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A Crisis of Representativeness? A comparative analysis of congruence between parties and their electorate in the 2019 regional election in Flanders

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Abstract

The policy positions and priorities of voters have become central in explaining electoral behaviour, to the detriment of traditional party affiliation. In Flanders, this has contributed to the rise of "new parties" and the demise of the three mainstream parties, whose convergence weakened their ideological profile. Using data from the RepResent electoral survey, I compare how representative the different Flemish parties were of the opinions of their electorate for the May 2019 regional election, using two measurements of congruence. This research shows that two of the three mainstream parties (the CD&V and the Open Vld) have some of the lowest scores on both types of measurements. Meanwhile, the sp.a is not only more representative of the positions of its electorate, but also of the voters of its left-wing rivals (Groen and Pvda) than the party of their choice, showing that the sp.a struggles to create enthusiasm for a program that is nevertheless in line with the demands of progressive voters.

Résumé

Les opinions politiques et les priorités des électeurs sont devenues essentielles pour expliquer le comportement électoral, au détriment des liens partisans traditionnels. En Flandre, cela a contribué à la montée de "nouveaux partis", et au déclin des trois partis traditionnels, dont la convergence vers le centre a affaibli le profil idéologique. Grâce aux données de l'enquête électorale RepResent, nous comparons la représentativité des différents partis flamands des opinions de leur électorat respectif pour les élections régionales du 26 mai 2019, en utilisant deux mesures de congruence. Notre recherche montre que deux des trois partis traditionnels (le CD&V et l'Open Vld) ont obtenu des scores parmi les plus faibles pour ces deux types de mesures. Par ailleurs, le sp.a est le plus représentatif des positions de son électorat, mais aussi des électeurs de ses rivaux de gauche (Groen et Pvda), ce qui montre que le sp.a peine à susciter l'enthousiasme pour un programme pourtant conforme aux exigences des électeurs progressistes.

INTRODUCTION

Partisan dealignment, programmatic diversification and niche party success are among the most important trends that have reshaped the political landscape in Western Europe since the end of World War II. In a number of countries, the emergence of new cleavages shook up the political arena, contributing to the rise of new policy issues and the success of new parties. As a result, the importance of policy issues in explaining electoral behaviour has grown over the years, to the detriment of traditional partisan affiliation. But did this programmatic diversification and subsequent partisan fragmentation lead to better representation of the personal policy positions of voters? Little comparative research has focussed specifically on the potential gap between mainstream and niche parties in terms of representativeness of the opinion of their voters. In light of issue voting theory, this paper deals with the alignment of opinions between parties and their voters in a multiparty setting. I chose to focus on the May 2019 regional election in Flanders, as it perfectly fits the description of the aforementioned trends that have been observed by scholars in recent years.

Using data from the RepResent electoral survey, I compare the situation of mainstream parties with that of niche parties by looking at a set of indicators of issue voting theory that each play a decisive role in voting choice. First, issue ownership theory enables us to understand how voters situated the various parties in relation to policy issues; then, I evaluate the representativeness of both mainstream and niche parties by measuring the alignment of the different parties on the opinions of their voters, in order highlight potential disparities between these party types. A particular attention is devoted to the situation of the sp.a (social-democrats), by far the most affected by these trends. To do so, two types of congruence measurements are compared: overall congruence and congruence on issues that are personally salient for voters. The aim of this research is to test whether mainstream parties are effectively less representative of their voters than niche parties by looking at the Flemish case. While the research shows that 2 of

the 3 mainstream parties (CD&V, Christian-democrats and Open Vld, liberals) score the lowest, the situation of the sp.a (socialists) is contrary to the expectations. The party is not only the most representative of the positions of its electorate – all parties – combined, but also performs better with progressive voters than its two rivals on the left.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 Shifts in voting behavior

For Lipset and Rokkan (1967), party systems originate from structural divisions in society which define the main political orientations of a given country throughout its history. However in recent years, these so-called cleavages have become insufficient in explaining the contemporary political landscape of numerous countries, including Belgium (de Coorebyter, 2008). After World War II, most western nations underwent a process of deindustrialisation, and gradually transitioned into post-industrial societies (Kitschelt & Rehm, 2015; Inglehart & Flanagan, 1987). The main socio-political consequence if this shift was the decline of economic-inspired cleavages as strong determinants of voting behaviour, in favor of the non-economic dimensions of the political space (Coffé, 2008; Wagner & Meyer, 2014; Kitschelt, 1994). According to the sociological approach, these evolutions of socioeconomic conditions and subsequent value reorientation would be the main determinant of partisan dealignment, shifting support towards challenger parties (Meguid, 2005; Wagner & Meyer, 2014). Inglehart and Flanagan (1987) highlighted the emergence of a new divide in post-industrial societies as early as the 1970s[1] between materialism – oriented towards the acquisition of material goods – and post-materialism, which transcends material needs and is geared towards well-being. Furthermore, the construction of

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[1] If one accepts that suggesting the emergence of new divisions does not fundamentally call into question cleavage theory.

strong and comprehensive welfare states in Northern Europe has contributed to mitigating the politicisation of socioeconomic issues, making sociocultural issues such as law-and-order or national identity more salient (Kitschelt & Rehm, 2015). In other words, economic prosperity and social gains reinforced individualisation and shifted the debate towards new policy issues (Callaghan, 2004). These changes illustrate the growing complexification of western societies, making it more difficult for established parties – especially social-democrats – to keep catering to their shrinking traditional base while trying to accommodate the demands of the new "salaried middle class", focussed on "non-material" policy issues (Delwit, 2004; Kitschelt, 1994).

Voters also became more informed, thanks to the emergence of mass media, making them more capable of discerning the multidimensionality of the political arena (Kitschelt & Rehm, 2015; Wagner & Meyer, 2014). As a result, old mass parties faced difficulties adjusting to the increasing heterogeneity of voters' programmatic appeals. For Inglehart (1990), there is a direct link between economic prosperity and salience of post-material issues in the national political debate, meaning that a growing proportion of voters are now voting on specific policy issues, a "short-term" factor, and no longer based on "long-term" partisan affiliation or community membership (Dassonneville, et al., 2015). For issue voting theorists, traditional partisan affiliation has made way for more rational electoral behaviour, with voters being more aware of the variety of policy issues put forward by parties and forging their own opinion on these issues (Maddens, 1996). However, if opinions on cultural issues now have more explanatory power of electoral behaviour than socioeconomic attributes, the latter still play a leading role in shaping their opinions (Van den Berg & Coffé, 2012). Issue voting on its own can only account for a partial explanation of voting behaviour (Schmitt & Binder, 2006).

