depicted as immensely powerful, it is rare to find a francophone socialist prime minister in Belgium. Only two French speaking Socialists had entered “Wetstraat 10” as prime minister so far, i.e. Paul-Henri Spaak in 1946 and 1947, and Edmond Leburton in 1973, only for a brief lapse of time, as it lasted less than one legislative session all in all. Second element: the party chairman became prime minister, which is far from being unimportant for the PS, as the former plays a key role in party affairs. He (or she) is indeed the party’s strongman (or strongwoman), unlike for example the chairman of the Flemish Christian-democratic party (CD&V).

In other words: the PS had to cope with an unprecedented role reversal. And things were not going smoothly, whatever the party leadership said about it at the time. Thierry Giet, a Liège PS member, replaced Elio Di Rupo as chairman. He is indisputably an excellent MP, as his fellow MPs testify, and a highly competent leader of the parliamentary party (Chamber of Deputies). But, aside from not having formal competence in certain matters, to ensure a smooth running of the party business, he lacks a number of skills. He does not feel at ease with the media and when conflicting opinions are raised in the party, he does not manage to impose a particular point of view or decision. It showed, when, in the first half of 2012, conflicting proposals were being submitted concerning the ‘intra-francophone institutional architecture’. PS minister Jean-Claude Marcourt then made a thinly veiled attack on his fellow party member and Walloon ‘minister-president’ Rudy Demotte. And vice versa. The attack was not an isolated incident and revealed a new and very delicate situation. Moreover, the party was also facing tough decisions, given the economic stagnation in Europe and Belgium. It made things even more complex.

THE LOCAL ELECTIONS OF 2012

Such were the circumstances in which the PS was trying to woo voters in October 2012. How to assess the PS's performance in these elections?

Results did not fall short of expectations. The PS delivered a better performance than in 2006 in its strongholds in Le Hainaut, i.e. in cities such as Mons, Tournai, La Louvière, Binche, etc. Moreover, it got an absolute majority in terms of seats in Charleroi, increasing its share of the vote with 9 per cent. In Liège and the Liège industrial area the PS equalled its previous result (2006) or suffered slight losses. So by and large the PS stood 'quite' firm in its strongholds, i.e. in what is sometimes called the socialist 'banana' (the area ranging from Le Hainaut to Liège).

Figure 1: PS election results in the major Walloon towns and cities (local elections 2000, 2006, 2012).

	2000		2006		2012	
	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats
Charleroi	51,37	30	38,43	23	47,69	30
Liège	34,83	20	37,97	21	37,95	22
Namur	35,94	18	28,51	15	28,36	15
Mons	61,35	30	51,55	27	55,16	29
Tournai	43,87	19	40,94	18	42,19	18
La Louvière	55,99	29	41,71	20	50,09	25
Seraing	58,98	28	56,90	26	50,35	24
Verviers	33,28	14	36,67	15	28,84	12
Mouscron	26,46	10	31,18	12	26,66	10
Braine-L'Alleud	25,24	8	21,19	7	*	
Herstal	51,98	21	50,86	20	51,06	20
Châtelet	55,76	21	50,55	20	54,31	22
Binche	34,05	11	39,70	14	57,04	20
Wavre	17,27	5	7,31	1	12,68	4
Courcelles	41,88	14	36,54	12	34,57	13
Sambreville	57,08	19	45,10	16	49,58	18
Ath	67,82	22	59,62	19	52,01	16
Ans	49,13	17	52,76	18	43,04	14
Waterloo	9,64	2	7,77	1	6,10	1
Flémalle	43,34	15	56,86	20	54,65	19
Arlon	26,15	8	30,36	9	26,10	8
Ottignies-Louvain-La-Neuve	15,80	4	13,16	3	14,05	4
Nivelles	34,42	10	35,85	10	33,44	11
Soignies	36,30	11	41,20	14	36,33	11
Andenne	64,00	20	59,10	19	55,29	19
Oupeye	29,42	9	38,06	12	44,89	13
Saint-Ghislain	52,64	17	53,97	17	54,47	16
Chaufontaine	18,34	5	20,58	5	20,25	5
Rixensart	12,04	3	14,47	4	14,64	3
Gembloux	25,45	7	20,21	6	18,80	5

*Electoral alliance with the liberals, mayor's list.

Results were markedly less good beyond those strongholds. The PS lost ground in the Luxemburg province, where Philippe Courard (undersecretary) suffered a symbolic defeat. The PS also lost votes in the Namur province and was defeated in Philippeville and Ciney. In the city of Namur, where minister Eliane Tillieux headed the list, the PS delivered a very disappointing result too, as it equalled its low score of 2006. And in Nivelles, in Walloon Brabant, André Flahaut (Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies) again failed to unseat the mayor.

And finally, the overall result in Brussels was very mediocre. Results in municipalities Vorst, Sint-Gillis, Koekelberg en Anderlecht could be evaluated as satisfactory, but losses were suffered in many municipalities, such as Molenbeek, Brussels, Evere and Elsene. In municipalities located southwest of Brussels, such as Sint-Pieters Woluwe, Sint-Lambrechts Woluwe, Oudergem and Watermaal-Bosvoorde, the PS now has to stand back and watch more than ever. In Schaarbeek too, where Laurette Onkelinckx (deputy prime minister) headed the list for the first time, the PS suffered a blow once again. Its share of the vote there was but a meagre 25 per cent.

THE PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS OF 2012

And what about the results of the provincial elections? It is particularly interesting to analyze them, because these elections are often perceived as ‘second-class elections’ or ‘by-elections’: voters consider them to be less important and are less familiar with provincial competences; candidates are usually lesser-known; voters often follow their heart rather than their head and ‘punish’ the parties in power. The question of political preferences is, of course, a complex issue in the French-speaking parts of Belgium, as the four major parties govern in coalition at one level at least. But logically speaking, in comparison to local elections, accessibility and reputation of the candidates play a more limited role in provincial elections.

The overall results of the provincial elections show a decline in the number of people voting for the PS. They were less good, not only in comparison with those of the local elections, but particularly with those of the federal elections in June 2010. This was patently obvious in Le Hainaut, where the party indisputably increased its share of the vote with 2.6% in comparison with the previous provincial elections (2006), but suffered a loss of almost 9% in comparison with the 2010 federal elections, thereby equalling more or less its performance in the regional elections in 2009. However, let us also mention the very poor results of the PS in Walloon Brabant, where the party’s performance was even worse than in the disastrous elections in 1999 and 2007.

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Figure 2: PS’s share of the vote (in percentage terms) in the federal (F), regional (R) and provincial (P) elections (per province).

	1999	1999	2000	2003	2004	2006	2007	2009	2010	2012
	R	F	P	F	R	P	F	R	F	P
Henegouwen	34,00	34,75	40,39	44,07	41,88	36,94	34,23	40,37	48,18	39,58
Luik	31,05	29,07	35,23	35,62	38,09	34,02	32,10	33,55	35,79	32,84
Waals-Brabant	18,51	19,24	22,12	24,28	24,04	20,13	17,97	18,07	22,48	17,33
Namen	26,89	27,55	31,38	33,50	34,42	28,76	25,95	27,47	32,20	27,82
Luxemburg	21,28	19,98	24,05	26,25	30,87	25,54	21,27	25,61	28,49	23,03

R: regional elections; F: federal elections (Chamber of Deputies); P: provincial elections.

A DISASTROUS SECOND ROUND

So results for the PS in the October 2012 elections were mixed: poor in the provincial elections and

'quite' positive in the local elections. It was less difficult to assess the political consequences of these elections, i.e. the losses which the party clearly suffered in the process of forging coalition deals.

The PS did not manage to become part of the ruling coalition in Namur, the Walloon capital, although it hoped to do so. Moreover, it was only a matter of days before the party was ejected from the ruling coalition in Verviers and Mouscron, two important Walloon municipalities. In Verviers the MR (liberal party) performed poorly and subsequently broke the agreement it had made with the PS to ally itself with the cdH (Christian-democratic party). In Mouscron, where the PS had cherished the faint hope to unseat the mayor, negotiations ended in a deadlock and cdH ultimately formed a coalition with MR. Lastly, in Molenbeek Philippe Moureaux thought to have reached an agreement with cdH and Ecolo (Green Party), but his party ended up being in opposition, as MR, cdH and Ecolo formed a ruling coalition. And in the city of Brussels, where Joëlle Milquet (cdH, minister) was consigned to the opposition benches, the Socialists were blamed for the blunt manner in which this had happened. In short, the handling of coalition deals was pretty disastrous and the party made no effort to deny it. The PS was designated as the loser of the elections, both by its political opponents and by the media, but the party declined to comment.

At the time when the party entered into tough negotiations on the 2013 budget, prominent PS politicians broke their public silence, were making sly little digs at one another and showing signs of weakness and indecision. For example, Philippe Moureaux sneered at the chairman of the Brussels PS 'federation'. The latter then felt his position undermined and proclaimed his intention to make the switch to the presidency of the Brussels regional government; a move which was welcomed by... Philippe Moureaux in an attempt to oppose the nomination of Philippe Close (a City of Brussels PS member) to this post. While the latter, and especially Yvan Majeur, were believed to be responsible for consigning Joëlle Milquet (cdH) to the opposition benches and for the reprisals in Molenbeek. Both aldermen, hard pressed to respond to the allegations, gave the Brussels newspaper *Le Soir* a surrealist interview.

The confusion as to who was to take up key posts in government and in the party was, if possible, even greater in Wallonia. Rudy Demotte, the 'minister-president' of the Walloon regional government, said he was awaiting instructions from the chairmen of the local party branches, who had to be convened by... Thierry Giet, the PS chairman. In short, in the last two months of 2012, the Walloon Socialists were quite edgy about the party's prospects. In addition, the PS had to avoid a clash with the increasingly militant socialist union (FGTB), despite the fact that it had succeeded in averting manipulation of the consumer price index - which allows for inflation compensation - during the negotiations on the 2013 budget. We will come back to that later.

Such were the circumstances in which the PS had to fill a series of key posts in government and the party, and devise a new organizational structure. Elio Di Rupo was urged by his advisers to give these issues serious consideration during the Christmas holidays of 2012. He wanted to close the divide in party ranks. After New Year he gave the party its marching orders for the threefold 2014 elections (federal, regional and European elections).

60 MAKING CHOICES

Both internal and external considerations were taken into account when devising the new organization chart. It was a fairly complex exercise. Eventually, there was a general notion that a temporary solution should prevail and the new organization chart received a fairly friendly welcome. Reshuffles are, of course, highly likely after the federal and regional elections in 2014.

To put it simply, Paul Magnette became the new chairman. He was the obvious choice in the eyes of the PS leadership for four main reasons. To begin with, Magnette can increase the party's visibility in the media, in addition to the visibility which is provided by the prime minister himself and the policies

of his government. Moreover, Magnette can make his voice - and that of the PS - heard in the Flemish media, as he has an excellent command of Dutch. Thirdly, with Magnette (42) serving as chairman, the party also has the opportunity to demonstrate that it is youthful and modern, which is a must, as young Christian Democrats and Liberals have taken over the leadership of their respective parties (cdH and MR). And finally, Magnette has a forceful personality; he does not only appeal to workers - i.e. the classic, popular electorate of the PS - but to highly educated voters as well, and to those voters who are wavering between the PS and Ecolo (Magnette is a former political scientist). However, Magnette can be a risky choice too. The first danger looms in Charleroi, the biggest city in Wallonia, with many families living below the poverty line. Getting it back on the rails is, therefore, an urgent and crucially important task both for the PS *and* for Magnette himself, who is the mayor of Charleroi. It will prove no easy task. There is a second danger looming in 2014, when Magnette will be leading the election campaign and is expected to deliver a good performance. Of course, Di Rupo and Magnette will jointly lead the campaign, but in order to be successful they will have to determine exactly which roles they are to play in it. Moreover, let us not forget that the excellent results of the 2010 election will provide a benchmark against which the results of the 2014 elections will be measured; it makes Magnette's task even more difficult. To use a football metaphor: how to perform better if your team has just won the Premier League title and the Champions League title? Electoral defeat, for which Magnette will perhaps have to take the blame, could prove a handicap in a contest for the leadership of the party in which other candidates will also be running (Laurette Onkelinx, Rudy Demotte or Elio Di Rupo himself).

Laurette Onkelinx is still high up in the party hierarchy. She continues to serve as vice-prime minister, although she cherished - and cherishes - the ambition to serve as party chairwoman. But Elio Di Rupo could ill afford to lose another minister after Paul Magnette had resigned to become the Charleroi mayor. However, Mrs Onkelinx does hold an important post in the organization chart, as she became chairwoman of the Brussels PS 'federation'. That too will prove no easy task. She is not widely considered a Brussels person. Moreover, post-election issues have deeply divided the Brussels PS federation. And let us also not forget that the latter was adversely affected by the decision of Charles Picqué (PS) to step aside as 'minister-president' of the Brussels region. He will not head the list in the 2014 federal elections. In the Brussels electoral district the PS will then have to face fierce competition from political heavyweights such as Didier Reynders (MR), Olivier Mangain (FDF) and Joëlle Milquet (cdH) too.

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Rudy Vervoort has replaced Charles Picqué as 'minister-president' of the Brussels region in May 2013. The choice is deeply problematic. He is not a well-known politician and did not deliver an impressive performance in the local elections (the municipality Evere). As Brussels will be the centre of all attention and he is bound to face a lot of criticism from the Flemish, Vervoort will have to work very hard to assert his authority, to embody an innovative project for the capital and to make the PS indispensable to the Brussels government, even though the election list will contain the names of Emir Kir, the mayor of Sint-Joost-ten-Node, and Fadila Laanan, minister of culture, who are likely to receive large numbers of votes.

Jean-Pascal Labille has replaced Paul Magnette as minister of public corporations and development aid. He lives in Liège, served as secretary-general to the socialist health insurance fund and has been heavily involved in the economic development of Liège and the Walloon region. He was offered the post not to upset the overall internal balance in the party. But the choice of Labille also shows that the Liège PS has enormous difficulty in selecting astute politicians, who are capable of holding ministerial office.

AN EQUATION WITH SEVERAL UNKNOWNNS

Facing a very tense political climate, the PS has chosen to steer a 'federal' course, while trying to pursue two objectives at the same time.

According to the PS it is reasonable to assume that Belgium is still an asset provided one manages to devise the policies necessary to sustain the 'Belgian model of a federal state'. When the negotiations on forming a new federal government had ended in deadlock, there were two conflicting options open to the PS and to Elio Di Rupo in particular: to break off negotiations and confine oneself to the Walloon and francophone cause; or to deem that Belgium does have a future. The first option meant a leap into the unknown, as it entailed huge risks for the Belgian social security system. However, it was a choice that could have enjoyed the support of growing numbers of people in the French-speaking parts of Belgium, who are irritated by the criticism and vicious remarks of certain Flemish politicians, journalists and employers organizations. The second option implied that the PS would have to fight to preserve a social security system based on federal arrangements, i.e. it entailed that tough and painful decisions should be taken to preserve the Belgian federal state, given the political power and influence of NVA and the right-wing views which prevail in Flemish political parties.

TENTATIVE STEPS

The PS has preferred the second option, while simultaneously trying to pursue two objectives. On the one hand, to contribute as much as possible to ensure that N-VA loses ground to the Flemish parties championing the cause of a federal state; on the other, to avoid losing political power and influence by doing so. These are nothing less than irreconcilable objectives. Francophone socialists are, therefore, pursuing a dangerous path. Moreover, these objectives have to be achieved in very tough circumstances.

To begin with, the economic and budgetary situation gives no cause for optimism. Economic growth has almost come to a standstill, as in many other European countries. In addition, public debt remains high and Belgium has to implement EU budgetary 'obligations'. We are not questioning here whether these obligations are sensible or not. The important thing is that EU member states *have* to comply with them and employers, liberal parties and the CD&V are constantly referring to them. Consequently, the PS cannot really satisfy the demands of the workers and the unions; on the contrary, it has come under attack from the employers and the bankers, who actually bear responsibility for the fact that the public debt has risen again.

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How to reach out to the Flemish coalition partners (Open VLD, CD&V and Sp.a) without suffering any damage yourself? That is the difficult dilemma facing the PS, while its opponents, incidentally, don't bother about it or refrain from responding a bit more sympathetic. One should not expect sympathy, of course. This is not the key issue. The thing is that two Flemish right-wing parties, Open VLD and CD&V, are not helpful enough, as they do not provide sufficient clarity, are badly managed and obviously too much of an easy target for N-VA and its chairman Bart De Wever.

