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Belgium:
Party Competition Dynamics and Nationalist Rhetoric

Introduction

This paper proposes a link between the Belgian federal electoral system and the rhetoric used by party elite and in official party media. The rhetoric adopted by party leaders and propagated through party media channels (website content, video ads, public speeches, etc) is assumed to be at least in part strategic rather than purely ideologically-driven. This premise is fairly simple and not interesting in and of itself: politicians choose their words carefully. More interesting is the issue of how the design of Belgium's coalition-building process nationally and the dynamics of party competition regionally determine rhetorical strategy. The bulk of this essay focuses on the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), a true dark horse that has, through careful cultivation of its message, managed to become the largest political party in Belgium over the course of only about ten years.

After drawing conclusions about the institutional and external determinants of rhetoric, this paper moves on to discuss how that impacts Belgian voters. As this discussion will reveal, there is a gap in the research on voter preference that stems from a failure to differentiate between policy preference and symbolic identification when talking about voters' motivations. A possible future research project on voter preference is briefly sketched.

An Idiosyncratic System

The party system in Belgium and the governmental structures that have been constructed to accommodate it are famously complicated and bizarre. The 1970s saw the beginning of a series of reforms to the national government that changed it from a France-like unitary state to a federal one with three regions divided by language: French-speaking Wallonia, Dutch-speaking Flanders, and bilingual Brussels (Loobuyck & Jacobs 2010, 35). This linguistic divide, which is representative of a broader cultural cleavage regarding the meaning of Belgian identity, manifested itself in the Belgian party system through a peculiar redundancy: in place of fully national parties representing the usual party families across the entire country, each party family (liberals, socialists, Christian Democrats, the greens) has two parties with separate organizational apparatuses, each exclusively serving one language community. Dutch parties compete directly[1] only with other Dutch parties, and Francophone parties compete directly only with other Francophone parties. Additionally, Flanders boasts two major regional parties— the N-VA and the far right *Vlaams Belang* (VB)— that have no counterpart in Wallonia.

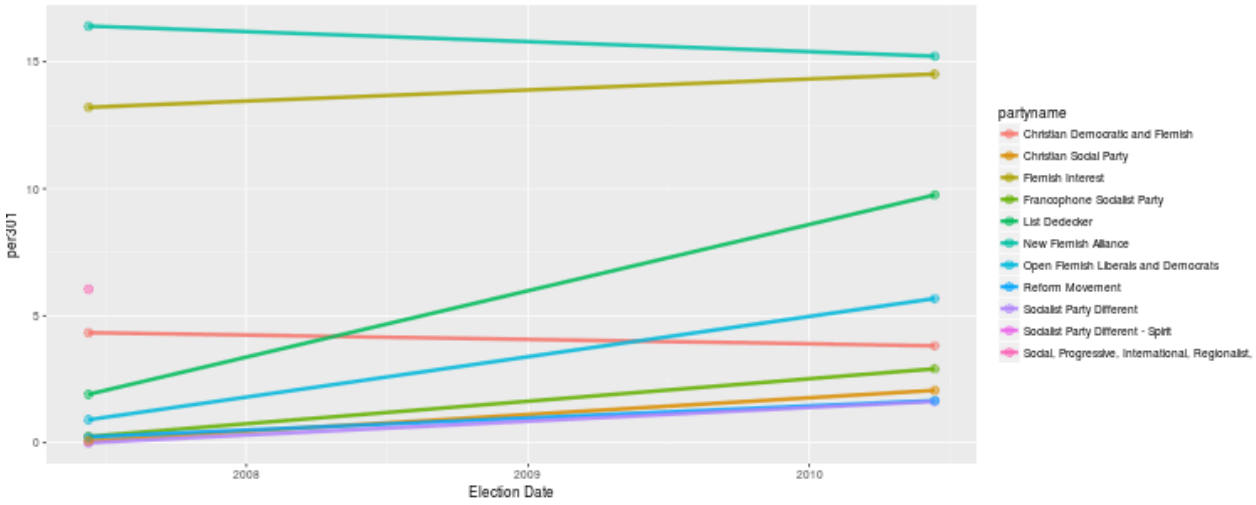
In the interest of maintaining national solidarity despite the quasi-autonomy of the Belgian regions— an autonomy insisted upon largely by Flemings, who have historical grievances with the French— Belgian law requires that the composition of the federal government be representative of both Flemings and Walloons (Van Haute & Deschouwer 2018, 689). Most significantly, there must be an equal number of cabinet ministers from each language community. The King of Belgium selects an *informateur* to identify points of agreement between parties that would allow a federal administration to coalesce around a coherent political program.