1.2   Diversification of the partisan landscape

Programmatic diversification subsequently led to more fragmented party systems, with established centrist parties converging to the centre programmatically[2] in an attempt to capture this diversifying electorate, and new "boutique" parties seeking support from the more extreme fringes of the electorate, especially in party systems where proportional rules of seat allocation allowed for small parties to persevere, and electoral realignments to take place (Kitschelt & Rehm, 2015). The literature regarding these newcomers in the political arena is flourishing, some labelling them niche (Meguid, 2005; Adams, et al., 2006), anti-establishment (Schedler, 1996), or challenger parties (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016) and many more. On the other hand, there is not yet a clear conceptualisation of what a mainstream party is, most labels being ideal types (Moffitt, 2021). For Meguid (2005), the main difference between niche and mainstreams parties is the rejection by the former of the class-based nature of politics, and the importance of new issues that have been little-politicised by the latter. For her, mainstream parties thus correspond to the dominant centrist parties (from centre-left to centre-right). For Adam et al. (2006), the mainstream/niche distinction is based on party family and not on programmatic aspects, especially since most "niche" parties responding to the definition of Meguid have moved towards mainstream profiles, at least for some issues in their program (Wagner & Meyer, 2014). Finally, Moffit (2021) reminds that party labels are not fixed and mentions the role not only of parties themselves in their mutual labelling, but also of the media and scholars. It is not the aim of this paper to further debate on the nature or the validity of these labels. Subsequently, we retain the mainstream/ niche dichotomy in this research, as it fits our case study the best in comparison to other labels, in accordance with the elements presented hereabove.

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[2] Kitschelt describes the result of this phenomenon as "amorphous centrism" (p. 182), showing the blurring of the ideological profile of mainstream parties.

Overall, niche parties have been able to alter both the issue positioning of the established parties, but also the salience and the ownership of these issues. They progressively gained popularity on policy issues long dismissed by mainstream parties (immigration, the environment and regional autonomy), and shook their electoral dominance (Meguid, 2005). In recent years, these parties have also adopted strategies that made them more appealing to the electorate (Wagner & Meyer, 2014). But is the result of programmatic diversification and fragmentation of the partisan landscape a better representation of the opinions of voters? And how do these two types of parties perform comparatively in terms of representativeness of their electorate? So far, little research has focussed the potential variation between mainstream and niche parties regarding their alignment on the opinion of their voters (Giger & Lefkofridi, 2014).

1.3   Measuring representativeness

Policy congruence between citizens and the elite is one of the criteria for evaluating the democratic quality of a political system, as it enables an individual to cast a "correct vote" (Lesschaeve & Meulewaeter, 2015, p. 112). In most democracies, political parties present their platform to voters, and try to translate it into policy once elected (Klingemann, et al., 1994). For Pierce (1999), this corresponds to the "responsible party model", based on the following principles: (1) voters have personal opinions on policy issues; (2) voters compare their opinions to the issue positions of political parties, and choose a party based on their program; (3) voters choose the party that best represents their opinions. This third assumption is crucial in the "correct vote" literature, as voters are not always able to choose the party that best represents them, mainly because of a lack of clear information on the exact issue positions of parties, or of a lack of interest for politics (Walgrave & Lefevere, 2013). Walgrave and Lefevere identify three main sources for this lack of information: ideology – voters being more inclined to select parties that can be easily labelled regarding the main divisions

of the political space –; salience – policy issues not being all equally important for voters –; and complexity – as it is not always possible for voters to know exactly where a party stands for a given issue, because of the coalitional nature of the political system, or simply the plurality of the political offer. For the authors, this lack of information would be the main cause of "incorrect vote" (voter-party mismatch), hindering representativeness. All these criteria demonstrate that it remains difficult for voters to select the party that best represents their opinions. Nevertheless, several clues exist within issue voting theory to help explain how voters proceed when choosing a party over another in an election. I will go over these different indicators and clarify their role in the analysis.

1.4   Issue ownership and issue salience

For issue voting theorists, voters are now more informed, and select a party based on shared opinions on a range of policy issues (Walgrave & Lefevere, 2013). To facilitate this choice, the "ownership" of some parties of specific issues is very useful to voters to distinguish parties from one another (Petrocik, 1989). This concept was theorized by Budge et Farlie (1983) to explain that party choice could be guided by the acknowledged competence of a party on an issue, or its reputation for dealing with the issue best (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008). As a result, a party will perform better in an election if the issue it is commonly associated with are the centre of attention (Lachat, 2014). Depending on the issue at stake, a specific party will be recognized as the most committed to addressing it, and therefore the most capable of providing an effective solution. Hence, if a voter is unaware of the views of a party on all policy issues, he knows the position of the party on the topic which it is the most associated with (Walgrave & Lefevere, 2013). Ownership of an issue is not static and can be contested as new issues emerge (Blomqvist & Green-Pedersen, 2004). A party can also "trespass" on issues associated with other parties by emphasizing its communication on the topic (Wagner & Meyer, 2014). Furthermore, it is essential to mention the more recent

distinction between a spontaneous association of an issue with a party *(associative issue ownership)* – or the perceived commitment of a party to solving an issue –; and the competence of a party to tackle an issue (competence issue ownership) – the perceived ability of a party to "solve" a problem (Walgrave & Soontjens, 2019). Competence issue ownership would have a direct effect on electoral behavior, while associative issue ownership would affect voting choice only when an issue is decisive for the voter (Walgrave, et al., 2012). The impact of the reputation of a party with an issue on voting behavior is therefore conditioned by the importance of this issue in the eyes of the voter. Issue salience is thus indispensable to attain optimal representation, as parties should align with their voters especially on issues they care the most about (Traber, et al., 2018).

In fact, for salience theorists, a voter will choose the party he perceives to be the most competent to tackle an issue that he considers key in the election (Schmitt & Binder, 2006; Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Walgrave & Lefevere, 2017). They can be opposed to "valence issues", which are more consensual – for parties as well as voters –, such as the social security issue in Flanders (Coffé, 2008). The salience of an issue is therefore central to the role of issue ownership for a party in a given election. It is opposed to spatial conceptions of voting which postulate that a voter tries to maximise his vote by reducing the distance separating him from a candidate on a set of issues (Schmitt & Binder, 2006). For Giger and Lefkofridi (2014), salience should thus be modeled at the micro-level: that of the voter. To this end, they draw from Mansbridge (2009) "selection of representation" model, which states that the "alignment of objectives"[3] is a prerequisite to selecting a party. Their model of congruence therefore includes both the individual preferences of citizens (proximity) and their priorities (salience). For the authors, the alignment between parties and voters is as much about issue positioning

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[3] The authors define this idea as "the agreement between two or more people [...] in the context of representation through elections, this means that parties and their electorates agree on political issues." (p. 289)

as it is about priorities. They subsequently define this alignment as "congruence on salient issues" (p. 290). We can also add the distinction between personal and national issue salience, the latter of which is key to an election in general but exerts less influence on electoral behaviour than the personal priorities of voters (Lavine, et al., 1996). In fact, it is easier for a voter to have a clear-cut opinion on an issue if it is easily accessible in his or her memory (Fazio, 1986). Additionally, Walgrave and Lefevre (2013) found that the "popularity" of an issue both for the electorate and parties is a good indicator of their congruence level. Due to its decisive role in voting choice, I choose to include salience more prominently when measuring the representativeness of the different parties.