Actually, the PS is facing a devilish dilemma, as it is increasingly at odds with the Walloon socialist union and partly also with the Christian union (CSC) over budgetary decisions, the policies of the Walloon authorities and the fact that there is absolutely no room for concessions in overall negotiations with the employers. The unions' leadership does realize the PS has to go it alone and is facing tough times. And it certainly does not want to consign it to the opposition benches (*'politique du pire'*). But middle-ranking union officials and part of the rank and file feel tempted to take strong action, although the balance of forces has shifted to the employers.

The PS has also been put under pressure from a far-left party, the PTB (Parti des Travailleurs belges), which is particularly influential in the Liège industrial area. In 2010 and 2012 the PTB delivered a spectacular electoral result. Moreover, the PTB managed to have access to the media, i.e. the papers of Sud-Presse group and *La Dernière Heure* are often willing to lend an ear to what it is saying. In addition, the PS has also come under attack from the MR (liberal party), which works hard to portray the PS as an archaic party, even at the risk of acting as the mouthpiece for views which prevail in Flanders.

And finally, the real problem for the PS was... their Flemish sister party and coalition partner Sp.a. It was left puzzled by its policies for a long time. Although Sp.a suffered successive defeats in the elections, the party did not seem to draw any lessons from them. The local elections returned disastrous results for Sp.a, while the wins in Bruges and Vilvoorde could not compensate for the losses. This is a problem for Sp.a in the first place, but it does also have major repercussions for the PS, as it allowed Flemish Nationalists (N-VA) to label all PS proposals and policies as left-wing (versus right-wing Flemish policies) and unfit for Flanders (while fit for Wallonia). These differences reinforce each other, resulting in an amalgam, which makes the nationalist narrative (of N-VA) even more attractive and the task of the socialist party even more difficult. Sp.a has now reconsidered its position on different issues and revised its strategy. Relations between the two socialist parties have become more cordial again since spring 2013. The Sp.a presence at the PS party conference, in May 2013, did not go unnoticed, as Johan Vande Lanotte - a leading Sp.a minister and a political heavyweight - took the floor, which is a rare - and therefore remarkable - thing to do at PS conferences. Moreover, the Sp.a has adopted a new ideological manifesto [*Het Vlaanderen van Morgen*], indicating that the party has turned left. If this policy change is not reversed, it will gradually become clear that the current debate about federal policies has been grossly misrepresented, i.e. that it is patently inaccurate to say that this debate is basically between the Flemish employers organization (VOKA) and the Walloon socialist union (FGTB).

STRIKING PROMISES

It is too early to judge the likely impact of this policy change. But the PS will certainly benefit from it in intra-governmental negotiations. It will have to strike compromises in the best way possible, hoping that the economy will start to improve slowly at the beginning of 2014. Will that be sufficient to achieve the above-mentioned objectives? There is nothing more uncertain. The 'mother of all elections' in 2014 is drawing closer. The poll ratings are not particularly positive for the PS, but the campaign agenda has not been set yet and campaign dynamics too are far from clear. The PS knows it is pursuing a narrow path, but once it had decided to preserve the Belgian federal state, there was no other option open to it.

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Translation: Jan Vermeersch

PART 2

THE FEDERAL, REGIONAL AND EUROPEAN ELECTIONS OF 2014

Sp.a: Taking the Offensive

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In spite of the crisis in financial capitalism, Socialism is ideologically still on the defensive in many European countries where the problems are older and run deeper than the current economic malaise. Nothing seems to have done the Socialist cause much good. In Flanders, the Socialists of the Sp.a have been unable to set the tone of the debates which the economic collapse around us has made possible. That is not so much because of any intrinsic weakness in their analysis and remedies, but because they are haunted by the issue of legitimacy. The great challenge is not only or even mainly intellectual or communicative; it is emotional and, in particular, moral. Nevertheless, with its new 'statement of principle', which was approved at the party conference 'Flanders of Tomorrow' (8 June 2013) the Sp.a should now be in a position to meet the challenge. The local and provincial elections in 2012 were anything but a success for the party, and 2014 promises to be another difficult year.

ON THE DEFENSIVE

The difficulties in resurrecting the party are partly due to pessimism about the social model with which Socialists in particular are associated. It remains in an unresolved state of latent crisis. The debate still seems to be dominated by analyses showing how indefensible the present system of redistribution is. The reassuring counterarguments that in the long term, if we remain calm and stick to some modest reforms, things will work out all right, ... leaves many unconvinced.

For some time now, the thought that children will find life more difficult than their parents did, has undermined faith in the future. It is not even a question of having objective evidence to support that fear and despair. If the property-owning middle class is fearful and the underclass sees itself dropping further behind, Socialists pay an electoral price on two fronts. But even worse, in the eyes of both groups they become irrelevant.

Socialists have made history with the steady improvement of people's condition. But as that development seems to have peaked and thoughts of decline have taken over, they are constantly being reminded of what has been: a history, rather than a future. The belief in what could be is eroded by general uncertainty and feelings of loss of control. It is quite obvious that the crisis of Social Democracy is not specifically a Flemish nor a recent phenomenon. The crisis is structural. Socialists have attempted to compensate for these challenges in all kinds of ways. For instance, by taking up some of the criticisms and adopting market mechanisms or shifting the goal to equality of opportunity. But this 'Third Way' was only temporarily successful and in the long term even harmful to the party's image. It became difficult to see any difference between some Socialists and Social Liberals.

Socialism never fares well in an atmosphere of fear and pessimism, of cut-backs and introspection. As an ideology of liberation, it blossoms at the prospect of freedom and improvement. Crises are

more easily exploited by populist parties who can always conjure up an external enemy to blame and are not hampered by the intellectualism that left-wing parties like to engage in. Incidentally, there is nothing wrong with left-wing populism so long as behind the slogans there is a powerful narrative based on a well-founded body of truthful facts and figures.

When Socialists are in coalition, they have their own approach and they do make a difference, as for instance in combating fraud or modifying the tax system. But all too often they are simply there to salvage the system, modifying and softening EU changes to the social model to make them more acceptable. Furthermore, in order to make the social model more durable, Socialists often have to tighten up the rules: obligations are given greater emphasis, rights become more conditional. Reciprocity and responsibility towards the system were always inherent elements of the concept of solidarity, but the Socialists have had to make those aspects even more prominent in order to keep the system workable. At times, this makes them seem just as tight-fisted as the most right-wing critics. It has widened the distance from the radical left, creating ever larger openings on the left wing. That wing has come to regard mainstream social democracy as a hollow shell of what it once used to be. It muddles along in the centre, competing with liberals and conservatives, who long ago accepted the existence of the welfare state. For a time, powerful personalities and marketing were able to keep up appearances. But gradually the Socialists have lost their grip of the situation and have become a variation on a theme.

TAKING THE OFFENSIVE

As the global financial - and later the economic - crisis has evolved, the situation now appears to be changing. The idea is returning that the left can fight back, that collective resistance to fatalism is possible, that it is possible to economise, that managing the economy is not only possible but necessary. That a gentle recovery of the economy is achievable. Disbelief has changed to doubt; despair is turning into cautious, uncertain hope. Consumer cooperatives are growing, national savings plans are being tried, steps are being taken to combat fiscal fraud and to regulate financial traffic and so on. A change of direction is observable, but it is too soon to say whether it will lead to a structural renaissance. The old guard still has not recovered from the collapse following the implosion of the Third Way. In Flanders, since the successful episode 'free socialism' [*Gratis*] of Steve Stevaert and the 'Teletubbies' (the Sp.a's big four: Steve Stevaert, Johan Vande Lanotte, Frank Vandenbroucke and Patrick Janssens), there has not been another creative phase of new and meaningful ideas. Perhaps that moment is now approaching. But if the centre-left misses this opportunity, it will no longer deserve to be taken seriously.

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With its spruced up 'statement of principle' and the project 'Flanders of Tomorrow', adopted in June 2013, the Sp.a choose for an offensive approach. At long last. For the first time since 2003, a path for electoral success has been mapped out. The party has gone through a decade of electoral disappointments. When in coalition, it has been able to use its accumulated experience and make-weight role to fight considerably above its electoral weight. But its uncertain dependence on the results and the strategy of other parties means that the sp.a has little control over strategic political issues. In a fragmented, volatile landscape with several coalition possibilities, that is far from reassuring.

So a substantive improvement is absolutely essential, though much will depend on the political context, and the specific issues that arise during the 'mother of all elections' (federal, regional and European) in May 2014, and of course the performance of the party's political personnel. But in that respect too there is some good news: it looks as if the Sp.a leaders have rediscovered each other. The atmosphere is no longer so chilly and individualistic as it has often been in the past and the party has found a degree of inner calm and mutual understanding. For a time it was believed, fortunately wrongly, that this would be its most important achievement under the leadership of chairman

Bruno Tobback. Although the party possesses a number of heavyweights, the layer below needs strengthening and support. A well thought-out personnel policy is absolutely crucial and more needs to be invested in party activists than a few big names in each constituency. The party still seems to rely too heavily on a number of heavyweights neatly distributed over the region. It is by no means certain that in future there will be enough heavyweights to go round.

SOCIALISM IS A MORAL ATTITUDE

The ideological revival made a positive start with the launch of the party's 'statement of principle' at its conference on 8 June 2013, even though it lost some of its shine in the Aalstgate affair when the local Sp.a joined up with ex-members of the ultra-right wing Vlaams Belang party, much against the wishes of the party leadership. The party is working on its image and still has some way to go. But it has no choice: some of its supporters have turned away because they disagree on principle with the party's message, others no longer recognize the party that they once knew and reject its vague imprecision, preferring other more interesting and clearly defined party profiles. The party cannot win all of those voters back. Some of the first group might be persuaded but if they disagree fundamentally, they are not going to support the Sp.a. That statement may sound trite but it is not as self-evident as it seems. There have been times in the past when it was assumed that every elector was a potential sp.a voter who should be kept on board. The second group, on the other hand, might be rescued, but only with a great deal of understanding and clearly presented choices with which, of course, they might disagree. The Sp.a should sum up what it stands for in a few key sentences. Its message should not just be a series of clever one-liners, but a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. Socialism is an ideology and therefore also a set of moral attitudes.

Clarity is always important, but it has become all the more important in light of the approaching multiple elections of 2014. Because so many parties, so many candidates and so many ideas will be jostling for attention and votes, it is essential that long before the campaign even starts, the parties are already up to speed in putting across their core message and their ideological look and feel. A handful of key concepts will enable even those without much interest to make an informed guess as to where the party stands on an issue, so long as it follows on logically from the principles which it has laid down. This is the opposite of what was once described as the people's 'ideas factory' [*ideeënfabriek*], when former chairman Steve Stevaert called on each party member to contribute one brilliant idea for a future political agenda. Every party now realises the importance of a clear message, which makes the challenge to differentiate the Sp.a from the others all the more important.

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CLARITY HAS NOT COME A DAY TOO SOON

The ideological profile of the Sp.a desperately needed to be clarified. In recent years, the Sp.a has not been losing out to the right, nor to the left. By and large, the party has lost out to itself. It became too much of everything and not enough of anything. Because of internal disagreements it failed to take crucial decisions on such matters as diversity. Its relationship with the unions was difficult: privileged partners who were often rubbed up the wrong way. The party would do well to make its relationship with the unions explicit and keep them at the right distance. This can be reflected symbolically at party headquarters. The party and the trades unions were born in the same nest, but they have different roles to play and contribute to Socialism in different ways. They should not get in each other's way. Today, unfortunately all too often, the unions have become a millstone, a conservative force who, also because of internal divisions, are all too ready to throw up the barricades of refusal. Sp.a must also collaborate with other progressive movements, such as for instance the umbrella organisation for Christian trades unions (the ACW). The Socialist community does not have a monopoly of Social Democracy.

The Sp.a should also be clear about what it means by 'Flemish'. It seems to be working on it, especially in view of the future Flemish powers that come to the regional governments (from 2015 onwards) in execution of the sixth constitutional reform of the federal state. But the party must be quite explicit about what it wants with these new regional competences: what kind of Flanders does Sp.a want? Flanders is right nor left by definition. 'Flemish' was in the past often wrongly regarded as firmly right-wing or conservative. But there is nothing right-wing or left-wing about 'Flemish' and the left must take 'Flemish' on board. The future of Flanders is wide open and will only be settled by a contest of power and ideology. In that respect, good relations with its Walloon sister party will do no harm. On the contrary. Nevertheless, the differences between the two parties and between Socialism in Wallonia, Brussels and Flanders are undeniable, despite its being an essentially international movement. These differences become very clear at the federal level.

A debate aimed at creating greater clarity is therefore very welcome. Nevertheless, organizing a large-scale thinking exercise is no guarantee of a sharply-defined profile. The risk of the opposite happening has often been demonstrated. Few parties have spent more time brushing up their fundamental principles than the Flemish Socialists. If one thinks of such campaigns as '*The Signal*' (1996), '*The Congress of the Future*' (1998) and '*The Major Overhaul*' (2002), one might wonder whether the party has tried to rediscover itself rather too often. Occasionally, when the time was favourable, the party got away with a dual approach such as the strict Frank Vandenbroucke together with the genial Steve Stevaert in the Teletubby period. But as a rule, such ideological duality is electorally untenable. The Sp.a is now tackling that problem. Of course, offering clear choices and refusing to flirt with the public does not guarantee anything, but the fact that the party has made the decision gives one hope. Incidentally, presenting a sharper image does not mean that the party should waste time on the question whether it is now left-wing, more left-wing or extreme left-wing. What will count are clear, consistent choices based on a set of core values, not how they fit into any preordained scheme.

Because of the constant attempts to revitalise itself and the numerous reformulation of benchmarks and principles, often driven by the urge for something new, the party seemed in the past to shrivel into little more than a modern electoral association. Why should it be any different now?

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Perhaps because this time the above diagnosis is accepted by the policy makers and because the dangers and the temptations are now well known. We shall have to see. The present leadership is aware of the criticisms which have been repeated *ad nauseam* during recent years of being a lefty, rather intellectual, establishment party of primarily urban, cosmopolitan, elegant and trendy progressives, system managers, corrupted by power and alienated from their shrinking rank and file, a party of arrogant bureaucrats with too much marketing and too little authenticity, too clever and too little indignation, too many pleasures and too few choices, too much 'glossy magazine' and too little 'serious newspaper' and so on. Now, however, it seems that the Sp.a is again allowing the raised fist.

OVER-EGGING IT

The measure of this umpteenth attempt is not whether Socialism has again been rediscovered or modernised. That kind of pressure caused earlier attempts to revive the party to fail. The question is whether it is possible to deduce from a number of clearly expressed basic principles, a program of ambitious but feasible proposals, which will make a difference towards 2014. All those proposals about social issues must together amount to more than the sum of the individual resolutions. The whole must trumpet forth; it must create a special atmosphere and radiate militancy and self-belief.

The core values of Socialism are timeless and are always topical. They must be held up critically and should mobilize people and hope positively. They may not seem especially inspired against

something or someone. Defending Socialism implies intellectual honesty, which does not caricature those who disagree or their ideas. Socialism should stand morally above the ideas that it fights, never about people with which it discusses. Those who cannot treat opponents with respect, do not themselves come across as trustworthy. Even if there are parties that successfully employ stereotyping, a Socialist party should be above such behaviour. It is a matter of morality and political decorum, and also respect for the voters who deserve to be honestly informed about opposing views. Socialism is a moral movement that should lead by example, constructing rather than destroying, uniting rather than dividing. Socialism is about us and together, therefore Socialists must avoid splitting up the general interest that they defend.

That should provide an answer to the key question: what does the Sp.a stand for and for whom? The call to rediscover the fundamentals, a quest shared by the Dutch Labour party (PvdA), has resounded for some time and the answer will not be found in a glossy election manifesto or government program. In the past, ideological prevarication was often the result of a failure of nerve, of being startled by one's own shadow. The resultant gap was filled with all kinds of petty notions from which one had to build an overall construct that more or less held everything together. Today it is the opposite: coherent and consistent proposals must now be deduced from basic principles.