[1] There is arguably some *indirect* competition that takes place in the political messaging surrounding national elections, e.g. PS and N-VA make it clear that they will not serve in coalitions together.

The effect of these rules surrounding coalition-building is that the Flemish nationalist parties tend to be, if not outright excluded, marginalized; the magnitude of their support by the Flemish people has not really translated into institutional power at the federal level. The 2010 national election resulted in a minority government that positioned the N-VA— newly the country's largest party— as an opposition party (van Haute & Deschouwer 2018, 690). The painstakingly negotiated 2014 coalition between the N-VA, the Dutch-speaking Christian Democrat party (CDV), and the Francophone Liberal party *Mouevement Réfourmateur* (MR) quickly fell apart over disagreements about an EU-wide resolution on immigration and refugees. Beyond accusations of xenophobia, the Flemish regionalists' perceived prioritization of decentralization and localization makes them essentially incompatible with a government formation process organized around the principle of solidarity.

Nonetheless, Flemish has found ways to exert influence on federal politics. While Flemish nationalist parties punch below their weight from an institutional standpoint, they punch above their weight when it comes to agenda-setting. A great deal of research has been done covering how Flemish nationalism affects the Belgian political climate and informs national priorities. Comparing Flemish nationalism with the Quebecois movement in Canada, Béland and Lecours (2017) find that the bifurcation of Belgian party system and the federal structure of the state elevates the strength of Flemish nationalist policy goals by facilitating the N-VA's regional competitiveness, the implication being that the party's regional dominance forces the federal system to accommodate it (692). Emilie van Haute (2016) argues that the electoral success of the N-VA put pressure on other parties to address decentralization more actively (92). This is something that can be verified quantitatively. The Manifesto Project uses hand-coding to analyze

election manifesto documents and track the prevalence of political topics. Data from the Manifesto Project shows that between 2000 and 2010 there was an increase in positive mentions of federalism and decentralization[2] in the published manifestos of Christian Democrat, liberal, and socialist parties (the exceptions are the CDV and the N-VA, both of which experienced minor decreases in mentions) (Volkens et al 2018). The trend is suggestive of a response to the N-VA's electoral successes starting around 2004, in the context of which an acknowledgement of regionalist-related issues may have seemed obligatory.



Other research has dug into what national narratives say about the values and preferences of actual Belgian voters. Deschouwer (2013) asserts that the efficacy of Flemish nationalists in agenda-setting is not truly reflective of hardcore nationalist sentiment by the population of Flanders. Deschouwer's study of voter policy priorities indicates that state reform is not a particularly salient issue: "If we look at the most important topic for electoral choice, only one

[2] According to the Manifesto Project coding instructions, this category includes "Favourable mentions of the territorial subsidiary principle… More autonomy for any sub-national level in policy making and/or economics, including municipalities… Support for the continuation and importance of local and regional customs and symbols and/or deference to local expertise… Favourable mentions of special consideration for sub-national areas" (Manifesto Project)

party— N-VA — scores significantly and strongly above the average 8 per cent for Flemish voters. Even the separatist and radical right party Vlaams Belang does not have many voters for whom reform of the state is the most important motivation for moting" (344). The picture painted by this data is perhaps comparable to American anti-abortion activists and nativists, whose organizational power and ability to dictate the national conversation is greater than their actual numbers. Voters who are extremely adamant or enthusiastic about decentralization policies apparently make up a minority of Flemish voters, and it makes sense that enthusiastically-regionalist voters who are very policy-oriented would be scooped up by the less controversial of the two Flemish nationalist parties.