1.5   Policy congruence

Policy congruence provides a mean of measuring the quality of representation by establishing the degree of convergence between the preferences of the population and the policy-positions of the political elite, the equivalent of political parties in representative democracies (Van Haute & Deschouwer, 2018). Although there is no single way of conceptualizing congruence, we can identify three main types in the literature: congruence between masses and candidates, between masses and parties, and between masses and the government (Vandeleene, et al., 2017). Congruence is most often calculated by measuring "the distance between the average position of candidates, MPs, parties and that of voters" (p. 96). However, the comparison between the median voter and the median representative is not necessarily the most optimal methodological approach for estimating congruence between the masses and the elites (Golder & Stramski, 2010). Some authors propose to adapt the method to the number of actors involved. It is thereby essential to establish who is in presence on both sides, and subsequently adapt the methodology (Andeweg, 2011). In this vein, Golder and Stramski (2010) propose three different conceptualizations: one citizen versus one representative, several citizens versus one

representative and several citizens versus several representatives. Noting that a representative may correspond to a government, or to a party.

Congruence is also mostly measured on a single dimension, the left-right ideological positioning scale (Van Haute & Deschouwer, 2018). However, many recommend conceptualizing it based on several dimensions, and not only through a situation of actors on the left-right scale, which does not cover decisive issues for voters in a contemporary Western European democracy (Thomassen, 2012; Vandeleene, et al., 2017). Golder and Stramski (2010) subsequently propose to model congruence by including the distribution of the opinions of voters, instead of simply measuring the distance between the median citizen and its representatives. The left-right positioning scale is indeed insufficient to explain electoral behaviour in a multidimensional political landscape such as that of Flanders (Walgrave & Lefevere, 2013). Hence, some suggest taking issues that are salient for voters into account and evaluating the ability of parties to capture these issues (Önnudóttir, 2014), which is exactly the approach adopted in this paper.

2. CASE SELECTION

2.1 Restructuring of the Flemish partisan landscape

This paper focusses on Belgium, more specifically Flanders which offers a textbook example of fragmented political landscape (Dandoy & Joly, 2018), with struggling mainstream (or ex-pillar) parties (Luypaert, 2019). For Wessels and Schmitt (2008), voting choice would have more meaning in a multi-party landscape, where voters are able to choose the party that best matches their personal opinions. Since the duplication of the party system between the two main language groups of the country (French-speaking and Dutch-speaking), the Flemish political landscape underwent changes reminiscent to that of other western nations, with "non-material conflicts" occupying the centre of the political debate (Coffé, 2008), while socioeconomic

issues have progressively become valence issues and do not dominate the political agenda anymore (Blomqvist & Green Pedersen, 2004). But although the materialist/post-materialist divide is clearly present in Flanders, for Swyngedouw (1995) it is not sufficient on its own to explain the entire electoral space. He subsequently adds an additional divide, that of "universalist cultural openness" (openness to multiculturalism and equal rights for all) opposed to "particularistic cultural isolationism" (questions of immigration and national identity) (p. 789). As a result, we find on the one hand issues such as the environment, captured by Groen (greens), and on the other themes such as immigration and law and order, captured by the extreme right of the VB (Vlaams Belang) (Dandoy & Joly, 2018). We can also speak of a "contagion effect" (p. 42) of these themes on mainstream parties, following the success of the newcomers over the years.

In addition, the politicization of the immigration issue in Flanders has increased electoral support for the extreme right, which managed to become the "owner" of that issue over time (Coffé, 2008). The success of the VB has also pressured mainstream parties to adapt their positions on issues such as law and order and immigration (Erk, 2005). More recently, other exogenous factors have contributed to the favorable context for the extreme right. The European migration crisis, the terrorist attacks of 2016 and the corruption scandals that affected the Socialists in 2017 all strengthened the positions of the far right (Dandoy & Joly, 2018), and – to some extent – of the nationalist N-VA.

On the supply side, mainstream parties converged to the centre in the 1990s, meaning that they have adopted moderate views on the more divisive issues, and now try to ease internal tensions in order to display a consensual position to the public (Bouteca, et al., 2017). This convergence reached its peak in 1999, when Socialists and Liberals stepped into a coalition excluding the Christian Democrats for the first time. This event marked the end of their polar opposition on socioeconomic questions, thanks to the

introduction of the notion of "active welfare state" with its "third-way" overtones (Deschouwer & Lucardie, 2003). Convergence also made it more difficult for voters to identify where mainstream parties stand, having become "mediators" rather than "ideologues" (Bouteca, et al., 2017). This in turn facilitated the shift from one party to another for voters (Bouteca, 2011). Electoral volatility has more than doubled in Belgium between the 1980s and the 2000s (from 15% to 40%), although the numbers have stabilized since 2014 (Dassonneville, et al., 2015). Today, the political landscape in Flanders is characterized by its fragmentation (Dandoy & Joly, 2018).

Hence, the paper first focuses on the issue ownership of parties, in order to better visualize how voters identified parties in relation to policy issues and themes. Based on existing research presented hereabove, I expect that **mainstream parties do not have ownership of post-materialist issues**, these issues having been captured by niche parties over the years, and the convergence of mainstream parties having blurred their ideological profile. In doing so, the paper is already able to give a first picture of the potential gap between mainstream and niche parties regarding the capture of sociocultural as well as socioeconomic issues.

I am aware that labelling the N-VA as a niche party is questionable, considering its enduring government participation at the regional level and its "catch-all" profile (Van Haute, 2016). In fact, all Flemish parties except from those at the extremes could potentially be labeled mainstream, as they all participated to a coalition government at some point and cannot be limited to single-issue parties anymore (Wagner & Meyer, 2014). Hence, the label "ex-pillar" was added as a decisive criterium to distinguish between Flemish mainstream and niche parties. In fact, Flemish mainstream parties share a similar organizational history: all three of them (CD&V, Open Vld and sp.a) used to be "pillar-parties". In Belgium, pillarization corresponded to the division of society into several distinct political subcultures that revolved around these three parties (Van den Berg & Coffé, 2012; Delwit, 2011). Additionally, as evidenced by

Moffitt (2021), scholars as well as the media both play a role in the "mainstreaming" of a party. In Flanders, the ex-pillar parties are referenced to as mainstream parties (*traditionele partijen*) by scholars and the media alike (De Ceulaer, 2019; Luypaert, 2019).