THE CORE VALUES

There is a place for a centre-left party that gives people the feeling that they have some control over their lives and environment. People need a party that can help them to make a stand and improve their lot through cooperation and constructive resistance, as the Dutch Labour party put it. Four central values stand out as a compass and reflect Social-democratic values:

- ☞ Security of acceptable living standards for everybody.
- ☞ 'Social improvement', through equal opportunities to live in freedom and pursue social goals.
- ☞ Thirdly, 'good work for all', the opportunity for personal development for everyone.
- ☞ Finally, 'relationships', the forming of communities that provide support against the trends that suppress individuals and intensify social conflicts. In short, bringing and keeping things together.

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The Sp.a's values are similar to those of the French Revolution, even though differently formulated. This opens up an interesting debate with Edmund Burke's followers about the modern meaning of freedom, equality and solidarity. Those powerful terms breathe optimism. A kind of militancy, pulling together for greater equality and justice, together. Some may march ahead, but no-one should be left behind.

The reintroduction of 'us' and 'we' is also of crucial importance. For too long, Socialists have allowed those terms to be hijacked by others, such as the Nationalists. When danger threatens, the feeling that nobody will be left behind or left to fend for themselves is worth more than its weight in gold. Socialists can apply equality to give more people the freedom to take control of their lives, for instance by modernizing instead of cutting back the welfare state. A re-evaluation of collectivism, which is not the same as a suffocating egalitarianism or clumsy limitations, is a powerful force for robust political efficiency and change. Furthermore, in the Sp.a's declaration of principles, solidarity is explicitly linked to reciprocity as 'a fundamental requirement for durable cooperation. The strong must be prepared to share with the weak (...) But in return we should expect complete honesty and wherever possible a serious effort to become self-sufficient. If they neglect this, the basis for solidarity will fall away.' It is a key element in the defence of political and economic redistribution. It is crucial for the legitimacy not only of the model of society but of Socialism itself.

Our society has arrived at a critical juncture. We have not yet sorted everything out: neither Belgium nor Flanders is completely ready for tomorrow. If Socialists want a say in what direction we should

take, they must first work out the path to their own ideals and values, and from there track back to the here and now. In the chaos of the 2014 elections, such guidelines will be invaluable. The Sp.a must be absolutely clear about what is 'of value' and for whom and for what it is fighting.

The Sp.a party conference of 8 June 2013 came up with some, but not all of the answers. Other issues have yet to be considered and the message that comes across must be convincing and believable. No single individual can do that alone, not even chairman Bruno Tobback. The Sp.a will have to find a strong, coherent and active 'dream team'. It will take a great deal of effort to persuade the public to listen to the Sp.a. But not to attempt it would be to guarantee failure. The elections of 2014 are important for a whole host of reasons. It would reverse the trend if the Sp.a were finally to win an election again. Naturally, in the end it is votes that make the difference, but even more important for Socialists is the legitimacy of what they say and of the social model that they represent.

Beyond the Myth of Unanimity Opinions of Belgian MPs on Federalism and the Sixth Reform of the Belgian State

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During the 541 days (2010-2011) when Belgium was without a federal government and was going through a political crisis, it was the party leaders who dominated the political stage and featured in the media. It was they who negotiated the sixth constitutional reform of the Belgian state which was a prerequisite for the formation of a new federal government. Afterwards, it was the turn of the federal MPs to vote on the legislation introducing this state reform. Nevertheless, party discipline very often prevents MP's expressing their personal vision of Belgian federalism, particularly if some agreement has already been reached. This research, which was carried out in the summer of 2011, and therefore before any agreement on the sixth state reform, sought to capture how members of parliament perceived federalism in Belgium. We surveyed not only the federal MPs, but also their colleagues in the regional parliaments. In this article, we discuss some of the results of this research.

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Between July and October 2011, before any agreement on the sixth constitutional reform, the 513 members of parliament, who make up the House of Representatives, Senate, Flemish Parliament, Walloon Parliament, Parliament of the Brussels Capital Region and the Parliament of the German Speaking Region, were asked to take part in a detailed survey on the future of federalism in Belgium. They were sent a list of 26 questions that touched on four important themes: the model and the architecture of federalism in Belgium; their identities (local, regional, federal, European); the most important reasons for legitimising the sixth constitutional reform; and the relationship between the language communities. Finally, it is important to emphasise that the questionnaire was completely anonymous to encourage the MPs to be completely open in their responses.

Table of Political Parties in Belgium with a parliamentary representation, referred to in this article.

Political leanings	Flemish	Francophone
Socialist	Sp.a	PS
Christian-democrat	CD&V	cdH
Liberal	Open VLD	MR
Green	Groen!	Ecolo
Nationalist / Regionalist	N-VA	FDF
Far right Nationalist	VB	MLD
Right wing Liberal	LDD	

In all, 243 members of parliament¹ (49.8%) completed our questionnaire (Table 1). From an international perspective, that is a high level of participation for this kind of parliamentary research. However, if one looks at the degree to which the different political parties participated, there are some notable differences which have to be taken into account when analysing the results, even though in absolute terms (N) the number of replies were sufficient to achieve ‘critical mass’. We should also add that the results of the very small parties (LDD, MLD and the independents) are included in the tables and graphs but not discussed.

Table 1: Respondents by party.

In absolute numbers (N) and in percentages (%).

Parties	N	Members of Parliament	%
MLD	1	1	100
Ecolo	33	41	80,5
Groen!	10	15	66,7
Open VLD	29	44	65,9
cdH	22	35	62,9
Sp.a	21	41	51,2
MR	28	55	50,9
Independent	1	3	33,3
N-VA	26	56	46,4
FDF	5	11	45,5
VB	14	36	38,9
PS	31	85	36,5
CD&V	20	56	35,7
LDD	2	8	25,0
UF	0	1	0,0
Total	243	488	49,8

THE NEW ARCHITECTURE OF THE BELGIAN STATE

One of the most important sources of contention during the negotiations was the extent of constitutional reform, in particular in finding a balance between conflicting views on greater regional autonomy and the retention of a powerful federal government (Popelier, Sinardet et al. 2012; Deschouwer & Reuchamps, 2013). We therefore asked the MPs to place themselves on a scale of 0 to 10, in which 0 meant that all authority should be exercised by the regions and communities and 10 meant that all authority should be transferred to the federal state. 5 represented explicit support for the status quo (i.e. the situation before the sixth constitutional reform). The respondents could only enter one value.

On the basis of the prevailing political and media-driven discourse, one would expect the responses to this question, which lies at the heart of the Belgian crisis, to reflect a sharp division between French-speaking and Dutch-speaking MPs. But nothing could be further from the truth. If we take the averages, there is little difference between the Francophone and the Flemish parties. In other words, although it is frequently claimed that the Flemish are unanimous in demanding a transfer of power to the regions and communities and that the Francophones are equally unanimous in opposing it, Table 2 (above) shows that the average scores of some Francophone parties are more in favour of dividing up political power than some Flemish parties. The MR and Open VLD, the Francophone and Flemish

liberal parties, chalked up the same average of 3.93, while the Flemish socialist (Sp.a) and green (Groen!) parties scored higher with averages of 4.38 and 4.9 respectively. Ultimately the figures primarily reveal how divided the Flemish MPs are. Of all the parties the Greens and the far right, nationalist Vlaams Belang were the furthest apart. However, in general the averages do not diverge very greatly. The average for all the political parties was less than 5, which meant that they were all in favour of greater regional autonomy but often only to a modest degree. Considering that this question was posed before the sixth constitutional reform was agreed and which it was claimed was absolutely necessary for the survival of the state, it is quite surprising that many MPs, and Flemish MPs in particular, opted for something that was not very different from the status quo.

Table 2: The MPs' views on the distribution of competences (average per party).

With averages, n=237

Parties	Averages
Groen!	4,90
PS	4,83
FDF	4,60
Sp.a	4,38
cdH	4,29
Ecolo	4,23
LDD	4,00
Open VLD	3,93
MR	3,93
MLD	3,00
CD&V	3,00
N-VA	0,42
VB	0,00

Key: 0 = All authority should be exercised by the regions and communities; 10 = All authority should be exercised by the federal government; 5 = You are satisfied with the current situation.

When we look at the details, we can distinguish a group of seven parties whose averages differ by less than one point. More specifically, with averages ranging from 3.93 to 4.9, they are Groen!, Ecolo, PS, Sp.a, FDF, LDD, Open VLD and MR, cdH (Table 2). A second group made of the Flemish nationalist N-VA and far right VB hover around 0 on the 0 to 10 scale, with 0.42 and 0 respectively. Finally, the Flemish Christian democrat CD&V is the only party between the two groups. Its average of 3 is significantly lower than the first group and significantly higher than the nationalist parties. Our research therefore confirms the strongly-held views of the N-VA and VB on the institutional development of Belgium whereby they opt for a model in which virtually all authority rests with the regions and communities; the Belgian state needs not formally disappear but it would be no more than a hollow – empty – shell. The dividing line appears primarily to run between the nationalist and separatist parties on the one hand and the remaining parties on the other hand. Yet our research also confirms the conspicuous position of the Flemish Christian Democrats in respect of the regionalising of political power. With an average of 3 it is half way to a scenario in which power is exercised exclusively by the regions. However, again we must bear in mind that the value of 5 refers to the situation before the sixth constitutional reform.

It is also important to remember that so far we have grouped the responses of individual MPs by party. However, if we consider them individually we see not only differences between parties but also within parties. And these differences are sometimes quite significant even though they are often invisible in political debates and in the media. Moreover, they are more pronounced in some

parties than in others. To start with, in Table 3 we can see that none of the MPs gave a score higher than 8. This means that none of them opted to return to a unitary or very strongly centralised state. Furthermore, even the value of 8 was entered by very few: the French Socialists scored the most with 10% of their MPs choosing 8, followed by the French Christian Democrats and the Flemish Socialists at 5%. Nevertheless, that does not mean that a majority of MPs reject any form of re-federalisation. Quite the contrary. The value of six can be viewed as opting for some degree of re-federalisation and if we count up the values between 6 and 8 it is clear that it enjoys considerable support among MPs. On the francophone side, 40% of the Brussels FDF positioned themselves between 6 and 8, 30.9% of the Socialists, 16.1% of the green Ecolo, 9.6% of the Christian democrat cdH and 7.4% of the liberal MR. However, on the Flemish side some of the percentages are even higher: 50% of the Greens, 30.9% of the Liberals and 19.1% of the Socialists. These figures too run counter to prevailing perceptions and they also reveal a sharp divide between these parties and the Christian Democrats and Nationalists.

Table 3: The MPs' views on the distribution of competences.

In percentages (%), n=237

		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Total
Flemish parties	CD&V	0,0	5,0	30,0	30,0	30,0	5,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	100
	Groen!	0,0	0,0	0,0	30,0	10,0	10,0	40,0	10,0	0,0	100
	N-VA	69,2	23,1	3,8	3,8	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	100
	Open VLD	6,9	6,9	10,3	27,6	13,8	3,4	10,3	17,2	3,4	100
	Sp.a	0,0	0,0	0,0	38,1	19,0	23,8	9,5	4,8	4,8	100
	VB	100	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	100
Francophone parties	cdH	0,0	4,8	4,8	9,5	38,1	33,3	4,8	0,0	4,8	100
	Ecolo	0,0	0,0	3,2	32,3	29,0	19,4	9,7	3,2	3,2	100
	FDF	0,0	0,0	0,0	40,0	20,0	0,0	20,0	20,0	0,0	100
	MR	0,0	0,0	11,1	33,3	25,9	22,2	0,0	3,7	3,7	100
	PS	3,4	0,0	0,0	20,7	27,6	17,2	3,4	17,2	10,3	100

Key: 0 = All competences should be exercised by the regions and local authorities; 10 = All competences should be handed over to the federal state; 5 = You are satisfied with the current situation.

Not a single MP from the CD&V, N-VA and VB entered a score higher than 5. In accordance with the official party line, every VB member and 69.2% of N-VA members wanted all powers to be exercised by the regions and the communities (value 0). For the N-VA the percentage rises to 92.3% if we combine the values of 0 and 1. None of the CD&V were entirely wedded to re-federalisation and 95% opted for more regional autonomy. 90% of them picked 2,3 or 4 on our scale which reflects some uncertainty about the degree of desirable regionalisation in contrast to the position before the sixth constitutional reform.

The other parties, both Flemish and Walloon, tended to support some shift of the political centre of gravity towards the regions and communities. However, what separates them from their colleagues in the N-VA, VB and CD&V is that they opt for only a slight shift. If we combine the values 0 to 2, which boil down to high degree of regionalisation, these parties retain their low percentages except for the liberal Open VLD which scores 24.1%. However, they are also the most divided over the question,

showing that 30.9% of them are in favour of re-federalising powers. The percentages for the other parties for the combined values of 0 to 2 are Ecolo 3.2%, 9.6% for cdH, 11.1% for MR, 3.4 % for the PS and 0% for FDF, Groen! and Sp.a.

In other words, except for the N-VA and VB, many MPs support a limited degree (3 and 4) of further regionalisation. In a context where for years politicians have hammered on about constitutional reform in which greater regional autonomy is the first political priority, initially in Flanders but then increasingly in Wallonia, it is surprising to see how many MPs do not support such constitutional reform and often even support changes that would move in the opposite direction. In fact if one counts up the values of 5 and above, or the responses of MPs who do not want any change in the direction of greater regional autonomy, one reaches some fairly high percentages even among the Flemish parties: Groen! 60%, Sp.a 42.9% and Open VLD 34.5%. These percentages are very similar to those of the Francophone parties: PS 48.3%, cdH 42.0%, Ecolo 35.2%, FDF 40% and MR 29.2%.

We also asked our MPs about 12 specific powers and whether they would best be situated at the regional or the federal level or both. More specifically, they were unemployment benefit, child benefit, overseas development, justice, labour market, noise control, science policy, pensions, overseas trade, defence, road safety and public health. The results confirm the above observation that there is no confrontation between homogeneous Flemish and Francophone points of view, and that the parties themselves are not monolithic blocs. The answers to the 12 questions also show that the division separating left and right is as important as the division between the language communities in determining the MPs' responses (for further details see Reuchamps *et al.*, 2012.)

There was a similar range of responses to the question of the architecture of federalism in Belgium, in particular whether we should continue with the present system with two types of constituency (regions and communities) or move toward a system based on four regions. On that issue there was no consensus within the language groups and very little within the parties themselves.

THE MPs' SENSE OF IDENTITY

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We not only sounded out the MPs' position in the institutional debate, but also their 'ethno-territorial' sense of identity. In concrete terms, we asked the Moreno question which is often used to probe such attitudes (in the Belgian case, 'Do you think of yourself as primarily Flemish/Francophone or Belgian?'). The problem with that question in the Belgian context is that it only allows the respondents one type of regional identity. For example, it was not possible to enquire about a Flemish and Brussels identity at the same time (a Brussels identity was sounded out in another question and is discussed elsewhere). That is why we only put the question of a Flemish or Francophone identity to the Flemish and Francophone MPs.

It is no surprise that most of the MPs who consider themselves to be 'Only Flemish' belong to the Flemish nationalist parties (all of the VB and 79.3% of the N-VA). What is fairly surprising, however, is that a significant minority of the N-VA MPs (26.1%) stated that though they saw themselves as primarily Flemish, they also felt Belgian. Similarly the FDF MPs identified themselves more strongly with a Francophone identity than the other Francophone parties. Most MPs in the other parties have a mixed sense of identity and see themselves as both Flemish/Francophone and Belgian: PS (79.2%), Groen (70%), Ecolo (69.2%), Open VLD (60%). The MPs of CD&V, Sp.a, MR en cdH also have mixed identities but one outweighs the other: in the case of Sp.a MPs, MR MPs and cdH MPs there is a marked sense of being Belgian whereas the CD&V MPs have a pronounced Flemish identity. On the Flemish side, it is the Sp.a MPs who stand out. Almost half of them feel primarily Belgian and only 5% as primarily Flemish. If we combine the 'Belgian' categories (Only Belgian and More Belgian than Flemish/Francophone) the sp.a MPs score more highly than all the other Flemish or Francophone parties.

Table 4: Sense of identity among MPs (the Moreno question).

