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Balancing Local Candidate Recruitment in Belgium

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Introduction

Recruiting candidates for local elections is a complex task. Even though some parties find difficult to attract candidates (mainly due to the decreased party membership and the lack of interest for local politics), one of the most important concerns is related to the subtle balance between different types of candidates on the list. Local parties need candidates who embody two main functions: (1) to attract votes (in open list systems) and (2) to serve the interests of the party once elected. As a result, party leaders tend to select candidates who belong to the party structure (incumbent councilors, party members, etc.) as well as candidates who could attract more votes (for example by including ‘candidats d’ouverture’ – ‘external’ candidates – on the list).

In order to uncover the diversity of local electoral strategies, guiding notably local recruitment, and why it matters for the electoral results of the lists, an interuniversity research project has been launched in the beginning of 2012. Following a large data collection process, this project has allowed for a quantitative analysis of the 1012 lists that participated in the 2012 local elections in the 262 Walloon municipalities (Belgium). The interest of studying local elections in the region of Wallonia was recently confirmed by Wille and Deschouwer (2007) that found out that local elections in

Wallonia are less nationalised than in other regions of the country (Brussels and Flanders). Consequently, the importance of local parties and local electoral lists is larger than in other regions and is more relevant for the study of candidate selection at the local level.

Among the data collected, the presence of different types of candidates (incumbent mayor and alderman, incumbent councilor, party member, 'external' candidate/'candidat d'ouverture', etc.) has been measured for each individual list. Using a logistic regression method, factors potentially explaining the variation of the presence of such candidates across lists and municipalities have been tested: demographic factors (size of the municipality, rural vs. urban, etc.), political factors (type of lists, independence from the national party, etc.) and party competition factors (number of competing lists, electoral alliances, etc.). This paper aims at presenting the first results of these analyses.

First, the legal and party-related regulation of candidate selection presented (section 1) and the data collected as well as a new typology of lists at the local level is discussed (section 2). Then, four aspects of local candidate recruitment are studied: the number of candidates on the lists (complete and incomplete lists) (section 3), the candidates that already have a mandate at another political level (section 4), the incumbent candidates (mayors, councillors) (section 5) and the 'candidats d'ouverture' ('external' candidates that are not party members and cannot be related to an existing party, section 6).

1. Legal and party regulation of candidate selection

Legal aspects

The Walloon code of local democracy and decentralization (Code de la démocratie et de la décentralisation locale, CDLD) regulates municipal elections in Wallonia (Matagne et al., 2009). Belgian citizens and European citizens (since the 2000 elections) have the right to stand for municipal elections if they enjoy their civil and political rights and reside in the territory of the municipality. EU citizens residing in Belgium can therefore sit in a local council. Unlike for federal and European elections, one can be candidate at

local elections at the age of 18. Are also ineligible for local elections, persons occupying some public offices or mandates: provincial governors, provincial 'secretary', district commissioners, advisers at the Council of State, members of the courts or the members of the municipal staff. Finally, the parties should take into account the fact that two members of the municipal body cannot be allies or relatives up to the second degree (not married or legally cohabiting).

It is interesting to note that the October 2012 elections were the last in which the parties were free to determine the distribution of male and female candidates on the lists. In 2012, the lists were to be composed of an equal number of men and women, with a maximum difference of one. In addition, the top two candidates from each list were to be of the same sex. From the municipal elections of 2018 onwards, the lists presented in Wallonia must respect the 'zipper' system. In other words, the lists must alternate men and women throughout the list.

Finally, there is an important rule regarding the designation of the future mayor. In Brussels and Flanders, members of the new majority are free to choose the mayor. In Walloon municipalities, since the 2006 elections, the candidate with the most preference votes within the strongest party of the majority coalition (or single party in the event of an absolute majority) is automatically designated as mayor, strengthening the role of the voter while weakening the role of the parties. An additional rule is imposed for mayors: they must be of Belgian nationality, contrary to the aldermen who may be from another Member State of the European Union.

Selection process of candidates according to the status of national parties

This section describes briefly the process of selection of candidates for the municipal elections for the main four Walloon parties: PS (Socialist party), MR (Reformist movement), CDH (Humanist democratic centre) and Ecolo (environmentalist/green party). Party statutes were used as the basis for determining the mechanisms in place, from a dual analytical approach. On the one hand, those in charge of the selection were identified. These actors – the 'selectorate' – can be distinguished by several features developed by Hazan and Rahat (2010): 'the selectorate may be more or less inclusive in

its size (one person to all members party) and more or less central in its location (at the commune or district, to the national level). On the other hand, the procedure was analysed: does it comprise several steps? Are all candidates selected in a similar fashion? These two dimensions allow us to analyse the selection process in a systematic manner for each of the main four Walloon national parties.

Ecolo is by far the party that determines more precisely the method with which the local sections have to select their candidates at the local level. The national statutes of Ecolo are fairly comprehensive in this respect and even include a section on local electoral rules. Locals Ecolo sections are therefore firmly framed in making their lists. This party is also the national party lists with the most under his own name.