2.2 The 2019 regional election

The May 2019 election reiterated the rift between Flemish mainstream parties and the other political formations, at both the national and regional levels. The VB (extreme right) established itself as the big winner, coming back from a very low score in 2014 and grabbing voters from almost all parties (Van Erkel, et al., 2019). The Pvda (extreme left) also performed well, entering the Flemish parliament for the first time (Mayeur, 2019). Finally, although polls had predicted a better outcome for the greens (Groen) following the "climate marches" that punctuated the pre-election period (Heyvaert, 2019), the party nevertheless managed to consolidate its place in the Flemish partisan landscape. This election was also preceded by the fall of the Michel government in October of 2018, due to the withdrawal of the N-VA of the coalition after the signing of the Global Compact for Migration by the MR (liberal) Prime Minister despite the opposition from the N-VA. This crisis would have a significant impact on the news coverage of the pre-election period (Maddens, 2018).

For academics, voters expressed discontent towards the parties of the ruling coalition, which was explicitly expressed in the ballot box by growing support for parties located at the extremes (Goovaerts, et al., 2020). These observations make it relevant for us to test the different indicators we presented on that specific case, the contrast between mainstream and niche parties being declared a characteristic of the election. As previously seen, voters are now better able to align their choice with their personal opinions, and vote for parties closer to them ideologically (Lesschaeve & Meulewaeter, 2015). But do all these parties represent these opinions in the same proportions? Previous research has demonstrated that niche parties are more

congruent with voters on salient issues, in part because they are not constrained to moderate positions on contentious issues (Giger & Lefkofridi, 2014). For the Flemish case, **I expect niche parties to be more congruent with their voters on salient issues, and mainstream parties to be more congruent overall (on all issues)**.

The overall context of the election was not favourable to mainstream parties, especially the social-democrats which are particularly divided on issues linked to globalisation and have the most hesitant (and least discernible) positions on themes such as law-and-order and immigration (Bouteca & Terrière, 2017). I wish to give more attention to the situation of the sp.a, which appears to be the most affected by the trends we have highlighted: it appeals to a shrinking segment of voters, and niche parties captured now salient "post-materialist" issues (both left and right). As a result, **I expect that the party is not as representative of progressive voters as its two rivals on the left (Groen and Pvda)**. By looking at the performance of the party with other progressive voters regarding its alignment on their policy positions, the analysis will examine whether the Pvda and Groen offer a more representative alternative on the left.

3. DATA AND METHOD

The aim of this paper is to investigate a potential gap between mainstream and niche parties in terms of representation: first by identifying how voters situated the different parties in the political landscape in the May 2019 election; and secondly by establishing how the different parties performed in terms of representativeness of the opinions of their voters, overall and on salient issues thanks to policy congruence calculations. This research being conducted at the micro level, I use data from the electoral survey by questionnaire conducted by RepResent for the 2019 election cycle in Belgium (for more information about the survey, see appendix 7). It provides a lot of information on the opinions of Flemish voters, including on the issue ownership of

parties and on personally salient issues for respondents. The paper compares the different electoral bodies in order to give a better idea of the variations within the population, as the electorate is often studied as a monolithic entity in similar research (Smith & Tsutsumi, 2016), and because such an approach is more instructive in multiparty systems (Traber, et al., 2018). The paper focuses on the non-Brussels Flemish population (N=1975) to carry out the analyses[4]. Therefore it relies on the vote for the Flemish regional parliament to isolate the electoral bodies of the different parties. These elections have grown in importance over the years and receive the same level of media attention as national elections (Van Aelst & Lefevere, 2011). This approach fits the purpose of this research, which is to determine the extent to which the parties were representative of the views of their electorate based on the vote they casted on election day. This method has also been adopted in previous research on this database (Goovaerts, et al., 2020), which I also use here. Hence, I make this choice to remain consistent and complementary with previous research. The same applies to data weighting, as the results are presented based on unweighted data but provide a copy of the results taking weighting into account in the Appendix section. The database makes it possible to weigh the data by age, gender, and education level.

Information about the issues parties are associated with by voters can be easily generated through descriptive analysis on SPSS. The following question was asked to respondents: "When you think about the following political themes, which party do you spontaneously think of first? This is not necessarily the party you agree with on this issue". This formulation already compels us to focus on the "associative" dimension of issue ownership. The "spontaneous" aspect of the question, and the fact that it is explicitly stated that the respondent does not necessarily have to agree with the party he is thinking of leaves little doubt as to the "associative" nature of the response it induces. This information gives us a first glimpse into the Flemish partisan landscape as it

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[4] To simplify the proceedings and align with previous research.

appeared in the mind of the respondents, making it indispensable for the research. In terms of salience, the data from RepResent enables us to highlight the key issues of the election in different ways: for the sample as a whole or by electoral body. However, we keep our focus on the list of 18 propositions to be able to compare the two types of measurements.

In doing so, we shed light on the opinion alignment between voters and the party of their choice in the May 2019 election. Congruence between voters and political elites is one of the criteria for evaluating the democratic quality of a political system. In fact, it enables the voter to cast a "correct vote" (Lesschaeve & Meulewaeter, 2015, p. 112). A similar approach to that of Goovaerts *et al.* (2020) is used here, namely to compare the responses of parties and respondents to the list of 18 proposals included in the RepResent electoral survey[5]. These 18 proposals cover a relatively comprehensive range of issues (immigration, taxation, environment, etc.). Respondents were asked to give their opinion on these 18 items by rating their level of agreement/ disagreement with each one of them on a scale going from 1 to 4 (1=totally disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=totally agree). I also received the answers of parties to the 18 policy items, but those were not nuanced as was the case for the respondents (0=disagree, 1=agree). I subsequently paired 1 with 2 and 3 with 4 on the side of the respondents to make the calculations, lacking comparable information from the parties.

Hence, I consider individual congruence as the sum of the proposals for which a respondent and his party of choice expressed an identical response. salience is also taken into account in this study. The database enables us to highlight the proposals that respondents considered crucial in the list of 18[6]. They were asked to choose between 3 and 5 of them. We are subsequently able to measure congruence for personally salient questions for each respondent, and to uncover disparities between

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[5] The full list of the 18 proposals can be found in Appendix 1
[6] In response to the question: "Could you [...] identify three to five proposals from the policy proposals mentioned above that you consider to be the most important? »

parties. One of the limitations of this approach is that the 18 proposals do not constitute the most in-depth source of information about the personal opinions of voters and party programs. Yet the aim of this study is to highlight general trends, and not necessarily to delve into details. To validate or refute our expectations regarding the representativeness of the different parties, I compare the average congruence scores of the different parties with their respective electorates.