In percentages (%), n=200

		Only Belgian	Belgian >Region	Belgian = region	Region > Belgian	Only Region	Total
Flemish parties	CD&V	0,0	5,3	47,4	47,4	0,0	100
	Groen!	0,0	20,0	70,0	10,0	0,0	100
	N-VA	0,0	0,0	0,0	26,1	73,9	100
	Open VLD	0,0	12,0	60,0	24,0	4,0	100
	Sp.a	0,0	47,1	47,1	5,9	0,0	100
	VB	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	100	100
Francophone parties	cdH	6,3	31,3	50,0	12,5	0,0	100
	Ecolo	7,7	19,2	69,2	3,8	0,0	100
	FDF	0,0	0,0	25,0	75,0	0,0	100
	MR	9,1	27,3	45,5	18,2	0,0	100
	PS	4,2	8,3	79,2	8,3	0,0	100

In sum, we can state that with the exception of the most nationalist MPs, there is an overlapping sense of identity (both regional and national). These results correspond to the results of earlier investigations into the whole population's sense of identity: an exclusively regional sense of identity, both in Flanders and Wallonia, was rare; in general, the sense of identity was mixed (De Winter 2007; Deschouwer & Sinardet 2010). This is not the picture painted by politicians and media which suggests that Flemish and Belgian identities are in opposition and mutually exclusive. Apart from that, we see that those who feel more Flemish or Francophone are those who support more regional autonomy. Those two variables are closely connected on both sides of the language boundary and is also reflected in the population as a whole, though to a lesser extent.

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In conclusion, there does not appear to be a discernible division in the sense of identity of Flemish and Francophone MPs. The traditional picture of Flemings who only feel Flemish in opposition to Francophones who only feel Belgian is only partially true. It is true that some Francophone MPs identify themselves exclusively with Belgium, but if one combines that category with 'more Belgian than Flemish' then it is the Sp.a MPs who score the highest.

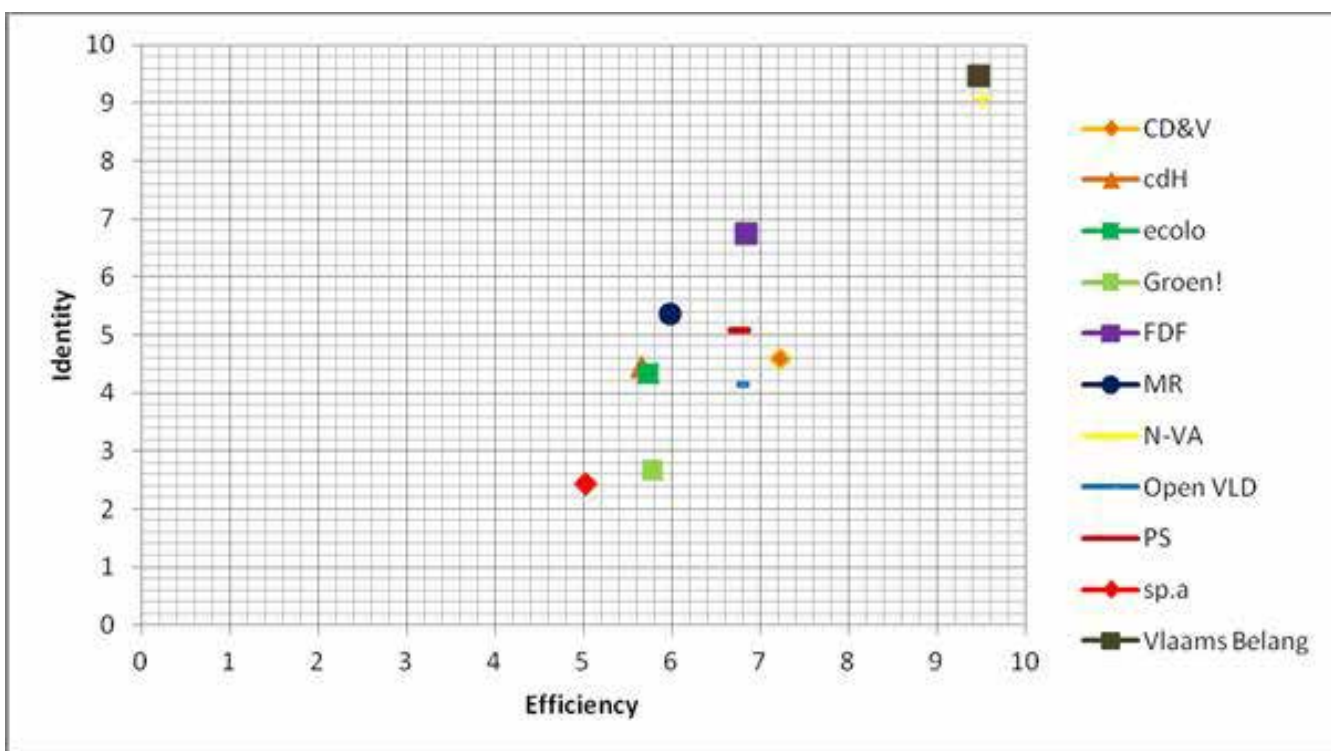
EXPLAINING THE DIFFERENCES: MOTIVES FOR THE SIXTH STATE REFORM

We have seen that the language difference is not the most important factor in explaining the standpoints of MPs in the debate on state reform. But what about the arguments used to support such reform? We can distinguish two important motives: identity and efficiency. Greater autonomy for the regions and communities can, on the one hand, be justified by the idea that a region - or even a nation - should have more autonomy because it possesses a specific identity and culture. That is a view which clearly links up with the definition of nationalism as formulated by Gellner (1983). According to that definition, Nationalists pursue a goal where nation and state coincide. On the other hand, there are more pragmatic arguments in defence of constitutional reform: the structure of the Belgian state must become more efficient. Good governance then becomes the most important motive. Obviously neither argument, identity or efficiency, excludes the other.

Therefore we attempted to apprehend through our questionnaire which argument was used most frequently by the members of parliament. For the first one - identity - we took the average of four questions, while efficiency was based on the average of five other questions. For each question the respondents were asked to select an answer ranging from 0, 'absolutely disagree', to 10, 'absolutely agree'; 5 explicitly reflected a neutral standpoint.

Unsurprisingly, the nationalist MPs were most strongly in favour of constitutional reform for reasons of identity (Figure 1). Nevertheless, it is striking that the FDF representatives (with an average of 6.75) scored less than the N-VA (9.06) and the VB (9.46). This may possibly be explained by the fact that for a long time, the FDF has historically framed its position in the form of a reaction to Flemish developments, whereas the N-VA and VB have been more proactive in their campaign for Flemish autonomy. Equally striking is that the VB and N-VA in this respect are very close to each other with an exceptionally strong emphasis on identity. Sp.a and Groen! on the other hand are the two parties that clearly reject identity as a reason for reform.

Figure 1: State reform for reasons of identity or efficiency: the positions of the MPs per political party.



All the other parties adopt a relatively neutral standpoint (around 5); the lowest figure being 4.33 for Ecolo and the highest being 5.37 for the MR. That means that the MPs of the CD&V consistently adopt a neutral standpoint (4.57) and cautiously reject reform for reasons of identity. In summary, with the exception of the nationalist parties, there are no political parties who consistently support constitutional reform with arguments of identity. So here too there is an absence of difference between the communities that we might have expected: many Flemish and Francophone parties were in close agreement. More strikingly, the only parties that explicitly reject the argument of identity are two Flemish parties, Sp.a and Groen!

One might expect that support for the efficiency argument would be the reverse of identity. Yet here too it is striking that VB and N-VA score much more highly than the other parties, while the Flemish Socialists had the lowest average with 5.28. With averages around 6, the Flemish greens and the Francophone parties (with the exception of the Socialists) position themselves slightly higher than

the Flemish Socialists with averages ranging from 5.77 to 6.22. Support for constitutional reform for reasons of efficiency is found most clearly from the PS, Open VLD and CD&V with 6.82, 6.98 and 7.49 respectively.

HOW DO MPs EXPLAIN THE POLITICAL CRISIS?

How do the MPs view the difficulties that the party leaders had in reaching agreement on the sixth constitutional reform? In order to find an answer to that question, we gave them 16 statements on possible reasons for the crisis and asked them to rate their reactions on a scale of 0 to 10. The results are set out in the form of average by party.

To start with, many blamed the crisis on ‘fundamental differences of opinion between Francophone and Flemish politicians’. That was about the only conclusion on which all the respondents were largely able to agree. That is fairly paradoxical if we remember the results above that showed differences of opinion between Flemish and Francophone politicians are in practice not particularly great. For the body of MPs as a whole, this reason scored above 7 with the exception, yet again, of Flemish Socialists and greens. Their averages of 6 and 5.4 respectively reflect a more neutral standpoint. And also once again the averages of the traditional parties were all very similar (between 7.04 and 7.76) while the nationalist parties were considerably higher: 8.4 for the FDF, 8.6 for the VB and 9.7 for the N-VA.

Furthermore, the blame was often placed on the parties of the other language community. Many Flemish members point the finger at their Francophone colleagues accusing them of ‘immobility’, ‘fearfulness’ and ‘reluctance’ to find a compromise. The same applies in reverse. With the exception of the Sp.a which scores a fairly low average on these assertions (between 4.2 and 5.9), all the other parties scored 7 or higher. Again it is the Nationalists, the N-VA, VB and FDF, who average the highest at around 9.0.

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However, it is striking that ‘the reluctance of some Flemish parties to compromise’ also scored highly among Flemish MPs whereas ‘the reluctance of some francophone parties to compromise’ was less widely supported among the Francophone MPs. While on the Francophone side only the MR and Ecolo were cautiously critical of their own community, on the Flemish side there was a greater readiness to criticise their own community by the Open VLD (6.3), CD&V (6.5), Sp.a (7.8) and the greens (7.8). Only the representatives of N-VA and VB strongly rejected that explanation with averages of 1.4 and 0.7. That is not particularly surprising since they argue that it is not the lack of political will to reach agreement but fundamental differences of opinion between north and south that have led to the clash. Conversely it is not surprising that Sp.a and Groen! are most willing to criticise the irreconcilable attitude of ‘some Flemish parties’ during the negotiations since they are the least sympathetic to the belief that fundamental differences of opinion lie at the heart of the crisis.

Quite surprising is that, with the exception of the Flemish nationalist parties, the MPs of all parties to a greater or lesser degree share the opinion that the political crisis is due to the ‘exaggerated expectations surrounding constitutional reform as the solution to every problem’ even though some of those parties openly shared or failed to denounce such exaggerated expectations. The highest averages were again to be found in Groen! (8.33) and Sp.a (7.45), but also Open VLD (7.35) and CD&V (7.0).

RELATIONS BETWEEN THE COMMUNITIES IN BELGIUM

We also asked the MPs about their contacts with the other community, including journalists and the public as well as political colleagues. This is important in light of Belgium being a ‘consensus

democracy'. One of the important elements of such political systems is, after all, a sharp division between social groups (in the past this particularly involved the religious and socio/political 'pillars') in which the elites who represent these groups have the important role of pacifying conflicts and reaching a 'Belgian compromise' (Sinardet 2010; Perrez & Reuchamps 2012). It is also interesting to see that the majority of MPs - with the exception of N-VA and VB - believed that the crisis can be explained by a 'failure of communication between Francophones and Flemings'. Although the PS (5.5) and Open VLD (6.4) averaged slightly lower, the Sp.a, MR, cdH and Ecolo scored between 6.9 and 7.2 while Groen! averaged 8.0. We shall consider in succession the contacts between MPs, with the media and with the public.

A. Contacts between Members of Parliament

First of all we must remember that these results relate to both federal and regional Members of Parliament. The figures might therefore be affected by the fact the regional MPs probably have less regular contact with their colleagues from the other community. Nevertheless, we should not attach too much importance to this methodological caveat since in both Flanders and Wallonia many MPs regularly move between the regional and federal levels.

An overwhelming majority of the MPs agree that it is important to 'maintain close contact with members of the same political family in the other community'. With the exception of N-VA, VB and FDF, for whom it was obviously a redundant question, and a fairly low score of 58% for cdH, the score of MPs who 'agree' and 'completely agree' with the statement swings between 84% for Open VLD and 100% for the Greens. That last score is no surprise considering that Groen! and Ecolo operate as a single political group in the Federal parliament (Ecolo came second with 92.6%).

It is therefore also interesting to investigate how important MPs thought it was to keep contact with members of other parties on the other side of the language border. In that respect, it is clear that the links between members of the same political family are stronger in spite of the ideological differences of opinion that can and do arise. There were far fewer positive responses to maintaining contacts with other political parties, with averages falling to 15.8% (CD&V) and 20% (Sp.a). More surprising perhaps is that although the MPs from Groen! thought it important, they did not give it the highest priority. There were more 'agree' than 'completely agree'.

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B. Contacts with the media

Our research shows that there is fairly little contact with the media across the language border. This stands out clearly in Table 5 in which the MPs report on their contacts with the media of both communities during the past six months. The differences are conspicuous: the MPs have contact with their own media between two and five times more frequently than with the media of the other community. These results correspond to the findings of another research project into the actual content of the media, which showed that news broadcasts, both north and south of the language border, do not often feature politicians from the other side. This weakens any sense of genuinely federal public life (Sinardet, 2012). However, the differences have a greater impact on some parties than on others. For instance, not a single VB MP appeared in the French-speaking media whereas the majority of them did appear in the Dutch-speaking media during the same period.

Nevertheless, the elected members do not appear to be satisfied with this situation since a large majority of them consider that 'federal MPs and ministers should make more effort to appear in the media of the other community'. With the exception of N-VA who were cautious (54.2%) and VB who were strongly against (72.7%) the MPs of all the other parties largely agree or 'agree completely' with the statement.

Table 5: Appearance of MPs in the audiovisual media and the printed press.

In absolute figures, n=210

Parties	The other community's media					Their own community's media				
	0	1	2-3	4-5	+6	0	1	2-3	4-5	+6
cdH	2	6	7	1	1	0	0	3	1	13
CD&V	3	4	10	1	1	1	0	1	6	11
Ecolo	17	3	5	2	0	2	3	5	6	11
FDF	1	2	1	1	0	1	0	0	3	1
Groen!	0	4	2	2	2	0	1	1	3	5
LDD	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
MLD	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
MR	8	3	3	8	2	0	0	0	2	22
N-VA	11	2	9	0	2	0	0	9	3	12
O VLD	11	1	7	1	5	1	2	5	3	14
PS	16	2	2	1	4	3	2	4	3	13
Sp.a	8	2	4	1	5	0	0	1	7	11
VB	11	0	0	0	0	2	2	3	1	3

C. Contacts between electors and elected

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A third aspect is the relationship with voters on the other side of the language boundary.

Because political parties in Belgium are divided along language lines and electoral districts do not cross the language boundary, political parties and their candidates only take account of a section of the Belgian electorate and primarily the voters of their own linguistic community.

What is the perception of the elected members? We make a distinction between the answers to questions relating to the electoral dynamic (the existence of two political areas in which the electoral battle takes place) and to questions about the role of the elected representatives (e.g. defending the interests of one community or of the country as a whole).

As of the former, a very large majority of the MPs find it problematic that 'federal election debates are in fact discussions within a community between politicians of the same language group' (Table 7). Only a significant minority (CD&V, 47.4%; Sp.a, 40%; N-VA, 37.5% and VB, 27.3%) denied that it was problematic. More than 70% in the other parties said that it was a problem. The others differed on the question whether it was so problematic that the country should be divided up. Not exactly surprising is that the only significant percentages were scored by the nationalist parties, VB (72.7), N-VA (41.7) and FDF (20). All in all, however, these are still fairly low scores for parties like N-VA and certainly VB. An important section of them did not see the federal organisation as a problem and certainly no good reason to break up the country.

Bearing in mind the results of Table 7, it is not surprising - in Table 8 - that very many MPs are also of the opinion that 'a federal minister or MP should primarily consider the interests of the whole country and not only the interests of his or her community', even if it is *not* currently the case (Column B). At least 75% of the representatives of Groen!, Ecolo, cdH, PS and Sp.a agree with that proposition (in descending order). Six parties scored somewhat lower percentages with on the one hand CD&V (63.2%, Open VLD (64%) and FDF (60%) and on the other hand, MR (70%), N-VA (45.8%), and VB (0%). In the first group a significant minority agreed with the proposition but believe that it already

Table 6: Appearance in the other community's media.