Then, the CDH is also relatively explicit in its national statutes. However, a degree of freedom is given to local committees and they can choose to hold a poll or not. Generally, the CDH is characterized by a professional selection of candidates. The Socialist Party, barely describes the selection process in its national statutes. Local sections are free to determine their method. Each section uses its own method, being more or less institutionalized. Procedures are heterogeneous. Nevertheless, it seems that institutionalization is present in many local sections. Finally, MR oversees the selection of candidates through liaison committees, briefly described in the articles of the statute. It also seems that the locals through the heads of the list are free to select the candidates.

As far as the 'candidats d'ouverture' are concerned, the detailed analysis of party statutes and rules partly confirms the hypothesis of De la Dehesa (2010) arguing that there is a "leftist parties' institutionalisation of external candidacies, opening candidate slots to non-party members to build alliances with civil society" (De la Dehesa, 2010, p.99). In this respect, the Socialist party does not confirm expectations because its party rules are eclectic but, most of the time, require party membership. As for Ecolo, the party is open to candidacies from some 'candidats d'ouverture' and has certainly the most institutionalised procedure. This party validates the hypothesis of leftist parties' institutionalisation of this type of candidacies. The centrist party CDH asks for party membership but foresees some procedures for dispensations. Finally, the liberal party

(MR) is the least institutionalised party regarding this topic, what is not without consequences on its electoral practices – as we see in the next section.

To conclude, the local sections of national parties are not on an equal footing when recruiting their candidates, some are totally independent and other fairly canalised by rules decided by the party at the national level or by local sections themselves. Obviously, a local list that does not wish to comply with the above rules has the freedom to choose a different name to distance itself from the national party.

2. Studying and measuring local parties and candidates

In the context of the local elections of 14th October 2012 a unique data collection process has been implemented in order to understand and compare the local dimensions of these elections in the 262 Walloon municipalities. The focus was put on the ‘supply side’ of the election, i.e. the strategies set up by parties, focusing on each electoral list in each municipality and on candidates. Each municipality presents a different socio-demographic and political profile. There are not only huge differences in terms of the size of a municipality, its degree of urbanization, etc., but also in terms of campaign issues and of parties that compete in these elections. In some municipalities, the electoral competition occurs only between national parties while it occurs only between local parties in some others.

The electoral system is the same for all Walloon municipalities: a proportional system with semi-open lists where the voter can either vote for the list or one or several candidates on the same list. Seats are attributed based on the Imperiali formulae and on electoral districts that correspond to the limits of the municipality. However, two differences linked to the electoral system have a direct impact on the candidate selection. First, the number of seats in each municipality council varies according to the number of inhabitants in the municipality¹. This number of seats corresponds to the maximal number of candidates that can run for election on a particular electoral list. This has a direct impact on the candidate selection as – in order to present a complete list – lists running in highly populated municipalities need to recruit a large number of

¹ This number varies from seven seats in the least populated municipalities to 51 in the largest one.

candidates (see section 3). Second, a system of computer-based vote has been implemented in 39 Walloon municipalities. Besides its impact on turnout (Dandoy, 2013), computer-based voting has also an impact on the composition of the lists and the positions of the different candidates. Contrary to the system based on paper ballot where there is only one column per list (and therefore only one candidate as the head of the list), computer-based votes implies that the list in the screen is divided in two (or more) columns, multiplying the heads of columns for each list.

Besides the differences in terms of electoral system, there are also differences in terms of party system in each municipality. National and local parties compete in these elections but in different configurations, producing 262 unique party systems. Sometimes a national party competes in a municipal election, sometimes it is a purely local party with only local candidates, with a lot of different scenarios in between (eg. a national party that competes with a local name, a local party that presents a list headed by a federal minister or MP, an electoral alliance between a national and a local party, etc.). In sum, the analysis of the candidate recruitment for local elections requires first a clear typology of electoral lists at the local level.

In order to fully grasp the local list phenomenon, all the 1012 lists that participated in the local elections of 2012 in Wallonia (262 municipalities) have been thoroughly analysed². Existing measurements of the local list phenomena (based on the list name, its election number or even surveys of local politicians) are not satisfactory as they only focus on a sample of electoral lists and they have little information about candidates on the list. Therefore, we collected a large amount of information on each list and on some categories of candidates on each list³. Based on this data, we built a typology of electoral list and each list has been classified based on its position on a local-national axis. These positions have been clustered in five main ideal-types (see Table 1).

The 'national' lists are the electoral lists whose name corresponds exactly to existing parties at the national level. National parties are the one represented in the federal

² For more information about the project, its methodology and the data collection, see Dandoy, Dodeigne, Matagne and Reuchamps (forthcoming, 2013).

³ A next step in this project concerns the data collection of individual characteristics of all candidates for these elections (about 30.000 candidates).

parliament (the French-speaking CDH, Ecolo, FDF⁴, MR, PP and PS) as well as the PTB+. 455 lists that participated in the local elections (45% of all lists) can be directly attached to a national party. Yet, some of these lists do not use the national party label but can still be attached indirectly to national parties by their names (eg. using the name of 'PS+' instead of 'PS' or of 'MR-IC' instead of 'MR') or by the fact that the majority of the candidates on the list are identified party members of one national party. In our typology, there are 99 such 'quasi-national' parties. Together, 'national' and 'quasi-national' lists account for more than half of the lists in competition. When looking at the party level, the national lists can be summarized to four main parties: PS, MR, CDH and Ecolo⁵.