4. RESULTS

4.1   Issue ownership and issue salience

Table 1 presents the main policy issues as they appear in the survey, and the party most frequently associated with these issues by the respondents. The first observations already partially support our expectations regarding the issue ownership of Flemish parties: the three mainstream parties do not have an overwhelming "associative issue ownership" with any issue.

Table 1: Policy issues and their associated parties for the 2019 election (in %)

	Social Security	Employment	Immigration	Environment	Law & Order	Defense	State reform	Taxation
CD&V	10,3	10,6	1,4	1,4	4,1	16,1	3,6	5,2
sp.a	**33,8**	15,2	3,2	2,0	2,5	3,8	2,4	11,2
Open Vld	5,2	15,6	2,2	1,5	3,2	8,5	3,8	**24,3**
Groen	1,9	1,6	3,0	**70,1**	1,0	0,8	0,9	5,4
N-VA	13,2	**17,5**	24,8	5,2	29,1	24,2	**54,1**	16,1
Pvda	8,5	8,1	1,7	1,6	1,5	1,7	1,7	6,3
VB	7,8	6,8	**51,8**	3,7	**38,0**	8,0	12,7	7,7
All parties	6,2	10,0	3,4	4,9	6,4	10,3	5,0	8,5
None of the parties	13,0	14,6	8,5	9,7	14,1	**26,6**	15,8	15,3

The highest score of a party for an issue is set in bold, a weighted version of the table can be found in Appendix 2

We first observe that, in 2019, the sp.a was still associated with the social security issue by more than a third of respondents. It is the only mainstream party to achieve such a score for any issue. At the same time, the most equivocal figures are certainly these of younger parties, which have almost undisputed associative ownership of themes that can be assimilated to the sociocultural divide, the likes of immigration (the VB at almost 52%) and state reform (the N-VA at 54%). The high score of Groen for the environment (70%) is interesting in that this issue is considered a valence issue in Flanders (Dandoy & Joly, 2018). On the other hand, mainstream parties are barely mentioned for any of these issues, but also when it comes to more conventional issues such as employment or taxation. The Open Vld is associated by about a quarter of respondents (24,3%) with the taxation issue, and the CD&V does not "own" any of the issues other than defense for which it is nevertheless defeated by the "none of the parties" option.

This absence of clear associative issue ownership for mainstream parties is an indirect illustration of the blurring of their ideological profile in the eyes of respondents. It is even more striking for issues related to the sociocultural divide (immigration, environment), which they are almost never associated with by respondents, confirming our expectations. Of the three mainstream parties, the sp.a is therefore the only one that is still associated with an issue by a non-negligible number of respondents, although we cannot talk of an overwhelming association as is the case with all the other parties with the issues they own. The relatively high score of the N-VA on a lot of issues when compared to other parties could be attributed its position as biggest party (also in the sample), but it could also reflect the fact that issue ownership is affected by partisan preference, which acts as a "perceptual screen" though which voters perceive the world (Walgrave & Soontjens, 2019, p. 137). These results provide tangible proof of the existence of a gap between mainstream and niche parties, with the former being only marginally associated with the issues that arose from the new cleavages compared to the latter, and no longer appearing as the 'exclusive' owners of any issue whatsoever.

4.2   Representativeness of Flemish parties in the 2019 election

Table 4 shows the two types of measurements used in thisresearch to measure policy congruence. The second column gives the average number of proposals which the party and its voters agreed on (out of 18), I then converted into percentages to facilitate comparisons with the second type of measurement. The third column deals with the salient issues, for which I give a score in percent, not all respondents having selected the same number of proposals (between 3 and 5). The score therefore corresponds to the average alignment score of a party with its voters on proposals they designated as personally salient. This approach certainly favors niche parties, with supposedly more homogeneous electorates in terms of policy position and priorities, over larger catch-all parties (see Appendix 3). However, the aim of this work is precisely to highlight a potential gap between mainstream parties and their rivals regarding the overall representativeness of the opinions of their voters.

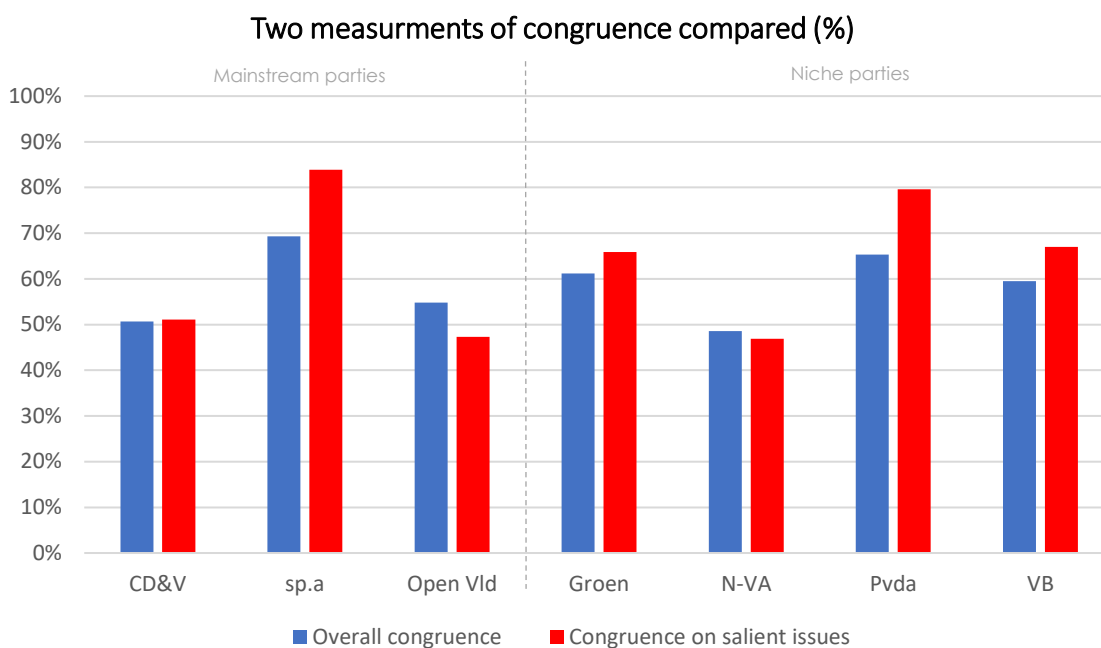**Table 4: Congruence scores of parties with their voters***

	Electoral Body	Congruence on all issues (%)	Congruence on salient issues (%)
Mainstream parties	CD&V	50,66	50,84
	sp.a	69,33	83,83
	Open Vld	54,72	47,36
Niche parties	Groen	61,18	65,83
	N-VA	48,61	46,87
	Pvda	65,27	79,62
	VB	59,55	67,23
	Anova	$F= 96.69$ $p= 0.000$	$F= 101.72$ $p= 0.000$