In percentages (%), n=210

Parties	Completely Agree	Completely Disagree	Irrelevant
cdH	88,2	11,8	0,0
CD&V	78,9	21,1	0,0
Ecolo	92,6	3,7	3,7
FDF	80,0	20,0	0,0
Groen!	90,0	10,0	0,0
LDD	100	0,0	0,0
MLD	100	0,0	0,0
MR	100	0,0	0,0
N-VA	54,2	25,0	20,8
O VLD	84,0	12,0	4,0
PS	92,0	4,0	4,0
Sp.a	90,0	10,0	0,0
VB	9,1	72,7	18,2

Table 7: Inter-community political responsibility.

In percentages (%), n=210

Parties	Do not agree	Agree, but not a problem	Agree and problematic	Problematic and division
cdH	11,8	5,9	82,4	0,00
CD&V	5,3	47,4	47,4	0,00
Ecolo	3,7	0,0	96,3	0,00
FDF	20,0	0,0	60,0	20,0
Groen!	0,0	10,0	90,0	0,00
LDD	0,0	100	0,0	0,0
MLD	0,0	0,0	100	0,0
MR	4,2	4,2	91,7	0,00
N-VA	0,0	37,5	20,8	41,7
O VLD	4,0	16,0	76,0	4,00
PS	8,0	20,0	72,0	0,00
Sp.a	0,0	40,0	60,0	0,00
VB	0,0	27,3	0,0	72,7

Table 8: The link between electors and elected in their own/the other community.

In percentages (5), n=210

Parties	A	B	C	D
cdH	11,8	82,4	5,9	0,0
CD&V	26,3	63,2	10,5	0,0
Ecolo	7,4	92,6	0,0	0,0
FDF	40,0	60,0	0,0	0,0
Groen!	0,0	100	0,0	0,0
LDD	0,0	100	0,0	0,0
MLD	0,0	100	0,0	0,0
MR	8,3	70,8	12,5	8,3
N-VA	8,3	45,8	20,8	25,0
O VLD	24,0	64,0	0,0	12,0
PS	16,0	80,0	4,0	0,0
Sp.a	20,0	75,0	0,0	5,0
VB	0,0	0,0	63,6	36,4

Key: A = Agree but it already happens; B = Agree, but it does not happen; C = Do not agree; one should put the interests of one's own community first; D = Do not agree; one should put the interests of one's electors first.

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happens. A number of MPs from the MR and N-VA, in the second group, go along with that but they are in a small minority (8.3% in both cases), particularly as a significant number of their colleagues believe that their primary concern should be for the interests of their community (column C) or their electors (column D). That is certainly the case with the VB members who were all of that opinion.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, mainstream media reporting as well as the dominant political discourse in Belgium have often given the impression that the conflict over institutional reform is being fought between two homogeneous blocs, the Flemish and the Francophones, with clear-cut and well-defined points of view. Even though there is sometimes talk of strategic differences of opinion or conflicts between parties in the same language group, the idea has taken hold that on either side of the language boundary everyone is in agreement on the heart of the matter: the Flemish want as much autonomy as possible while the Francophones remain devoted to Belgium.

Our research has shown that, as far as the MPs are concerned, this perception is far from the truth. Within the two main language groups, differences of opinion are sometimes very great, particularly on the Flemish side. The greatest difference of opinion in respect of the distribution of power between the federal level and the federated entities is between two Flemish parties, Groen! and VB. Consequently, we also see that some Francophone parties are in favour of a greater degree of regional autonomy than some of their Flemish colleagues. The MR MP's, for instance are as autonomist as those of Open VLD and more so than those of Sp.a and Groen. Also the sense of identity and the perception of community relations shows no clear division between the Flemish and Francophones. On many levels, it is the nationalist parties who clearly stand apart from the rest.

There is another dominant perception that needs to be modified in the light of our research, namely the internal homogeneity of political parties. In Belgium strong party discipline is exerted especially when it comes to parliamentary voting. However, that does not mean that points of view within the parties cannot differ. We have observed this on institutional questions, though that could have to do with the fact they are not the core concern of the non-nationalist parties. The most striking example is the Open VLD in which a quarter of its members support a high degree of regional autonomy while nearly a third of them would prefer to see an expansion of federal powers.

These results can also be read as an incentive for political analysts and commentators to take greater account of the nuances and differences of opinion within the language groups and within the political parties.

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Translation: Chris Emery

Endnote

1/ 12 of the 25 German-speaking MPs also filled in the questionnaire but their responses have not been incorporated into this article.

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Flemish Nationalists (N-VA) Versus the Rest and... Themselves

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The elections of 25 May 2014 have for some years, and certainly since the start of the current Di Rupo I administration in December 2011, been regarded as critical. On that day, membership of the Flemish Parliament, the Federal Chamber and the European Parliament will be decided. In this article we shall consider how the ideological changes in the Flemish party system in 2013 came about and where the Flemish political parties stand at the start of the 2014 campaign.

THE MOTHER OF ALL ELECTIONS

84 The elections in 2014 will be held at every level above the province, and involve many parties, many candidates, many issues and much hard work. And from 2014 even the federal elections will be held every five years so that in theory after 2014 these elections will always coincide. How it will actually turn out in practice remains to be seen. It is dealt with in a complicated section of Belgium's sixth constitutional reform, the so-called 'bow tie agreement' [*Vlinderakkoord*]. But it is highly likely that the next simultaneous elections will take place in 2019. Five years is a long time in politics and the balance of power established in May 2014 at the regional and federal levels will remain in place for quite a long period. It is a period in which all kinds of reforms have been promised, partly because a long break between elections is the best time to push through reform. So it makes a world of difference whether a party is involved in the action or not. Nobody can predict what the political world of 2019 will be like. The question, therefore, is whether the turbulent period which began in 2007 will be brought to a close in 2014 or still continue.

FLEMISH NATIONALISTS (N-VA) VERSUS THE REST...

That is one reason why the 2014 elections are of the greatest importance for all parties, including the traditional parties in Flanders: CD&V (Christian Democrats), Open VLD (Liberals) and Sp.a (Social Democrats). For many years now they have been in decline. Their electoral share in 2010 fell below the symbolic 50% of the Flemish community. If they sink any further and are unable to turn the tide, not only their electoral share but also their role in government will be further eroded. So next year even the traditional parties will have to be on their toes.

That is why in the last few months they have all been giving their ideologies a thorough overhaul. The traditional parties are now widely perceived as virtually interchangeable. It was undeniably the success of the Flemish nationalist N-VA, which does seem to offer a clear alternative, which was the catalyst for their urge to reprofile themselves. The aim of the traditional parties is to improve on their 2010 performance by presenting a face, a profile, that is clearly their own and which

distinguishes them from the others. Working together in a tripartite coalition, they want to offer a fresh and meaningful alternative. All three are acting on the same basic principle: they are not interested in 'demolition politics'; they oppose revolutionary change because they believe it only leads to uncertainty; and their proposals though not spectacular will offer a solution to the country's problems. This common approach will then be given a particular ideological twist according to taste, and topped up with specifically liberal, social democratic or Christian democratic proposals designed to provide acceptable answers to the many uncertainties faced by today's voters.

Notwithstanding that some would prefer not to mention the N-VA at all in the run-up to 2014 there is no doubt that it will dictate at least part of the campaign. In the present political context it would be extremely difficult to organise a blanket of silence around the Flemish Nationalists. On the right, the Open VLD Liberals and the far-right Vlaams Belang need to win back supporters who broke away to the N-VA, and in the centre the Christian Democrats must do the same. As for the left, the N-VA is the incarnation of neoliberalism against which they have always fought. The Social democratic Sp.a has traditionally won most votes on the left of the ideological spectrum, but even they have not been safe from the magnet of the N-VA which has attracted voters who are angry or disillusioned by the whole traditional system of 'Dexia parties'. Furthermore, the Sp.a also has to face a revived Green party, which is becoming increasingly left-wing in its social policies, as well as a radical left represented by the far-left Labour Party (PVDA). But the N-VA will play an important role during this 'mother of all elections' even if the campaign does not directly revolve around it. Of course, the traditional parties are themselves partly to blame for this by relying on their status in government and allowing the N-VA too much of a free run before finally launching their counteroffensive.

... AND AGAINST THEMSELVES

Nevertheless, the greatest challenge to the N-VA will be itself. It will have to make sure that its message remains focused and that it avoids a 'losing victory'. To do that, it is going to have to make some difficult ideological and strategic decisions. The battle is far from over. The crucial issue is whether the voters can be persuaded that things will be better and more efficient with the N-VA. Dislike of the traditional parties will not give it a solid enough victory. N-VA will have to show voters that a 'force of change' exists and that it can work. It is a difficult balancing act. It has to propose changes that set it apart from the other parties, but which are not so radical that they frighten voters away.

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IDEOLOGICAL PURITY

Since 2010, the traditional parties have been eclipsed by the N-VA electorally and in their publicity, although they do seem to have recovered a little ground during the 2012-2013 season. A common explanation for this state of affairs is that they no longer project a clear message. *'That we can speak of CD&V, Open VLD and Sp.a in a single breath is (...) symptomatic. For is it not the interchangeability of the traditional parties, their amorphous ideologies, their coalescence in power that lies at the heart of the problem? What distinguishes the Open VLD precisely from the other two? That they shout more loudly about company cars? And how exactly does the Sp.a offer a clear left-wing alternative to the current approach to the eurocrisis? It doesn't ... Instead of responding to the needs of the Flemish voter (...) they just serve up more of the same.'* These words of Wouter Verschelden, former editor of newspaper *De Morgen*, vividly express a widely-held perception of the traditional parties (12 March 2012).

These criticisms are not new and have spurred the party chairmen on to sharpen up their party profiles and distinguish themselves more clearly from one another. The democratic function of this exercise is open to different interpretations. On the one hand, one might expect political parties to

offer people a clear choice of alternative policies. In that way voters can play their role to the full. For if the parties all say the same thing, voters have no real opportunity to choose or influence policy. On the other hand, radical or ideologically-inspired proposals can cause instability by making it difficult to form coalitions, or lead to disillusionment with politics because 'clear' proposals are subsequently smothered in a 'grey' coalition compromise.

This insoluble dilemma is primarily subjective and normative. A more 'objective' approach is to consider the strategic importance of more clearly-defined party differences at election times. Rabinowitz *et al.* (1991) argue that parties increase their electoral chances if they are slightly more extreme than their competitors but do not overstep the mark of what is acceptable. N-VA is the incarnation of this principle: chauvinist without actually mentioning separatism; just respectable enough on immigration to avoid being completely sidelined like the far-right Vlaams Belang, and socio-economically just that bit more aggressive than the Liberals without demanding the right to secede. In the hunt for electoral success, policy makers try to create areas of tension and distance themselves from other parties. Voters seem to like clarity and prefer straight talking to an amorphous message. Their main source of information about politics is the media which always likes to polarise issues, preferring a sharp riposte or a memorable quote that puts an opponent down.

THE BATTLE FOR HEARTS AND MINDS

According to N-VA's chairman, Bart De Wever, his party has been successful because it reflects the basic feelings of the Flemish people. If so, it implies that the majority of Flemish voters embrace centre-right values. They want a strict, but fair, system of immigration and justice and a government that is supportive of people who work, run businesses and save. A party that is able to build a credible right-wing programme around these values will, according to De Wever, win the elections (*Knack*, 19/12/2012).

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Post-electoral research after the elections of 2010 tends to confirm this view. The victorious N-VA was in the first instance a refuge for former supporters of its cartel with the Christian Democrats, followed by disillusioned former supporters of the far right Vlaams Belang and Open VLD (Swyngedouw *et al.* 2012: 15-16). These new N-VA voters were particularly attracted by the party's approach to constitutional reform, immigration, the economy, the budget and criminality (Abts *et al.* 2011: 6-7). In other words, by positioning itself between the Liberals and Christian Democrats on the one side and between the far-right Vlaams Belang and the small right-wing populist LDD on the other, the N-VA succeeded in drawing blood from the entire Flemish right.

The North Flank

The parties on either side of the N-VA - Christian Democrats (CD&V) and Liberals (Open VLD) on the north flank and Vlaams Belang (VB) and LDD to the south - are hoping that their refreshed ideological profiles will win back the voters. In particular, the chairman of Open VLD, Gwendolyn Rutten, in her book *De geëngageerde burger* [*The engaged citizen*], has thrown down the gauntlet to the Flemish Nationalists. Less sharply critical than the manifestos produced by former chairman and now MEP Guy Verhofstadt, but with similar classic liberal recipes, she competes for the favours of the centre-right electorate. The N-VA, after all, has now become the most credible player on the right of the socio-economic divide, a position which the Liberals had once monopolised. Now by arguing for slimmed-down government, lower taxes, deregulation, and the primacy of politics over interest groups, the Open VLD is hoping to take back ownership of the issues which the N-VA has stolen from it. In her book, Rutten also distances herself directly from De Wever and his ilk. She argues that the nationalist N-VA is not a genuinely liberal party because it always supports the first against the last. The Open VLD, with its positive message and in particular its rejection of confederalism, is now ready to take on the nationalists.

Avoiding the battleground of state reform, where the N-VA enjoys an advantage, is a strategy which

all the parties except for the far right Vlaams Belang (VB) have adopted. For them, a constitutional reform will not be an issue for 2014. The VB will try to show that the N-VA has lost credibility on that point because it does not dare to go for separatism but is pressing for the soft option of confederalism. The traditional parties and Green will emphasise the dangerously radical nature of the confederalist adventure. The battle over confederalism will not be waged with rational argument so much as with graphic imagery.

The strategy of Open VLD in the run-up to 2014 will be concerned with preventing its centre-right message from being drowned by the policies of the tripartite Di Rupo government. Considering the multi-coloured nature of the coalition this will not be straightforward. Indeed, every time the Liberals launch an offensive, it might be asked what more the party needs to push through these measures while it is in the federal government. Cynics might suggest that liberal reform will only be possible with a strong electoral support for the N-VA. And indeed there was a certain amount of background noise to Rutten's message about the linguistic problem. Even before its official release, her confession of faith in the Federal construction (instead of confederalism) was skilfully explained away by the pro-Flemish wing of her party, who wanted to go even further and remove some basic supports of the Federation such as parity in government, which would have required extremely radical constitutional changes.

Just before the municipal elections of October 2012 the chairman of the Christian Democrats, Wouter Beke, admitted that his party lacked a clear message. Operation 'Innesto' was then launched to stimulate an ideological rethinking. By clarifying its standpoints, the CD&V hoped to recapture its former position in the Flemish electoral marketplace and also win back voters from the N-VA. Without much humming and hawing and in the party's spirit of 'personalism', it launched proposals such as shorter summer holidays for schools and road pricing for private cars. But at times the CD&V seemed to be afraid of its own shadow, for at the slightest hint of protest it would temper or moderate the proposal concerned. The question therefore is how much further the party will go. In complete contrast to the CD&V of earlier years, there were no proposals relating to a seventh constitutional reform.

We have already remarked that avoiding any reference to a new state reform was a strategic decision based on a belief that electors would not consider the present crisis period as the right time to stir up linguistic problems or to enter another record-breaking delay in forming a government. In any case, the CD&V, together with its federal coalition partners (Open VLD and Sp.a), also believes in 'issue ownership' (Petrocik 1990; 1996). According to this golden rule, a party programme should avoid its opponents' pet themes because it only gives them greater credence within the electorate. In the campaign for 2014, the Christian Democrats would prefer to focus on socio-economic issues and its new image concentrates heavily on this. Meanwhile, it has again become apparent that the 'personalism' of CD&V - an ideology that sets the individual above the economy and opposes Socialism and Liberalism rather than standing between them - does not self-evidently lead to concrete proposals and is readily perceived as fence-sitting, or as an either-or approach. That is because, on the one hand, in the 'Innesto' texts there were proposals which seemed to be fairly right-wing. The CD&V repeatedly demanded less government, argued against permanent appointments for civil servants, and for helping businesses by a wage freeze and longer hours without extra pay. On the other hand, proposals in Beke's book *Het moedige midden* [*The Courageous Centre*], were drawn from centre-left. Beke said that he did not favour the right of the strongest and was prepared to veto handing health care over to the free market. He also argued strongly for the Rhineland model of a 'caring' free market, and for a strong civil society. The CD&V must take care that voters see coherence and internal consistency in its proposals and in particular that the basics should be clear and comprehensible. After all, many voters will not look much further than the basics.