However, Deschouwer's findings have the potential to be misleading. To say that state reform is not the *strongest* factor in voter choice is not to say that voters do not care at all; Deschouwer's method gives his respondents a binary choice where a gradient is needed. On the other hand, his study creates an opening for a conversation about what regionalist sentiment actually entails. As the paragraph above hinted, nationalist policy preference and nationalist feeling or symbolic identification with nationalism should not be conflated. A more detailed discussion of this is located in a later section.

On the subject of the Flemish nationalists' agenda setting power, it is also worth noting that the very success of the Flemish nationalist movement presents an existential threat to Flemish nationalist parties themselves. Many of their preferred policies have already been implemented or— as it often goes with the tragedy of smaller single-issue parties— adopted by more conventional parties. This is widely considered the cause of death for N-VA's predecessor party, *Volksunie*; as reform issues lost much of their salience, traditional left-right cleavages

reasserted themselves, leading liberal nationalists and leftist flemish nationalists to scatter into different parties— the liberals into the Flemish liberal party *Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten* (Open VLD), the leftists into the ecology party *Groen* and the social democratic *Socialistische Partij Anders* (sp.a).

Given these conditions— where interest in state reform is either low or secondary, and where most of the heavy lifting in regard to decentralization has already been done — it is incumbent on observers of Belgium's party system to ask how the N-VA has managed not only to survive but to *grow* as an electoral presence. With the understanding that an analysis of their rhetorical strategy might have some explanatory power, the section that follows delves into how the N-VA frames Flemish nationalism and its programme in party media to appeal successfully to large chunks of the Flemish population.

N-VA and Strategic Rhetoric

Rhetorical analysis is a valuable method to political science because political conflict is not always reducible to rationalist or materialist struggle for power. The commercialization and dominance of visual culture in contemporary electoral politics demands that attention be paid to how "personality, emotions, and gut reactions" play into decision-making; De Vries & De Landtsheer (2013) suggest that, while voter reliance on extra-rational cues are near-universal in modern competitive electoral democracies, messaging and aesthetics play a particularly crucial role in multiparty systems with coalition governments such as Belgium's (172, 169-70).

The importance of rhetoric to the design and implementation of political programmes is also quite clear to scholars of nationalism, who by and large eschew traditional liberal or realist

views of political conflict. Nationalism is narrative-driven, its priorities based in a particular construction of a capital p People (or, in the case of Flanders, a capital v *Volk*). Because the idea of a culture is actually a complex *network* of ideas, nationalist-style decision-making may not appear consistent from the standpoint of someone predisposed to thinking of political action in terms of monolithic ideological principles (the liberal perspective) or rational self-interest (the realist one). This line of thinking about the logic of nationalism originates from Rawi Abdelal's *National Purpose in the World Economy* (2001), which attempts to explain how nationalist sentiment (or the lack thereof) determined the economic paths of post-Soviet states in the 1990s. Abdelal provides a useful leaping-off point for this essay not only because his framework configures nationalism as its own distinct mode of political thought, but because he looks at the interaction between culture against political economy: "I do not argue that national identities trump material interests. Rather, national identities affect how governments interpret their material interests. The cultural contexts within which politicians are embedded define their best course of action" (20-1). This approach to understanding how political priorities are formed is important to this essay on Flemish nationalism because the N-VA has gone to considerable lengths to frame the nationalist cause as an economic one.

Two very similar political ads from the N-VA and VB may elucidate this issue. In the earlier of the two— "Vlamingen Verdienen Beter - Eerst Onze Mensen" (Flemings Deserve Better - Our People First), the ad created for Vlaams Belang and published to their Youtube channel on April 5, 2019— a Flemish cyclist races some representatives from other Western European countries. He lags behind, panting and sweating, because a Walloon sits idly behind him, weighing him down. A narrator reads, in almost storybook fashion:

> "The Fleming works extremely hard, and yet our country is not improving. We have to throw that extra ballast overboard and stop filling bottomless Walloon wells and pay an immigration bill that nobody asked for. The Fleming deserves better. Our people first." ("Vlamingen Verdienen Beter," translation mine)