*A weighted version of this table is available in Appendix 4

The comparison of congruence scores does not fully support or contradict our expectations: two of the three mainstream parties do have lower congruence scores than niche parties on salient issues, meaning that their respective electorates tended to disagree more often with their chosen party on proposals they considered salient in comparison to their niche opponents. It should be noted that the differences between parties are not colossal. Nevertheless, there are exceptions in the two main categories that we have identified: the N-VA for younger parties, and the sp.a for mainstream parties. The N-VA has the lowest congruence score (M=8,75), and the sp.a the highest of all parties combined (M=12,48). It also shows higher congruence scores for parties at the extremes (VB and Pvda), as previously highlighted by Goovaerts *et al.* (2020). This is especially true for congruence on salient issues, which supplements their findings. Conversely, mainstream parties and the N-VA display lower congruence scores (or more or less equal for the CD&V) on salient issues, with the exception of the sp.a.

The most striking observation remains that of the score of the sp.a, which appears to be the most representative of all parties from a programmatic point of view. However, such a suggestion must be put into perspective, as the 18 proposals which this research is based on do not constitute an exact reproduction of the platform of the party. In addition, the N-VA, the largest party in Flanders, has the lowest congruence score even for salient issues. In both cases however, these results are not necessarily as counterintuitive as they might seem. In order to better visualize the results, chart 1 puts the two measurements of congruence into perspective. The Pvda and the sp.a stand out in terms of congruence on salient issues, with much higher figures than for overall congruence (between 10 and 15 extra percentage points). The same can be said of the VB and Groen, in more moderate proportions. On the contrary, the Open Vld and the N-VA have lower congruence scores on salient issues than on all issues, although the differences are not as noticeable.

Two measurments of congruence compared (%)

Mainstream parties | Niche parties

A bar chart comparing "Overall congruence" (blue) and "Congruence on salient issues" (red) across parties CD&V, sp.a, Open Vld (mainstream) and Groen, N-VA, Pvda, VB (niche), with values approximately:
- CD&V: Overall ~50%, Salient ~51%
- sp.a: Overall ~69%, Salient ~84%
- Open Vld: Overall ~55%, Salient ~47%
- Groen: Overall ~61%, Salient ~66%
- N-VA: Overall ~49%, Salient ~47%
- Pvda: Overall ~65%, Salient ~80%
- VB: Overall ~59%, Salient ~67%

■ Overall congruence   ■ Congruence on salient issues

For some scholars, the N-VA now appears to share similarities with its mainstream coalition partners at the regional level (CD&V and Open Vld), having become a "government party" after being in power continuously for more than 10 years (Bouteca & Terrière, 2019). This perception is also present in the media (De Vadder, 2018). Our results also show the heterogeneity of the issue positions of its voters, through the low congruence scores, reminiscent of that of its two coalition partners. This could reflect the "catch-all-ization" of the party that now attracts a diversified electorate in terms of policy positions (Goovaerts, et al., 2019). Finally, the fact that congruence is generally higher on salient issues, especially for niche parties, substantiates salience theory. It appears that salient issues do play a prominent role in party choice, particularly because of the higher level of information of voters on issues they consider personally important (Giger & Lefkofridi, 2014). However, this is not the case for all parties. These findings also contradict the expectations when it comes to the representativeness of mainstream parties on all issues: not only do they not perform better than their niche adversaries in terms of congruence on all issues, but parties at

the extremes (VB and Pvda) score much better than them on that indicator as well, supplementing similar results from another research by Costello et al. (2020) on different countries.

4.3   Complexity, a useful indicator?

These observations are consistent with those of Walgrave and Lefevere (2013) relative to the complexity of a partisan system: the more important the number of parties to choose from, the more difficult it is for a voter to choose the one best representing his or her opinions. The authors found greater levels of incongruence for right-wing than for left-wing Flemish parties for the 2009 election. While the partisan landscape ten years later has somewhat changed, with a third competitor on the left (the Pvda), this statement was still partially true in 2019. Right-wing and centrist parties still represent a majority of voters (56,4% and 71,8% with the CD&V), and still have the lowest congruence scores, with the exception of the VB[7]. We could also argue that one of the reasons for the high congruence score of the sp.a is that the party has relied on its core electorate, greatly reduced under the effect of growing competition on the left (Demeulemeester, 2019). This could explain the low degree of disagreement between the party and its electorate in this election, even in terms of dispersion (see boxplot in Appendix 3). All respondents who voted for the sp.a agreed with at least 8 proposals out of 18, the highest minimum value of all parties. These findings therefore reject the assumption that the social-democrats do not represent the opinions of their voters, in fact they even perform better than their niche rivals in terms of policy-congruence. However, we cannot assert this without looking at the performance of the party with the electorate of other parties, especially that of its left-wing rivals.

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[7] Official results, retrieved from https://www.vlaanderenkiest.be/verkiezingen2019

4.4   The sp.a and Flemish voters

More so than its two other mainstreams counterparts, the sp.a suffered the most from the erosion of the pillars (Coffé, 2008). It is now perceived as an "old left" clientelist party whose fighting days are long gone (Bouteca & Terrière, 2017), and has not benefitted from its time opposition. A study from 2010 revealed that the Socialists were confronted to a mostly centre-right leaning Flemish electorate (Vander Weyden & Abts, 2010), making the rising interest for the Pvda in the 2019 election even more threatening, 18% of the electorate of the extreme left party in 2019 being ex-sp.a voters (Van Erkel, et al., 2019). For these reasons, a particular attention was givento the party in the analysis, in order to give more perspective to its situation in terms of representativeness of the progressive electorate. Table 5 presents congruence scores of the sp.a with the different electorates on all issues (salient and non-salient). The goal here is to estimate how congruent progressive voters were with the sp.a in the May 2019 election. This should give us an idea of the added value of the party for left-wing voters, but also for centrist ones. Unsurprisingly, the electorate of the VB (M=10,52) and of the N-VA (M=10,15) are the least congruent with the Socialists. On the other hand, the electorate of the left-wing parties display relatively high congruence scores with the sp.a, very close to that of the party with its own voters. Both the voters of Groen (M=12,47) and of the Pvda (M=12,74) are more congruent with the sp.a than with the party they ultimately chose to vote for on May 26. This demonstrates the proximity of these electorates in terms of policy positions, at least for the 18 proposals. The sp.a also has the highest congruence score of the three left-wing parties with the electorate of all other political parties. This observation certainly reflects its more centrist position in comparison to its two competitors on the left.