The CD&V's balancing act is understandable. On the one hand, the party is targeting the centre right voters which it lost to the N-VA in 2010 (Abts *et al.* 2012: 6). In Kris Peeters, the Flemish Minister-President, it has the ideal leader for the task. As the popular ex-head of Unizo, an interest group that represents SMEs, he also has a highly credible centre-right profile. On the other hand, the party must not forget that its core support is actually centre-left (Abts *et al.* 2011: 5). Within the ACW, the

umbrella organisation of Christian trade union, it has been suggested at various times that its close connection with the CD&V has run its course and that it should perhaps look for a political party which was ideologically closer. But dropping their centre-left voters does not look like an attractive option, for it would probably leave the party entirely at the mercy of the volatile electoral market. CD&V therefore seems to be condemned to a balancing act between left and right. The question is whether pursuing this zigzag course will not obscure the clear kind of message that will win votes.

The South Flank

On the N-VA's south flank, the most interesting aspect is the profile of the extreme right-wing Vlaams Belang (VB) [Flemish Interest]. They too saw many of their supporters go over to the N-VA at the last federal elections (Swyngedouw *et al.* 2012: 18). There seem to be many voters who find the issues raised by the VB important (stricter control of immigration and crime), but believe that by voting for the N-VA there is a better chance of action. The VB has been condemned to perpetual opposition by the *cordon sanitaire* imposed by the main parties, so a vote for the VB is in effect a vote for opposition. However, there are signs that the issue of immigration is no longer particularly important to the electorate. The VB must therefore come up with some new messages. Also its role as the anti-system party has lost its impact since the N-VA started to attract large numbers of disillusioned voters by promising change from within the system, instead of endless protests outside the gates.

In Gerolf Annemans the VB has a new chairman who communicates less aggressively while still maintaining his party's principles. Its view towards the future of the Belgian state therefore remains resolutely separatist and the party hopes that this will attract Flemish Nationalist voters who are tired of the N-VA's lack of clarity on the issue. De Wever's party has opted for confederalism, even though it is unclear how this chimes with article 1 of the N-VA's statutes which commits it to pursue an independent republic of Flanders.

With that we have touched on the Achilles heel of the N-VA. But before considering it further, we shall first look at the Flemish left.

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WHO WILL BE LEADER OF THE LEFT RESISTANCE?

Whereas on the right-wing of the political spectrum the problem is how to win back voters from the N-VA, on the left, the Labour Party (PVDA), the Greens (Groen) and the Social Democrats (Sp.a) have to decide who will lead the left's campaign at the polls. In the course of the election battle, the title of 'progressive alternative to the N-VA' can win a large number of voters. The left will claim that the N-VA wants a coalition with the Liberals and Christian Democrats, as in Antwerp since 2012 under mayor (and N-VA chairman) Bart De Wever, and that those who want to prevent it must therefore cast their vote for the left. The press loves nothing better than a good duel, so the party that succeeds in stepping up as the antipode of the N-VA will have made a good start. Like the right, the left will use ideological renewal to shore up its dam against the N-VA with solid socio-economic input. In this they are to some extent on home territory even though it has been a long time since the left has succeeded in launching a credible counter-offensive against the right.

In this confrontation, large-scale themes have been introduced. One important feature of the debate with the right is the desirability, or otherwise, of the German model for Belgium. Admirers of the policies employed by our eastern neighbours are particularly impressed by the large trade surpluses, German competitiveness in the global economy and low unemployment. Their opponents highlight the flexible employment, the mini-jobs and the low wages; in short, the impoverishment of the workers. In the Sp.a's left-wing revision of its declaration of principle, '*The Flanders of Tomorrow*', it firmly opposes the German system. Instead of 'mini wages', it emphasizes the need for a respectable income and as many jobs as possible. More effort should go into such things as taxing capital gains,

combating fiscal fraud, and imposing a minimum level of taxation for large businesses. The income that this raises would go towards lowering income tax. This emphasis on a number of traditional social recipes makes *The Flanders of Tomorrow* read like a left-wing version of the Sp.a's usual message. However, this is probably essential because for the first time in many years it is being threatened on the left flank not only by the Greens but also by the Labour Party (PVDA), currently the darling of the Trade Unions. So a more left-wing image for the Sp.a in the present political constellation can only be an advantage since by moving to the edge, it can steal a march on the extreme left-wing Labour Party. Furthermore, the party need not fear any falling away to the right because there is a large void between them and the political centre. The chance of left-wing voters turning to the liberal Open VLD, as happened on occasion a decade ago (Bouteca 2011:1), is now most unlikely. Open VLD's more right-wing direction and a campaign that is likely to focus on socio-economic issues, will not be conducive to an exchange of voters between Liberals and Socialists.

At the moment, the most left-wing alternative to the right of the Sp.a is the Christian democratic party (CD&V). But for a variety of reasons, including their historic philosophical differences, the two parties are not exactly communicating vessels. So on the basis of its programme the Sp.a's prospects do not look at all bad. But it is not enough to look promising from the outside. Also internally, the ideological choices must create unity. Moreover, a party does not win elections with manifestos alone. And the party still has problems with its personnel policies.

On the basis of past election results, the leadership of the left is almost certain to fall to the Sp.a, unless a monumental shift occurs in the meantime. The Flemish Socialists still have ownership of more socio-economic issues than their closest rivals, the Greens. That party, chaired by Wouter Van Besien, is primarily known for its concern for the environment, political renewal and multicultural questions, though it has also been trying to move into socio-economic territory by emphasizing the green economy, and lately by playing on 'red' themes. If the election campaign focuses mainly on the socio-economic debate, the Greens will now have their own contribution via their 'Impulse Congress' of October 2013, which was an attempt to make their electoral profile sharper and more credible on the socio-economic front. Wouter Van Besien summarises the 'unique selling proposition' of the Greens as 'less pollution and more in the wage packet'. With that programme the ecologists are targeting the left wing of the Christian Democrats and those Social Democrats who are disillusioned by the Sp.a's involvement in such federal policies as the wage freeze and the cutting back of unemployment benefits. The question is whether this change of course by the Greens has not come too late. Perceptions of parties change extremely slowly.

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The question of which party will be the most credible opponent of the German model is naturally closely connected to the question of which politician will lead the attack. And therein lies the catch for the left-wing parties. Their standard message will automatically bring in about one fifth of the vote, but one needs charismatic politicians to drive the number of voters up further. Steve Stevaert, for example, was able to do this in 2003 as Sp.a chairman. But at the moment there is a lack of charisma on the left. Consequently, it could be that the contest in Flanders will boil down to a duel between the two titans, Bart De Wever for the Flemish Nationalists and Kris Peeters for the Christian Democrats. On the left there is no-one to match them.

N-VA IN A TANGLE

In spite of the fact that the N-VA is under assault from all sides, the greatest threat to the party is possibly not in that but rather in the doubts that may arise about precisely where the N-VA is going. In the next few months the party is going to have to answer to what extent its 'necessary socio-economic reforms' are, or are not, dependent on a 'necessary constitutional reform'.

For a long time the greatest strength of the N-VA has been its crystal-clear communication. The

party usually speaks without any hint of self-doubt, or at least it gives that impression. It does this very deliberately, breaking with the ambiguities of its People's Union [*Volksunie*] past. Nobody was able to say whether the People's Union was right wing or left wing despite many attempts to find out. Perhaps the N-VA still wrestles internally with this question, but it has been very successful in hiding it. It thereby makes a very consistent, straightforward impression. It sells itself as being unlike the other parties. It is less ready to compromise, it will remain more faithful to its programme, and in many kinds of reform it is prepared to go further than the traditional parties.

However, in recent months maintaining that ideological cool-headedness has not been so easy. It has to do with the contradiction that now threatens the party's message on the future of the Flemish community. According to its statutes the party has a separatist agenda, but it has opted for confederalism because there is little support for outright independence. Research shows that only a minority of voters (10%) and N-VA members (30%) are eager to see an independent Flemish state (Swyngedouw and Abts 2010; Wauters 2013). So from an electoral viewpoint, it seems logical to opt for confederalism.

This confederal state consists of two sub-states: Flanders and Wallonia. Brussels would lose a lot of its current autonomy and its inhabitants would largely depend on the Flemish or Walloon sub-state. Both would govern Brussels together. The confederation would only have the competences that it gets from the sub-states. On the one hand, this confederalism is less radical than the party's own statutes while, on the other, many voters and potential coalition partners will regard even that confederalism as a gamble to be avoided in these economically difficult times.

The N-VA, therefore, not only faces the problem of positioning itself along the fault line of Flemish autonomy but also having to decide how far its plans for Flanders should take priority over its socio-economic policies. One might insist that it should be a 'both-and' affair, but in a party system where coalitions rule, it would be difficult to persist with it if every potential coalition partner rules out any constitutional reform after the 2014 elections. On the basis of current opinion polls, if the party is serious about wanting to be in government, it would seem logical to set the socio-economic agenda above its 'flamingant' demands for confederalism. But the uproar which resulted from the notorious remark made by the N-VA MP Siegfried Bracke shows that office seekers in the party cannot (yet) slip past the inner ring of principled defenders of policy who are firmly attached to the first item on the party programme: confederalism. In a newspaper interview, Siegfried Bracke created an opening for the party. When in government, he said, the N-VA would be prepared to make a start on socio-economic reforms before any agreement had been signed on confederalism. It soon became obvious that he had spoken too soon and that this revised strategy had not been fully discussed or agreed by the party. Chairman Bart De Wever confirmed this and stated that the party would naturally listen to any government involved in socio-economic recovery but it would not join a government without an agreement in principle to major constitutional reform. It might, however, join a government without a fully worked-out agreement, but only if its partners accepted confederalism and gave the N-VA a guarantee that at some point it would be fully implemented. But how exactly this is supposed to happen, and within what period, remains unclear and vague. But how exactly that was supposed to happen, and many other related matters, remained unclear and vague. So N-VA has placed an 'equals' sign between confederalism and socio-economic reforms without removing the question mark against what confederalism precisely signifies.

The Flemish Nationalists have shifted the core of their strategy outside the party and that is risky, particularly because nobody else wants constitutional change, let alone confederalism, in 2014. The N-VA is asking its coalition partner(s) for a commitment to introduce constitutional reform. But experience has shown that the best way to keep up the pressure for institutional reforms is to link them directly to the process of coalition formation. How otherwise does the N-VA think it is going to impose it on the other parties and obtain the necessary two-thirds majority? The Flemish Nationalists assume for the sake of convenience that the Walloon Socialists (PS) will take the easy way out and simply

retreat back into Wallonia when confronted by a right-wing 'reformist' government. An extremely unlikely assumption. Furthermore, would confederalism have to sustain the many transfers which the N-VA has talked about which would be the PS's price for allowing the N-VA have its own way?

MP Siegfried Bracke's remarks, intended to remove a major obstacle to the N-VA's participating in government, were rapidly countermanded, although the manner in which De Wever did it still left things open-ended. The question is whether a new solution can be found. It is not impossible, but very unlikely. In which case, the party's only hope is to achieve a spectacular 40% in 2014. The other parties might then be so bowled over by this sledge-hammer blow to the political system that they would see it as a deafening demand from the electorate for further constitutional reform. However, the polls do not suggest that it is likely and neither does the N-VA believe it will happen. The outcome, therefore, will probably be a second Di Rupo government, or in any case a federal government without the N-VA. The party is therefore doing everything possible to win a resounding victory in the Flemish elections so that it can use the Flemish government as a platform from which to put pressure on the federal government. This scenario would be most unwelcome to the other parties, because five years of tension between the two levels of government is nobody's idea of fun.

In other words, N-VA is wrestling with itself. If it clearly declares in advance that constitutional reform is not absolutely essential, it will face internal problems in the form of accusations of betrayal and opportunism and the party would also lose one of its unique selling points. If, on the other hand, it makes its demands for confederalism a non-negotiable precondition, they are likely to appear too radical or unrealistic, certainly to potential partners, and voting for the N-VA will begin to look like a wasted vote. Furthermore, the N-VA has to show the importance of change in areas other than the issue of state reform in order to keep the bar high, but on the other hand it must not make its demands so difficult or uncomfortable that the voters will consider the party too hard-nosed or radical. Faced by such 'either-or' considerations the N-VA risks falling into the same trap that has kept the traditional parties imprisoned for decades. That, and the question whether the party has enough competent personnel to communicate effectively with the electorate leads us to conclude that the N-VA will have most to fear from ... the N-VA.

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Translation: Chris Emery

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The Francophone Parties in Unfamiliar Territory

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The francophone parties are preparing themselves for the federal, regional and European elections of 25 May 2014. Three simultaneous elections, like those of 1999 and referred to by the Flemish as 'the mother of all elections'. The Walloon context differs fundamentally from the Flemish, which has changed radically during the past ten years. In Wallonia the political landscape has been surprisingly stable, more so even than in Brussels. In both these French-speaking regions the four major parties (Socialist PS, Liberal MR, Christian-democratic cdH and Green Ecolo) continue to dominate the political scene. Unless something very unexpected occurs, such as the Dioxine Affair of 1999, the 'second round' of the elections, the negotiations and the formation of the governing coalitions, will remain in the hands of these parties.

LOOKING BACK ON EARLIER ELECTIONS

To illustrate this we shall survey the recent elections in Wallonia and Brussels.

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Wallonia

Here we shall sketch the electoral balance of power in Wallonia, bearing in mind a category that is seldom considered in election statistics, namely those people who are disqualified, or have disqualified themselves from the poll. They are those whose votes are blank or void, or registered voters who fail to turn up even though voting in Belgium is compulsory. Some of them will be sick or incapable, people who are not in a position to register a valid vote. That is a group that one can assume will remain relatively stable from election to election. But there is another group of registered voters who simply stay away or spoil their votes. This group varies from election to election and is politically significant.

In Wallonia the highest number of disqualifications since universal male suffrage was introduced in 1919 was recorded in 1999, but this record was surpassed in the elections of 2010 when the French-speaking parties stated in advance that they would consider the demands of the Flemish parties, instead of systematically opposing them like they had done in 2007 (the four francophone parties had said that they were '*demandeurs de rien*'), and the record was again broken in 2012. This trend shows that something important is afoot in our political system.

If we look at the electoral relationships between the francophone parties, we can detect the following trends: (Note that the percentages are of all registered voters, and not just of those who actually went voting)

- The Socialist PS (Parti Socialiste), in the lead since 1919, achieved an average of 32.3% of registered voters between 1981 and 1995 but since 1999 has dropped to an average of 27.8%.

Table 1: Election results in the Walloon region since 1999.

%	Fed. 99	Prov. 2000	Fed. 03	Wall. 04	Prov. 2006	Fed. 07	Wall.09	Fed.10	Prov. 2012
PS	23,8%	30,5%	30,4%	30,8%	27,3%	24,8%	26,9%	30,6%	25,4%
cdH	13,7%	16,1%	12,8%	14,7%	16,0%	13,2%	13,3%	11,9%	13,5%
MR	20,2%	20,1%	23,7%	20,3%	23,1%	26,2%	19,2%	18,1%	22,0%
Ecolo	14,9%	12,2%	6,2%	7,1%	10,4%	10,7%	15,2%	10,0%	10,5%
Far right	4,4%	2,4%	5,3%	7,3%	4,7%	5,3%	3,7%	3,0%	1,3%
Other	4,5%	4,0%	5,1%	3,3%	2,8%	3,7%	3,8%	7,8%	6,8%
'Off side'	18,5%	14,9%	16,4%	16,4%	15,6%	15,3%	17,8%	18,7%	20,5%

- In second place is the Liberal MR (Mouvement réformateur) with averages of 18.4% and 21.4% for the same periods. In other words, whereas PS has declined in the last thirty years, the trend for MR has been upward.

- The Christian-democratic cdH (Centre démocrate humaniste; formerly the Christian Social Party) has declined from an average of 19.4% in the 1980s and 1990s to 13.9% in the past 13 years.

- The Green Party, Ecolo, has been more stable than one might expect of a party which is scarcely 30 years old. Between 1981 and 1995 it scored an average of 7.9%, but since 1999 has risen to 10.8%.

- The 'disqualified' category was the fourth highest numerically between 1981 and 1985 when it stood at 15.1%. Since 1999 it has risen to third place with an average of 17.1%.