Six days later, on April 11, 2019, the N-VA published their own cycling-themed advertisement, titled simply "Vooruit!" (Forward!). This time, a whole team of Flemish cyclists in yellow and black navigate the countryside, sometimes cutting through cobblestone streets while onlookers in yellow and black pump their fists and cheer them on. Their movements are highly coordinated. Though their exertion is obvious, they have momentum that the Fleming in the VB ad does not. The advertisement ends with an aerial shot showing the cyclists spread across the road in a V formation. The voice-over proclaims:

> "You can only make progress through change. The V-NA drove for more jobs, more wages, more bargaining. We want to continue. That requires vision, reason, determination. Uphill or headward. The N-VA is continuing. For Flanders. For progress." ("Vooruit!" translation mine)

Both parties have tried to make economics the center of their pitch for nationalism. While they serve as justification or apologia for their nationalism, their economic arguments also only make sense if one presupposes the validity of their claim to nationalism, because it is only through a nationalist lens that their economic goals are coherent. On the VB side, this is rather cartoonishly obvious: "Vlamingen Verdienen Beter" polemically differentiates between the essential cultural characters of Flemings and Walloons. The personification of Flanders and Wallonia is no mere metaphor; from the VB's perspective, it is vital to understand that different

approaches to fiscal policy and immigration are not flukes but an expression of the core traits of the Flemish and Walloon peoples (Dalle Mulle 2017, 67). Grasping that public spending related to the function of the modern welfare state is likely to resonate with Flemish voters, the VB only have to encourage those issues to be viewed in the context of a civilizational contest between the Germanic work ethic and French decadence. Passing off nationalism as concern over fiscal policy also arms the VB with a strong historical argument against appeals to Belgian solidarity. According to a 2014 statement issued by the party's central office, the problem with solidarity is not Flemish intolerance but a history of economic exploitation and victimization of the Flemings by the Walloons: "'the Wallons are deaf to the Flemish requests. They take always more, never give anything. This is no solidarity, but brutal theft'" (quoted in Dalle Mulle 2017, 65). Narratives of victimhood and the othering of a historical external antagonist are staples of nationalist thought. This is an overwhelmingly defensive kind of nationalism; its primary affects are resentment and distrust.

The N-VA takes a near opposite route in its nationalist reading of economic problems. Where *Vlaams Belang* emphasizes difference, the N-VA focuses on belonging. The cycling allegory in the VB ad imagines the task of the nation as a competition between states with winners, losers, and impediments, whereas the cycling allegory in the N-VA ad eliminates the idea of competition altogether, instead lingering on national camaraderie (in the ad, this is literal cheerleading) and unification of purpose. Rather than lean on a negativist image of group identity (something to the effect of: "I know that I am a Fleming because I sure as hell am not a Walloon"), the N-VA tries to promote national consciousness by stressing the team element of cycling ("We are Flemings because we have common values and a common destiny"). Peppered

with first person plural pronouns, the narration of "Vooruit!" uses the ideas of reason, foresight, and determination to signal the importance of Flemish cultural values as a glue connecting the nation without dragging immigrants or antagonizing Wallonia.

The differences in the rhetoric used in each of these ads could represent actual philosophical differences between the parties. Specifically, the N-VA advocates for a form of cultural nationalism that leans towards civic nationalism, while the VB is more willing to mingle their cultural nationalism with xenophobia and ethnic nationalism (Loobyuck & Jacobs 2018, 29-30). While nationalism is often associated with a fixation on ethnic hierarchies and racism, the N-VA demonstrates the malleability of nationalism as a logic of political decision-making and source of programme justification. VB and the N-VA have both appealed to nationalism to support their economic priorities, but the N-VA's focus on belonging-based nationalist rhetoric leaves room for major European norms and institutions.

Two additional examples of party messaging support this interpretation. First: the N-VA website boasts a kind-of defensive question and answer page that is designed explicitly to combat the association between nationalism and VB-style provincialism. The site defends the N-VA's nationalism as compatible with the European Union and complementary to global economic trends: "It is often said that Flanders would be too small in a Europe that is only getting bigger. This point of view is evidence of an error in reasoning by postulating an opposition between increasing scale (globalisation) and decreasing scale (localisation). These processes aren't contradictory but complementary: globalisation precisely encourages localisation" (N-VA). The rhetoric here is in line with Abdelal's model of nationalistic reasoning; the N-VA has provided a plausible interpretation of Flemish interests that leaves room for both

Europe and Flanders and reinforces the centrality of Flemings in determining which policy outcomes are desirable.