Table 5: Congruence of the SP. A (and left-wing parties) with the different electorates

Electoral Body	Congruence with the SP.A	Congruence with the PVDA	Congruence with Groen
CD&V	11,17	9,81	8,69
Groen	**12,47**	11,73	11,01
N-VA	10,15	8,52	7,41
Open Vld	10,91	9,67	8,41
Pvda	**12,74**	11,76	10,59
SP.A	**12,48**	11,33	10,02
VB	10,52	9,07	7,52
Anova	$F= 32.22$ $p= 0.000$	$F= 53.18$ $p= 0.000$	$F= 63.17$ $p= 0.000$

This finding is subsequently contrary to my expectations: the left-wing electorate seems to converge with the sp.a in terms of policy positions. This constitutes evidence that the party lacks added value for progressive voters, though not from a programmatic point of view – as expected – but rather because of the apparent homogeneity of their opinions. In the case of Groen, while their voters are extremely similar in terms of policy positions, the two parties do not attract the same voters and speak to different age categories and social groups. In 2014, Groen voters were younger and more educated than those of the SP. A (Swyngedouw, et al., 2016). This situation remains unchanged today (see Appendix 5 and 6), with Groen still attracting the largest contingent of highly educated voters (54,8%) – more than double that of the SP.A (24,2%) – and also a much younger electorate than the Socialists. This structural differentiation of their electorate therefore makes them very complementary, the socio-demographic profiles of their voters overlapping in a very limited way. This stratification of their respective electorate could explain the few points of divergence between them on issues such as immigration (Swyngedouw, et al., 2016).

That the sp.a has not yet managed to win against its main competitor since 2003 could mainly be because it has not been able to convince Groen voters of the relevance of its program. This statement, however, could also be applied to Groen the other way around. In fact, the program of the Socialists is not as much the core of the problem as its promotion. Despite the apparent competitiveness of its policy positions in terms of representativeness, the party has failed to convince voters, both on the left and in the center. As Bouteca and Terrière (2017) declared, "politics is not just a battle of ideas, it is also a battle of leaders" (p. 11). The advent of Conner Rousseau as the new party leader appears to give some credit to this theory, some media already comparing him to Steve Stevaert – former very popular leader of the socialists – (Cobbaert, 2020), or even Bart De Wever – leader of the N-VA and one of the most popular politicians in Flanders for over a decade – (De Morgen, 2020). On the one hand, one can only insist on the fragility of such an approach, as the experience of the party with Steve Stevaert attested: the sudden electoral success of the party vanished with his resignation following a scandal. But on the other hand, its strength should also not be underestimated as Bart De Wever remains central to the success of the N-VA to this day (Bouteca & Terrière, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The goal of this article was to determine whether the electorally struggling Flemish mainstream parties were less representative of their voters than their niche rivals, following the programmatic convergence of the former and subsequent capture of newly salient policy issues by the latter. The analysis of the RepResent electoral survey data seems to confirm the existence of a nuanced gap between mainstream parties and niche parties for the indicators used in this research. For issue ownership, while mainstream parties still had a partial ownership of few issues – mostly valence issues –

and the fact that they no longer hold a "near-exclusive ownership" plays in favor of their adversaries. Niche parties are clearly identified by voters as owners of issues originating from the new cleavages (universalist/particularistic, materialist/post-materialist), which have become at least as important as more conventional socioeconomic issues for voters. The conclusions, although counter-intuitive for the sp.a, give partial credit to the idea of crisis of representativeness for two of the three mainstream parties: the CD&V and the Open Vld. It is exemplified not only by their lack of issue ownership of any issue, but also by their low scores in terms of policy congruence, for all issues as well as salient ones. Interestingly, the situation of the N-VA is very reminiscent to that of CD&V and Open Vld in terms of congruence, while the sp.a distinguishes itself from its two mainstream colleagues.

For the sp.a, the results show that the party failed to persuade voters despite its residual ownership of the social security issue, and the fact that its policy positions were perfectly capable of attracting progressive voters. This was evidenced by the high congruence scores of the party with the electorates of Groen and the Pvda. Base on these elements it seems that the main problem of the sp.a lies in its lack of leadership in the face of growing competition, as evidenced by the outflow of voters from the party to the Pvda in the 2019 election (Van Erkel, et al., 2019). The image of the party among voters, and especially its perceived (in)competence, has played a much more important role in voting behavior than its ideological orientation. These results therefore contradict the idea of a program not in line with the demands of the electorate, reminding us that issue voting theory can only partially explain voting behavior and is much more useful when combined with other tools such as socio-demographic data.

AFTERWORD

Ten years ago, Verhaeghe *et al.* (2010) declared that to revive itself after the 2010 disappointing electoral performance, the SP.A did not necessarily need to adapt its program in order to attract centrist voters (preference accommodation*)*, but rather create a demand on the left by convincing voters of the relevance of its program (preference shaping*)*. For the authors, the center-right orientation of a majority of Flemish voters, if it remained a fact, was not inescapable. It was therefore up to the party to bring the public opinion back to the left, keeping in mind that the political space in the center is already overloaded. The Flemish political landscape has certainly changed over the past decade, but it is now more than ever anchored to the right (Huyghebaert, 2019). This research shows that ten years later, the SP.A still faces the same problem: its weak ability to sell its electoral platform, despite obvious affinities between the party and a non-negligible share of voters. With the rise of the Pvda, its situation even seems to be worsening on the left, although it is still too early to draw conclusions about the good performance of the party on May 26, 2019. Finally, this election could be considered a status quo election for the SP.A. The party can still count on its consolidated electoral base but cannot hope to expand it without finding leadership that can showcase its agenda and generate enthusiasm. The appeal of the new leader of the party to the youth may prove lifesaving, but there is still a long way to go to re-emerge as a legitimate competitor on the political scene.

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Appendix

1. List of the 18 proposals of the RepResent survey

|	
1.	Hosting transit migrants must be a punishable offence.
2.	Situation tests must be put in place to detect discrimination in employment.
3.	There must be a test on the European values in order to obtain the Belgian nationality.
4.	If the request for asylum of families with children is rejected, these families can be placed in detention pending their repatriation.
5.	By 2024, the company cars that run with petrol or diesel must be banned.
6.	The VAT on electricity must be reduced from 21 to 6%.
7.	There must be a tax on plane tickets in order to raise their price.
8.	Nuclear power plants must remain operational after 2025.
9.	We cannot drive while having drunk alcohol.
10.	Abortion must be allowed beyond the 12th week of a pregnancy.
11.	Sperm donation must no longer be anonymous.
12.	Great fortunes must be more taxed.
13.	Wages must no longer be automatically indexed.
14.	The fingerprints of all citizens must be kept in a central database.
15.	Shops must be able to choose when to do sales.
16.	A retirement pension of at least 1500€ per month must be put in place.
17.	The government should be composed of an equal number of men and women.
18.	Important political decisions must be handled by citizens via a referendum.