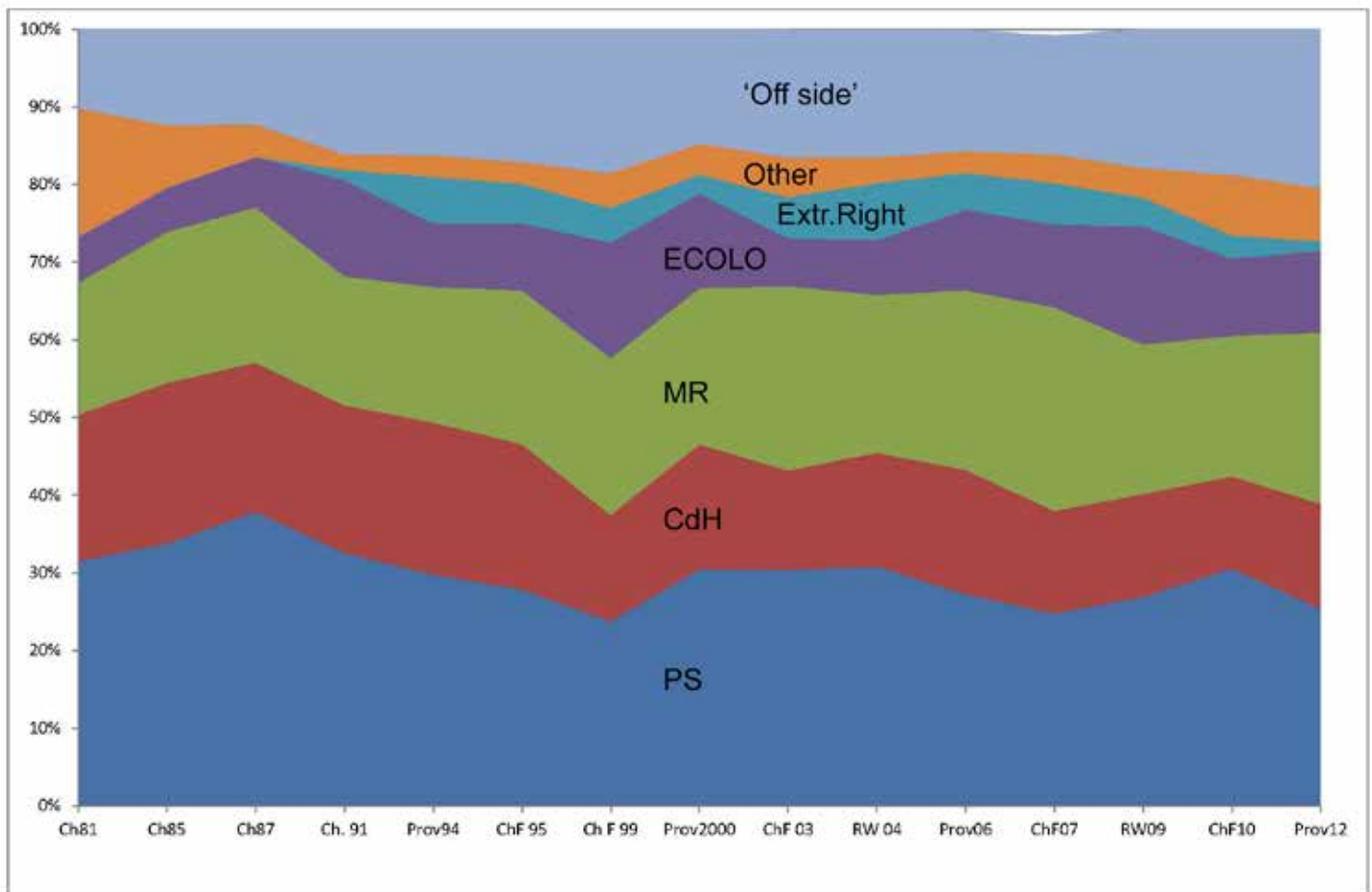
- The various extreme right-wing lists remained below the threshold of 5% of registered voters during both periods, while the other small parties achieved 6.1% (mainly because the Walloon Rally and the Belgian Communist Party lost their parliamentary representation) and 4.7% for the two periods.

The provincial elections of 2012

Table 1 provides more information than just the averages. One can clearly see that the provincial elections, which political scientist Vincent de Coorebyter described as 'chemically pure' because of their lack of any obvious conflict issues, any well-known leaders or any specific programme, serve as a warning or as a transition between two elections where much more is at stake. So the provincial elections of 2000 show that the PS had recovered from its defeat in 1999, and that Ecolo had again lost some support. 2006 shows that the PS is in decline and that the MR is gaining support, as is Ecolo. The provincial elections of 2012, as yet insufficiently analysed, show that the PS and MR are separated by a mere 3% (as happened in the mid-2000s), that the cdH still trail Ecolo by 3%, and that disqualified voters are back in third place (they had been second in 2010!).

Moreover, a closer look at the 2012 provincial elections also shows the emergence of new political groupings in Wallonia which might, who knows, be the harbinger of a more volatile political landscape. The Pirate Party attracted 69,764 votes (or 2.8% of registered voters) which is a very respectable result for a first election. The Parti du Travail de Belgique (PTB), left of the PS, won 54,932 votes, or 2.2% of registered voters, while the FDF (Francophone Democratic Federalists, FDF, once an ally of the MR) was relatively successful in establishing its presence with 47,782 votes, or 1.9% of registered voters. The four traditional parties in Wallonia are now not only competing against each other but also with newcomers who might possibly break through in 2014.

Graph 1: Election results in Wallonia since the creation of the region.



In Table 2 one can trace the electoral behaviour of voters in Brussels since the formation of the Brussels Capital Region in 1989. Here disqualified voters averaged 21.1% which is higher than in Wallonia.¹ The most important party in the past thirty years has been the MR, between 1995 and 2011 in alliance with the FDF. The original PRL-FDF cartel, which was succeeded by the MR, averaged 22.8%. Behind them is the Socialist PS with 18%, the Green party Ecolo with 10.1% and the Christian-democratic cdH with 9.2%. The average for the combined Flemish lists in the Brussels Capital Region was 10.5% while the remaining francophone lists were below 8.3%.

The overview provided by Table 2 cannot disguise the developments of the past few years. In 2004 the PS succeeded in overthrowing the MR, which won back its dominant position in 2007 after a campaign that also gave them the leadership of the walloon region. The 2010 elections narrowed the gap between the two main parties, and heightened their rivalry. The battle for third place throughout this period was between the Christian Democrats on the one side and the Green party Ecolo on the other. Electoral competition in Brussels is fierce and the results uncertain, especially since the FDF and MR broke up in 2011.

At the federal level between 2007 and 2010, support for the PS rose from 724,787 to 894,543 votes (from 20 to 26 seats), whereas the MR moved in the opposite direction from 835,073 to 605,617 votes, or from 23 to 18 seats. During the same period, both the cdH and Ecolo lost votes, though Ecolo retained its 8 seats while cdH dropped from 10 seats to 9. During this time the number of disqualified voters in Belgium as a whole rose by 269,304 (from 12.4% to 15.7%).

Table 2: Voting behaviour in Brussels since the region was created.

%	R° 1989	R° 1995	R° 1999	R° 2004	2007 Fed	R° 2009	2010 Fed
PS	16,5%	16,4%	12,6%	23,1%	17,5%	18,7%	21,2%
cdH	8,9%	7,1%	6,2%	9,8%	11,8%	10,5%	9,7%
MR	14,2%	26,9%	27,0%	22,5%	26,0%	21,2%	21,6%
Ecolo	7,7%	6,9%	14,3%	6,7%	11,3%	14,4%	9,5%
Flemish lists	11,5%	11,3%	11,1%	11,1%	9,5%	9,0%	9,8%
Other Francophone	16,3%	8,1%	7,2%	7,2%	5,3%	6,3%	7,9%
'Disqualified'	24,8%	23,2%	21,6%	19,6%	18,6%	19,9%	20,3%

THE LONG RUN-UP TO 2014

The vulnerability of the political parties in the face of an increasingly volatile voting public does nothing to simplify their electoral preparations. But that is the context in which the francophone parties have to ready themselves in 2014 to redistribute the balance of power in the regions and municipalities, to participate in the formation of a federal government and to have some input at the European level, however little that may be.

In a system of proportional representation practically every party has to accept that the elections themselves are a kind of 'first round' which establishes the new distribution of seats in the various parliaments. The 'second round' is the formation of a governing majority based on the results of the first round. An excessively aggressive election campaign can raise barriers to participation in the coalition negotiations nevertheless absolute vetoes rarely occur. Politicians are conflict professionals who know that they will often have to make alliances with erstwhile opponents either within their own party or in government. Even before the campaign starts, discrete pre-election agreements are made. And it regularly happens that parties make alliances with different partners, which then depend on the outcome of the elections.

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The political programmes

The party programmes for these elections have not yet been fully worked out at the different levels. The procedures will be decided before the end of 2013. Depending on the degree of transparency, party members will be called upon, either individually or collectively, locally or through federations, to work on the draft versions to be put to the party's executive committee. In most parties, drawing up the programme is considered to be a fundamentally democratic occasion, important for the internal workings of the party and the motivation of activists and officials.² In other parties, these procedures may be regarded as a formality designed primarily to attract voters. Here one can see the difference between mass parties and cadre parties such as the Liberal MR, which since its formation in 1846 has never concerned itself greatly with strict procedures and detailed programmes.

These programmes will be subject to the politics of budgetary consolidation to which all the parties have subscribed at every level. To reject financial restraint, which has been imposed externally, would be too provocative a denial of the political realities facing society since the banking crisis of 2008. Those who want to reduce the role of the state will be most insistent on continued restraint. Those who are closest to the workers' organisations will argue that it is time to bring this period of financial constraint to a close. In the election campaign, reference will be made either to the ultra-liberal economists who dominate the international institutions, or to Social Democrats who are popular among supporters of the Rhineland Model of the social market economy.

Another common characteristic of the francophone parties is that they have replaced their executive committees. In some parties this signifies a break with the previous leadership, while with others there is continuity and the retention of leading political officers. These differences in degrees of internal tension within the parties are not always easy to gauge. Naturally, every chairman has his own style, but in some parties there is a strong desire to monopolise the levers of internal power in order to prevent the return of one's predecessors.

One more characteristic shared by the francophone parties, which has been a feature of the Flemish parties for some years now, is the use of new technology and social networking by candidates. The down-side of this interactivity will soon become apparent. This means of communication hampers the practice of discrete negotiation for the medium term. The pressure from voters who have no special education in Belgian political economy, increases the difficulties of managing the system in a coherent fashion.

The federal level

If we ignore the separate role of the European Parliament, seeing that their delegates in Brussels and Strasbourg will have little influence, the francophone parties are preparing for elections and power-sharing at two levels in 2014: the federal level, and the level of the regions and municipalities.

At the federal level, the basic principle of the francophone parties, with the exception of the Liberal MR, is to form a government without the Flemish nationalist N-VA of Bart De Wever if at all possible, but with them if necessary. The three francophone parties (PS, cdH, Ecolo) who together, if not always harmoniously, form the governing coalition in Wallonia-Brussels Federation, in the Brussels Capital Region and the Walloon Region are less separated from each other on socio-economic matters than any of them are from the MR (which is a member of the federal coalition). This ideological affinity is not *a priori* exclusive, but it makes it easier to reach agreements and make government decisions. It also enables them to oppose the N-VA and show the voters the political excesses from which they have been rescued.

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As for the MR, as in 2006 its leader Didier Reynders can use the N-VA's anti-Socialist views to back up his own message and breathe new life into his desire to shift the political balance of power in Wallonia to the right. However, the dynamic has changed. In the period when political favouritism and corruption in some Hainault constituencies led to the electoral defeat of the PS, the MR had the wind in its sails and its alliance with the FDF seemed very secure. But the bickering between the FDF and MR during the Brussels municipal council elections in 2012 inevitably raised questions about the Brussels branch of the MR. During the summer months, the francophone press regularly reported contacts between supporters of the MR and the N-VA, though that does not necessarily imply an alliance at any cost. Smoothing the rough edges off political programmes, moderating the 'belgianism' of some leading francophone politicians on the one hand and the more extreme urge for independence on the other in order to achieve some degree of socio-economic agreement, building a common desire for neo-liberal policies that favour employers more than the trade unions: all take time. Furthermore, it does not necessarily lead to a successful political programme nor to a place in government.

The other francophone parties who are more inclined to defend existing social achievements, are apprehensive about the election results in Flanders. On the one hand, they try to remain neutral in Flemish debates where the N-VA calls the tune, but on the other they need to counter the N-VA when it moves on to federal matters. At this moment, the various political groupings do not see a need to re-establish an explicit francophone front. In fact, as in 2010, the francophone parties do not seem to be able to agree on a common approach. But neither do they give the impression of wanting to make clear to the voters or their future partners how far they are prepared to negotiate over confederalism. It is understandable that they are reluctant to provide opponents with ammunition, but it does not

help the cause of democratic transparency. The four francophone parties are trying to hurry along voting on their agreements in order to hold up the N-VA and also to show that they have made more concessions to their Flemish coalition partners than could ever have been expected from the N-VA in 2010. Nevertheless, Flemish public opinion, under the persuasive influence of the N-VA who dismiss the achievements of others as worthless, might still be critical of the institutional and socio-economic compromises reached. Although in the fall of 2013 the N-VA seems to have lost some momentum. Furthermore, consultation between the sister-parties across the language divide has been much less regular since 2007.

The regional level

At the regional level all coalitions seem to be possible, from the renewal of the 'olive tree coalitions' of PS, Ecolo and cdH on the left, to the centrist-Blue of MR and cdH on the centre right, with every conceivable combination in between. Since Ecolo has become a party to various coalitions, one thing is obvious: the four major parties have made it quite clear that they want to participate in the 'second round'. Suggestions from some big names and activists that a spell in opposition would do no harm are declared out of order. One does not (yet) hear any call to return to one's roots or to the party's core values. The leaders of the francophone political parties want to have a say at every level. At the federal level, to prevent any further dismantling of what remains of the welfare state, and in the regions, to manage the new and important powers which the sixth constitutional reform has transferred to these entities.

FINALLY

On the eve of these three simultaneous elections, the francophone parties find themselves in unknown territory. Where previously it used to be the victorious Flemish party that led government negotiations and the federal government, since the rise of the N-VA this is no longer inevitable. At the federal level no-one is certain about what game is being played. However, at the regional and municipal levels the roles are more firmly established and the parties can claim those roles by virtue of the voters' verdict, even though the latest constitutional reform might require a couple of new chapters. And that leaves the European level, but there the demographic balance recommends a degree of (Belgian) modestness.

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Translation: Chris Emery

Endnotes

1/ From 1919 to 2007 the average number of disqualified voters averaged 12% in Flanders, 13.5% in Wallonia and 15% in Brussels. See Pierre Verjans, 'Mutation des systèmes partisans et résultats électoraux. Proportion congrue et gouvernabilité' in Beaufays, Matagne, *La Belgique en mutation. Systèmes politiques et politiques publiques (1968-2008)*, Bruylant, 2009, pp. 56-58. This category has been growing in recent decades.

2/ The statutes of the PS and Ecolo, both mass parties, are to be found on their websites together with their procedures for the run-up to elections.

Real European Elections at Last?

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On 25 May 2014 the eighth European elections will take place. In this contribution we look ahead to these European elections in Flanders. Firstly, we shall consider how these elections were managed in the past and suggest a few reasons why it was difficult to find them interesting. Then we shall discuss the context, which has changed radically since the last European elections in 2009. The eurocrisis put the EU onto the front pages, even in the popular media. Next we shall look at what issues are likely to feature in the debates running up to the European elections in Flanders. In the final section, we shall consider what image the political parties will try to convey in these debates.

EUROPEAN ELECTIONS UNTIL NOW

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The European Union has changed fundamentally in the 35 years since 1979 when the European Parliament was first directly elected. One of the most important developments has involved the European Parliament itself. It has grown from being an advisory body into being a fully-fledged legislator. The Parliament is fully involved in most European decisions and ultimately has to judge the end results. So it is paradoxical that the turnout for European elections has steadily declined. In Belgium voting is compulsory, but in other countries the trend has been the same: fewer and fewer voters have been turning out for European elections. Either people do not know that the European Parliament has become powerful and important, or they do not believe it.

As elsewhere in Europe, European election campaigns in Flanders have seldom been dominated by European issues. It is quite usual for regional, even federal elections to be held at the same time, and it has been regional (or national) issues that have dominated the debates. Parties usually include a European section in their manifestos, but it is rarely given much of an airing.