The tactic is repeated by N-VA member Minister-President of Flanders Geert Bourgeois in his speech on the future of the European Union at the Bruges campus of the postgraduate institute College of Europe. Bourgeois explain his party's position on the relationship between Flemish and European identities: "We want to be Flemish to become European… No leveling of identities… [the immigrant] should adapt to his host country" (Bourgeois). In this imagining of geopolitical space, nations (such as Flanders) are autonomous components of a larger European civilization. Bourgeois skates a line between the importance of tolerance and intracontinental cooperation and the necessity of cultural preservation while, again, anchoring *all* of these principles in the primacy of the nation.

If one assumes that the two cycling ads are not just pure and uncalculated expressions of the parties' philosophies, then the differences in their rhetoric could also be reflective of different estimations of the relative efficacy of positive advertising and negative advertising. This latter explanation connects to the parties' broader electoral strategy, because strong rhetorical style choice are made in consideration of target audiences. The VB's desired audience is perhaps a more habitually paranoid group of voters, while the positive message of national belonging and community-building is— by virtue of being less antagonistic and confrontational— less polarizing and more likely to appeal to the median voter.

I suggest that the strategy of the N-VA is to attract voters who are more aligned ideologically with VB without alienating new voters scabbing from the CD&V. Verthé and Beyens (2018) indicate that strategic voting— i.e. voting for a candidate or party other than one's

preferred candidate or party— is prevalent in Belgium's federal elections, particularly among voters whose preferred parties belong to the ideological fringe (142). Strategic voting is incentivized for voters who more ideologically congruent with parties on the extreme right and left because a) Belgium's system of proportional representation has a 5% share threshold, therefore penalizing already marginal parties, and b) the federal multi-party, multi-lingual coalition-form governments make a party's viability for potential postelection coalitions a significant motivating factor for voters (Verthé & Beyens 2018, 142). The N-VA views itself as an opposition party in transition to a dominant party in government. Their likely voters score higher on political efficacy and political cynicism than the general Belgian population (van Haute 2017, 92). They rely on rhetoric that can be associated with a more pragmatic and mainstream politics and a variety of nationalism that has mass appeal. The goal of the type of messaging seen in "Vooruit!" is to stoke and/or exploit a more casual, friendlier nationalism than the one associated with the stereotype of the wild-eyed and brazen ideologue.

Research Proposal: Symbolic Identification, Policy Preference and Voter Behavior

The logic of nationalism internal to party publications and party member statements is interesting, but it does not say much about how the rhetoric impacts voter choice. To evaluate the efficacy of the N-VA's apparent media strategy, it is worth examining how Flemish actually engage with the rhetoric of nationalism. As previously indicated, existing research on voter preference in Belgium does not adequately differentiate between policy preference and symbolic identification when discussing voters' motivations. The conceptual framework of this proposal is inspired by Christopher Ellis and James Stimpson's *Ideology in America* (2012), an ambitious

polling project that uncovered an enormous incongruence between symbolic identification with political labels (conservative, liberal) and actual policy preferences in the United States (ii). The project would consist of a survey (see page 15) of a representative sample of Flemings who voted in the 2019 federal election with a set of questions designed to distinguish between a) their level of identification with symbolically-important Flemish nationalist issues and cultural narratives and b) their level of support for specific policies that are regularly connected to nationalism. The degree of dependence or independence of symbolic identification on policy preference would deepen our understanding of the psychology of nationalist-identified voters in complex multiparty systems. Specifically, it would measure more accurately the salience of concrete policy issues to voters who have expressed strong support for less concrete cultural narratives. If there is a strong correlation between support for nationalist symbolism and support for nationalist policy preference, this paints a picture of Flemish voters as much more cogent and deliberative than research into the modernization of political campaigns would indicate. If there is a loose or no correlation, this suggests that nationalism is, *contra* Abdelal, more of a style of presentation than a consistent geopolitical logic.