2. Issue ownership, weighted data

Electoral Body	Social Security	Employment	Immigration	Environ ment	Law and order	Defense	State reform	Taxation
CD&V	8,4	9,3	1,1	1,2	3,8	15,2	3,2	5,0
Groen	2,2	1,9	2,8	68,2	1,3	1,1	1,1	5,1
N-VA	12,5	16,2	22,4	5,0	27,2	22,8	48,7	16,2
Open Vld	5,3	14,8	2,4	1,5	3,0	7,8	3,9	21,1
PVDA	8,9	8,7	2,1	1,9	1,7	1,8	2,0	6,0
sp.a	31,9	14,8	3,1	2,3	2,7	3,8	2,6	11,1
VB	9,4	8,6	52,7	3,9	37,7	9,5	14,2	9,5
All the parties =	6,5	9,6	3,6	5,2	6,8	10,4	5,8	8,9
None of the parties	14,8	16,0	9,7	10,7	15,8	27,7	18,5	17,0

Data weighted by age, gender, and education level

3. Boxplot
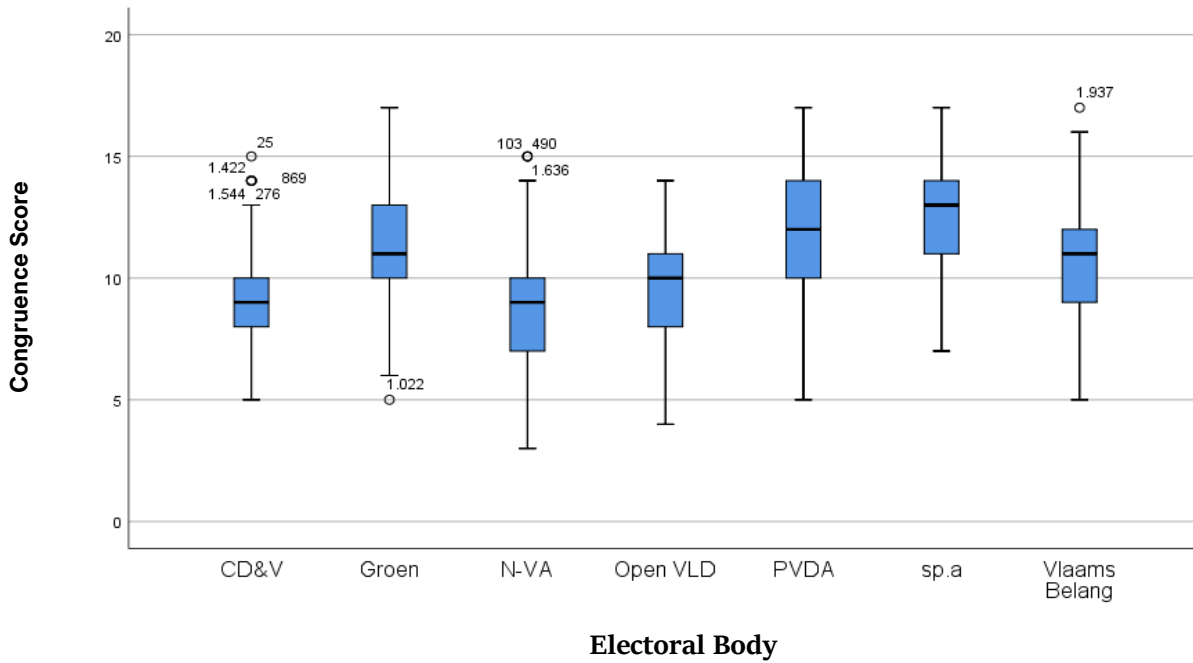
Electoral Body

4. Congruence scores, weighted data

Electoral Body	Overall Congruence	Congruence on salient issues (%)
CD&V	8,97	50,31%
Groen	11,00	65,16%
N-VA	8,57	45,36%
Open Vld	9,87	47,91%
PVDA	11,85	79,35%
sp.a	12,45	84,51%
VB	10,45	65,92%
ANOVA	$F= 109.55$ $p= 0.000$	$F= 101.97$ $p= 0.000$

Data weighted by age, gender, and education level

5. Electoral bodies by education level

Electoral Body	None or primary	Secondary incomplete	Secondary complete	Higher education (non-university)	University
CD&V	2,2%	13,7%	41,0%	26,2%	16,9%
Groen	1,3%	10,1%	34,0%	29,6%	25,2%
N-VA	0,9%	22,3%	40,6%	23,8%	12,4%
Open Vld	8,7%	21,1%	31,7%	24,8%	13,7%
Pvda	1,5%	31,3%	38,8%	21,6%	6,7%
sp.a	9,5%	22,3%	44,1%	14,7%	9,5%
VB	6,0%	28,9%	45,5%	14,1%	5,5%

Data weighted by age, gender, and education level

6. Electoral bodies by age groups

Electoral Body	25 and under	Between 26 and 40	Between 41 and 65	More than 65
CD&V	17,8%	16,2%	37,8%	28,1%
Groen	26,6%	27,8%	36,1%	9,5%
N-VA	7,5%	18,5%	39,9%	34,1%
Open Vld	10,5%	26,5%	37,7%	25,3%
Pvda	11,9%	32,8%	40,3%	14,9%
sp.a	8,1%	15,6%	50,7%	25,6%
VB	13,7%	24,3%	44,4%	17,7%

Data weighted by age, gender, and education level

7. Information about the RepResent survey

This research uses data from the two waves of online survey conducted by Kantar TNS at the request of RepResent (Representation and Democratic Resentment), a Belgian interuniversity consortium coordinated by Stefaan Walgrave and Jonas Lefevere (UAntwerpen), in collaboration with Sofie Marien (KULeuven), Karen Celis and Kris Deschouwer (VUB), Virginie Van Ingelgom and Benoît Rihoux (UCLouvain), and Emilie Van Haute and Jean-Benoît Pilet (ULB). Its aim is to study "the relationship between the functioning of representation and popular resentment towards democracy" (RepResent consortium, 2019). The first wave of the survey took place from April 5, 2019 to May 5, 2019, and the second from May 28 to June 18. The raw sample was made up of respondents recruited through online panels. Samples were compiled to be representative of the population of each region. The final net samples differ somewhat from the point of view of sex, age and level of education because of non-response. For this reason, weighting variables are present in the database to better match the samples to reality (Van Erkel, et al., 2019). They therefore allow us to verify the results. I am therefore following the same approach as the authors of previous research on this database by weighting data for socio-demographic variables and using unweighted data for the rest of our analysis. However, a copy of our results on the weighted data attached to each table is provided.