The situation in other countries has been much the same. European elections have been a kind of secondary election or a popularity contest for the parties in power. The genuinely serious problems which European politicians have to struggle with, such as expanding the EU, the future of agriculture, climate change ..., may occasionally get a mention but they seldom dominate.

In the past thirty years, the EU extended its powers quite considerably. Until the early 1990s Europe's impact on people's daily lives was fairly limited. Since then its impact has grown spectacularly, but it has happened without any great debate about it. The general public seems not to have much knowledge of or insight into how the EU has developed or makes its decisions. But neither have many opinion-makers, journalists or teachers. So it has been easier to say nothing about Europe, even during elections.

In Belgium, it has been even more difficult than in most countries to have a proper debate on Europe because for a long time the political parties were largely in agreement. In essence, there was a consensus among the political elite in favour of more Europe. Belgian politicians from every political grouping have played an important role throughout history in building up Europe and the people have also long been among the most enthusiastic supporters of integration. For decades, the euro-barometers have shown this. Perhaps the enthusiasm has lessened over the years, but in its place has come a kind of permissive consensus: a belief that Europe supposedly can do no wrong. And because that belief is widely held in Belgium, for many years every debate on Europe has been exceptionally soporific. Politicians agreed with each other and there was rarely much real conflict.

The extreme right-wing Flemish Bloc [Vlaams Blok] was the first party of any significance to adopt an explicitly critical attitude to Europe. But the party did not give the European theme any priority. Occasionally something might be said about Turkey's entry into the EU or about a failure of democracy, but the Flemish Bloc, or the Flemish Interest [Vlaams Belang] as it became, has never given Europe much prominence.

In the build-up to the European elections of 2004, Caroline Gennez, then chairman of the Flemish Social-democratic party, the Sp.a, attempted to lift the debate to a higher level. She published a booklet entitled *Beste Europa [Dear Europe]*, which she described as euro-critical. It was particularly interesting as an attempt to transcend the sterile debate about being for or against Europe, or for more Europe versus less. Traditionally, the great majority have been on the same side, namely for 'more' Europe, which rather cuts down the space available for genuine debate. For Gennez the arguments about more Europe or less were outdated. The discussion ought to be about 'What now for Europe?'. In her booklet she summarised a large number of issues where, in her opinion, European politicians had made the wrong choices. However, it also contained numerous half-truths and was inconsistent in a number of areas. Decisions which she criticised turned out to have been supported by her own party in the European Parliament or in the Council of Ministers. Bart Staes, MEP for the Greens, was one of several who took Gennez to task about this. The booklet lacked sufficient content and depth and consequently fell rather flat. But for the first time an attempt had been made to make it clear that 'more' Europe was not necessarily 'good' Europe: 'more' Europe can be filled from the left or from the right, and it is up to politicians to decide which it will be.

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During the European elections of 2009 two ex-prime ministers and political heavyweights, Jean-Luc Dehaene and Guy Verhofstadt, battled it out as 'list leaders', leading candidates, for the Christian Democrats (CD&V) and Liberals (Open VLD) respectively. They attracted most attention in the few debates that were held specifically on Europe. But as regards content, there were as usual few real differences. (They both wanted a stronger Europe, with greater powers and a clearer voice in the world). Disagreement was primarily about strategy: Verhofstadt wanted to make the leap forward sooner rather than later, while Dehaene was more cautious. In fact the most dissident voice in that period was that of Derk-Jan Eppink, a Dutch journalist who had a prominent position on the rather small right-wing populist Dedecker List. He described himself as a 'eurorealist', wrote a book about it, and attacked in particular the European passion for regulation. But he too failed to dominate the public debate. As usual, the popular media paid little attention to the European election campaign.

DIFFERENT CONTEXT, NEW OPPORTUNITIES?

Meanwhile, almost five years later, the context has changed considerably. Since early 2010, the euro crisis has put the EU almost permanently in the news. Even the popular media now report on the bail-outs for countries with budgetary problems, the imposed cut-backs and the future of the euro. Recently it has become clear to what extent national and regional politicians have to operate within guidelines laid down by Europe. Debates on the budget are overshadowed by what Europe dictates.

In socio-economic discussions on wage levels, employment or ageing, there are constant references to ever stricter European guidelines.

The question of solidarity with the peripheral countries and the usefulness of the emergency funds that were created, have been debated at length in Flanders. The parallel with the domestic debates about the relationship between Flanders and Wallonia gave them a familiar ring. Moreover, it was very easy to echo the populist line: southerners are lazy and corrupt and end up in debt. Northerners, who are thrifty and responsible, who work hard and save, are now expected to bail them out. The reality, of course, is infinitely more complicated than the simplistic twist that some of the media have given it.

The euro crisis has seriously damaged the popularity of the EU. Even before the crisis, eurosceptic parties were doing well in many member states. These are parties that question the value of integration or want less European interference at the national level. Every opinion poll has shown that since the euro crisis, euroscepticism has grown dramatically, though not everywhere for the same reasons. In the south, the EU is associated with rigid budgetary discipline and the disastrous social consequences it has had. In the north, the EU is associated with the transfer of huge subsidies to the bottomless pits in the south. But once again: the reality is far more complicated. The situation in Spain or Ireland cannot be compared to that in Greece; what is seen as support for the south largely ends up in northern banks; and the fact is the northern economies have done very well out of the southern states who are now in debt. These more sophisticated insights are seldom given an airing, so the judgement of public opinion remains based on the simplistic assumptions peddled by the popular press.

However, the savings which the EU insists upon affect both north and south even though in different measure. The powers of the EU to impose economies have increased considerably. The euro crisis was initially interpreted by the European leaders, many of whom at the time were of a centre-right persuasion, as a crisis caused by too many debts and too large deficits. Consequently, all kinds of measures were agreed to enforce budgetary discipline across Europe. A treaty to that end was drawn up and legislation passed to enforce it. The European Parliament, where centre-right parties are in the majority, endorsed the policy. Only since the end of 2012 has the focus shifted slightly as it became apparent that the passion for economy was having a negative effect on economic growth. Cut-backs lead to unemployment and a reduction in tax revenue. Measures to encourage growth figure more prominently on the agenda, though the reality is limping some way behind, and the budgetary straitjacket that was imposed on the member states has, at least for some, been relaxed a little. The pressure to economise, however, is as great as ever and that includes spending on the social services.

Left-wing parties like the Greens and Social Democrats (Sp.a) have been very critical of the course adopted by Europe which has largely been mapped out by the centre-right parties, both at the level of heads of states and heads of government as well as in the European Parliament. In Belgium, it was in particular Paul Magnette, chairman of the Walloon Socialists (PS), who heavily criticised the policy of retrenchment. Christian Democrats and particularly Liberal politicians distanced themselves from Magnette's position and called on him (in vain) to toe the European line and defend it.

Another aspect that Magnette touched on concerned the democratic character of European decision-making. He criticised the European Commission, which has to approve the economies being made by the member states. In particular, Olli Rehn, the commissioner concerned, was targeted. 'Who knows Olli Rehn?', wondered Magnette to illustrate the lack of democracy. The Flemish Social Democrats have not put it quite so bluntly, but largely share Magnette's views.

Thanks to the euro crisis the EU is now frequently in the news. There is controversy over the decisions that have been made and the political parties have clearly differing viewpoints. That offers some chance of a genuine debate.

EUROPEAN ISSUES IN FLANDERS FOR 2014

There is no shortage of EU related issues. The trade agreements which it enters into; climate change; the future of agriculture; the role of human rights in foreign policy... All of them are European preoccupations. The European Parliament plays an important role in these issues and one hopes that they will figure in the programmes of the political parties. In the next few months, however, the main public discussions and debates will revolve around a smaller number of topics, and more specifically around issues on which we can expect disagreement between the Flemish parties.

Cut-backs and solidarity

In the first place there are the subjects relating directly to the euro crisis. Left-wing parties will stress that the EU has been dominated in the past by right wing parties who imposed an agenda of retrenchment that has had a negative effect on growth and employment. Opposition to budgetary discipline will probably be prominent in left-wing programmes everywhere in the EU. The economic right-wing will then argue that it is precisely a lack of budgetary discipline that has undermined confidence in the financial markets causing the eurozone to falter.

Much good sense but also much nonsense will be spoken on the question of solidarity with the member-states on the periphery. Is it necessary to hold the eurozone together? Was it sensible to create emergency funds and shore up the problem countries? Is it in our interests in the north or are we throwing money into a bottomless pit?

During the campaign, the role of the banks might also be discussed, although on this issue most of the Flemish parties are in agreement: there should be more European control over the banks, and abuses such as excessive bonuses must be abolished.

An instrument of torment

As in other member states the question could also arise in Belgium whether European regulation of day-to-day matters is desirable. This refers to legislation dealing with consumer protection, the quality of foodstuffs, environmental standards, agricultural regulation and so on. Since the 1990s, the EU has issued thousands of regulations which lay down in minute detail the standards which certain products have to meet. Europe is regarded in some quarters as an instrument of torment, which interferes in all kinds of things without its being immediately obvious what the purpose of the intervention actually is. From the size of pig sties, or the rear lights of tractors, to surprise-Easter eggs for children, there are European norms that must be met. Not only products but also production processes are to some extent regulated by Europe. Dozens of laws prescribe how European businesses must safeguard the health and safety of their employees. They cover things like handling poisonous products, driving and rest periods for bus drivers, minimal levels of protection during pregnancy, protection against noise pollution etc. These regulations often arouse opposition. Certainly in the United Kingdom, large sections of the public believe that the EU should not concern itself with such matters.

In essence, it boils down to a left-right divide. Supporters of the free market are annoyed by European interference and the amount of red tape which stands in the way of free enterprise. Right-wing parties argue for European restraint, perhaps the reversal of previous agreements and the curtailing of European powers. On the other side of the debate are those who fear that an unregulated free market leads to a lowering of standards and less protection for consumers, environment and employees. Left-wing parties in general argue for even stricter European regulations, including agreements on taxation. Europe must ensure a level playing field: in the single European market, competition should only be permitted when there is fair taxation for all and everyone enjoys a wide range of social and economic rights. Otherwise, countries and businesses will compete in those areas which are not yet harmonised, with the risk of sparking off a race to the bottom.

Electing a President for the European Commission

A particular issue which might crop up during the campaign is the level of democracy in the EU. Traditionally it has been difficult to broach this in public debate because it is fairly technical and one soon becomes bogged down in such things as consultation procedures, rights of initiative, comitology etc, and also because the main Flemish political parties are largely in agreement.

But this time there is one aspect that deserves special attention: immediately after the European elections, discussions will begin, as usual, about who is to be the new president of the Commission. The heads of state and government leaders will have to propose somebody while bearing in mind the verdict of the European elections. Finally, the European parliament will have to vote on the new president. The European political 'families', (Social-democrat, Christian-democrat, Liberal, etcetera) will have already come to an agreement on who will be their particular candidate during the spring campaign. In this way, they intend to present the heads of government with a *fait accompli*: the largest political family, or the grouping with a parliamentary majority, will then propose their candidate. It will be very difficult for the heads of government to ignore this parliamentary action. So in the coming months, the party groupings must organise a kind of pre-election. It will be a novelty and each will do it in their own way. But one can expect the ultimate front-runners to be politicians with a fairly high profile. In the past, candidates for the presidency tried to keep a low profile so as not to make too many enemies. This time, things could be quite different because they will now be given a high profile during the 'pre-elections'.

If this plan goes ahead, it offers the prospect of some interesting debates. The front-runners of the main political groupings can take part in television debates that would be broadcast in every member state. The national leaders would then explain why the leader of their own particular grouping would be a suitable president of the European Commission. In Flanders therefore, a vote for the CD&V would also be a vote for the European Christian Democrats' presidential candidate. Whoever votes Sp.a would thereby support the candidate which the European Social Democrats had chosen as their front-runner. The European elections would in that way take on a much more 'European' character.

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In the meantime every party is buzzing with names; and yet it is still not entirely certain that things will proceed as planned. In the largest political grouping, the European People's Party, to which the CD&V belongs, a number of caveats can be heard. Political leaders like the German chancellor do not like the idea of being confronted by a diktat from the European Parliament. In other political groups, picking a front-runner could give rise to bitter internal feuding. However, most parties will certainly go ahead with the plan and the coming weeks will show whether the reluctant European People's Party will follow suit.

THE FLEMISH PARTIES

In Flanders, the election contest will probably be overshadowed by the Flemish and federal elections. The Flemish nationalist party N-VA (which is in the Flemish government, but in the opposition at the federal level) and the future of this country will be the central issues. But as well as that, there are plenty of interesting European issues for the Flemish parties to discuss.

The CD&V will play their traditional role in the centre. It will defend the European response to the crisis, which was drawn up by leaders like Christian Democrat Herman Van Rompuy, the President of the Council of Europe, and MEP Marianne Thyssen. It will defend solidarity, the setting up of emergency funding and the retrenchment programme. At the same time, it will emphasise that in future the EU must focus more on growth, but that it is far from easy to reach agreement with every country.

In recent years, leader of the European Liberal family in the European Parliament, Guy Verhofstadt,

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has frequently clashed with President Herman Van Rompuy. His criticisms are not so much an attack on the decisions reached by the EU (emergency funding, retrenchment) as on the delays in reaching those decisions and the fact that are inadequate. We can expect Verhofstadt to be again in fine voice during the election campaign arguing for a more ambitious EU, though it will not necessarily be entirely clear what we should expect from this more vigorous Europe of which he dreams. In the past, the Open VLD has defended a left-wing agenda on some levels (e.g. arguing for communal debt-management and Eurobonds) but when it comes to budgetary discipline its economic programme is right-wing.

The Social Democrats of the Sp.a and the Greens will be sharply critical of the choices made by Europe. They will target the cut-backs and the economic programme and emphasise their negative effects. They will argue for a stronger but also completely different approach which will highlight left-wing concerns: the EU must do more about unemployment and combating poverty. It will be difficult to detect any major differences between their programmes. However, an extreme left-wing party such as the PVDA+ is likely to go considerably further and even call into question European integration, the euro and the common market.

The extreme right Vlaams Belang [Flemish Interest] has traditionally taken a critical course. It will probably criticise solidarity with states on the periphery as well as the common currency. Furthermore, they also dislike the EU's passion for regulation and its policy of expansion.

How right wing, Flemish nationalist N-VA politicians will conduct themselves in the debates on Europe is more difficult to predict. Europe is not the N-VA's central concern. In the past, MEP Frieda Brepoels was the European face of the N-VA. In the European Parliament she was a member of the same political grouping as the Greens and voted with them on most issues. She has now stepped down and the N-VA is preparing a full European programme. In this it will almost certainly argue that Flanders should have a greater voice in European affairs, but it is not yet clear what kind of Europe it has in mind. What will be the N-VA's attitude to emergency funding, and solidarity with the peripheral member states? Will it paint the EU, even more than in the past, as an instrument of torment which interferes in matters which should be left in Flemish hands? It is a real possibility, if only because it will have seen that such an approach has been electorally successful in other countries. N-VA politicians are happy to be seen in the company of British Conservatives who are also highly critical of European interference. If the N-VA chooses that route, it will be the first time in Flanders that a major party will defend a programme that argues not only for a different Europe, but for a manifestly diminished Europe.

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CONCLUSION

The European election in Flanders will be fought, as in the past, under the shadow of the Regional and Federal elections taking place on the same day. But there is a real chance that European issues will be taken more seriously than in the past. The eurocrisis has put the EU on the front pages and in Flanders the parties cannot agree on how the crisis should be dealt with. So now there is something to debate, which has not always been the case.

Moreover, other countries too are paying more attention to Europe. Parties that strongly reject European interference and want to be masters in their own house are doing very well. A recent Gallup poll suggests that in the next European Parliament the extremist and the eurosceptic parties will return in greatly increased numbers. Whether in Flanders, any parties apart from the extreme right Vlaams Belang will play a fully eurosceptic card remains to be seen. The N-VA might possibly use it to win the support of those who want less interference from the EU.

Finally one should keep an eye on the plans of the major European political groupings to select in

advance their candidate for the presidency of the Council of Europe. Whether they will all succeed is still unclear. One wonders how far it will feature in the discussions between the Flemish political parties. In any case it will be an interesting attempt to give the elections a more 'European' flavour.

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