While Ellis and Stimpson built their survey around self-identification with broad ideological labels, this research project would take the identification question a step further by parsing between a) symbolic identification with nationalism that is founded in belonging and b) symbolic identification with nationalism that is founded on practices of othering and emphases on difference. Attention to this detail may yield interesting findings on the cognitive proclivities of the various parties' supporters. Pertinent to this essay's rhetorical analysis: this facet of the survey would reveal what types of nationalist rhetoric *strategic voters* for the N-VA most

commonly identify with and to what extent this identification encourages or discourages strategic voting. Access to this data would allow for the N-VA's rhetoric to be read in the context of its voters' thought processes.

Conclusion: A Note on the 2019 Election

The results of the May 2019 national election, in which VB picked up 18 seats and came in second behind the N-VA, indicate the need for further research. The results are still coming in, so not much data on the election is yet available. Tt could be that the inefficacy of the N-VA caused strategic voters to return to their preferred party, or that the success of the N-VA has helped to legitimize more extreme forms of nationalism. Electoral gains by the far-left Workers Party of Belgium (PVDA/PTB)— the only multilingual party in the country— suggest a blanket anti-establishment sentiment rather than a shift in policy preference strong identification with national symbolism per se. In any event, the growing institutional strength of Flemish nationalists underscores the need for more research on how nationalism as a set of conceptual commitments can be used to rally voter support and influence federal policy in an increasingly divided state.

(Survey Master Outline on Following Page)

Flemish Voter Survey on Nationalism, Policy Preference, and Strategic Voting Patterns
Master Outline

Note: For ease of reading, this document organizes the survey questions according to the trait that they measure. In the questionnaire that respondents would fill out, the questions from the Belonging, Difference, and Policy sections would be unlabeled and shuffled together, while the Voter Alignment Questions would remain at the top of the page.

Voter Alignment Questions
Select the party that you agree with the most

a) Partij van de Arbeid van België (PVDA)
b) Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams (CD&V)
c) Groen
d) Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA)
e) Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (Open VLD)
f) Socialistische Partij Anders (sp.a)
g) Vlaams Belang (VB)

Respond: (Yes/No)
"I voted for the party I agree with the most in the 2019 federal elections"
If you responded no, select the party that you voted for

h) Partij van de Arbeid van België (PVDA)
i) Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams (CD&V)
j) Groen
k) Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA)
l) Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (Open VLD)
m) Socialistische Partij Anders (sp.a)
n) Vlaams Belang (VB)

Symbolic Identification: Belonging Statements
Respond: (Strongly Disagree/Disagree/Neither Agree Nor Disagree/Agree/Strongly Agree)

1. "I am a Fleming first and a Belgian second."
2. "My Flemish ancestry is an important part of who I am."
3. "Speaking Dutch is an important part of being Flemish."
4. "The history of my people is an important part of who I am today."
5. "My personal values are strongly linked to Flemish culture."

Symbolic Identification: Difference Statements
Respond: (Strongly Disagree/Disagree/Neither Agree Nor Disagree/Agree/Strongly Agree)

1. "Immigrants to Flanders can never fully assimilate"
2. "Solidarity between Flemings and Walloons cannot work because the Walloons are too culturally different."
3. "I would not mind if language my children regularly spoke both Dutch and French"
4. "The Walloons are not carrying their own weight in Belgium"
5. "The Flemings have a stronger work ethic than most other peoples."

Policy Preference Statements

Respond: (Strongly Disagree/Disagree/Neither Agree Nor Disagree/Agree/Strongly Agree)

1. "In Flemish districts with a Francophone minority, voting materials should be published in both French and Belgian"
2. "Immigrants to Belgian should undergo a process of citizenization that requires them to assimilate"
3. "Flanders should become a separate legal entity from the rest of Belgian and negotiate separate trade deals with other countries in the Eurozone."
4. "Tax revenue from Flanders should be used to fund welfare programs anywhere in Belgium, including Wallonia."
5. "If welfare programs must exist, then tax revenue from Flanders should benefit Flemish citizens first."

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