On the other side of the local-national axis, we find purely local lists, that display no connection at all with a national party. Such 'local' lists composed of local candidates represent 20,6% of the 1012 electoral lists in Wallonia. But not all local lists are purely local. We also identified 'quasi-local' lists, i.e. lists that are local but that display some connection with national parties. Our three criteria for the identification of quasi-local list are: the presence in the list of a regional or national minister or MP; or a list attached to a political movement with a supra-local or sub-regional ambition but is only able to be present in a few municipalities⁶; or a list identified by the coder as having another type of connection with a national party based on the media or the official discourse of the list. Together the local and quasi-local account for more than one third of the lists for the local elections in Wallonia in 2012. The last category of electoral lists concern the electoral alliances, i.e. the lists composed of a majority of candidates that can be attached to a least two political parties or that can be identified by the coder as an alliance based on the media or the official discourse of the list.

Table 1. Number of list (per type) and electoral results

| List type | N | % | Votes (in %) |
|-----------|---|---|--------------|
|-----------|---|---|--------------|

⁴ This party split from the MR one year before the local elections of 2012 and currently has three federal MPs.

⁵ The FDF, PP and PTB+ presented electoral lists in only 23, 10 and 13 municipalities respectively.

⁶ It mainly concerns the list related to the following political movements: Lepen, Wallonie d'abord, Fédération des Nationalistes Wallons, Parti pirate, Parti des pensionnés, and Démocratie Nationale.

| | | | |
|----------------|-------|-------|-------|
| National | 455 | 45,0 | 58,9 |
| Quasi-national | 99 | 9,8 | 10,3 |
| Quasi-local | 113 | 11,2 | 8,0 |
| Local | 208 | 20,6 | 10,3 |
| Alliances | 137 | 13,5 | 12,6 |
| Total | 1 012 | 100,0 | 100,0 |

3. The number of candidates on the lists

In the candidate selection process, electoral lists share the same objective: recruiting as many candidates possible in order to present a full (complete) list of candidates, i.e. a list with the same amount of candidates as the number of seats to be elected in the local council. This objective is mainly symbolic as – with the exception of municipalities where only one list participates in the elections – lists rarely win all of the available seats. In the eyes of the voter, a complete list is often perceived as more serious than a list composed of a smaller number of candidates. But politically speaking, a complete list is also important as it allows a maximisation of the financial and/or human resources available for the electoral campaign, as well as it allows a diversification of the profile and characteristics of the candidates (as they address different types of voters).

Yet, it is not easy for a list to gather a large number of candidates at the local level (De Vos et al., 2008) and a significant number of lists do not reach the goal of presenting complete lists. For the local elections of 2012 in Wallonia, only 827 of them were complete, which represents only 81,7% of the total amount of lists. In two thirds of these incomplete lists, more than 50% of the candidates were missing. Table 2 indicates the relative number of complete list per list type. Interestingly, the number of complete list is higher in the case of national and quasi-national lists compared to the other list types. National parties do have an advantage to compose their list as it seems that – compared to local lists – national parties have less difficulties to present complete lists.

Table 2. Complete lists (per type)

| List type | N | % |
|-----------|---|---|
|-----------|---|---|

| | | |
|----------------|-----|------|
| National | 379 | 83,3 |
| Quasi-national | 87 | 87,9 |
| Quasi-local | 86 | 76,1 |
| Local | 164 | 78,9 |
| Alliances | 111 | 81,0 |
| Total | 827 | 81,7 |

Yet, these higher figures do hide the small amount of complete lists in the case of smaller national parties such as the PTB+ (38,5 %), the FDF (22,2 %) and the PP (0 %) that had one of the lowest proportion of complete lists, followed by quasi-local lists such as Wallonie d'abord! (0%) or the Parti Pirate (0%). Among the four largest national lists, this ability to present complete lists is not homogeneous as the PS presents 2,9% of incomplete lists, followed by the MR (6,3%), the CDH (7,3%) and Ecolo (19%). The results confirm previous studies that demonstrated a strong local implantation of the PS in Walloon municipalities, compared to the MR and CDH (Deschouwer, 2009; Blaise et al., 2012). Lower figures for Ecolo also confirm that this party has a weaker local basis, even if the central party organs want to strengthen the presence of the green party in all municipalities (see section 1).

This higher frequency of complete lists in the case of national parties has to be confirmed by a multi-variate analysis. A set of potentially explanatory variables has been integrated in a logistic regression model, such as the size of the municipality, its urbanisation rate⁷, the degree of electoral competition in the municipality⁸ and a absolute majority in previous election, the presence on the list of the incumbent mayor or of European, regional and national ministers or MPs (variable name: VIP).

Table 3 indicates that – as expected – quasi-national list are more often complete than local lists. But the coefficients for the quasi-local lists, alliances and, more surprisingly,

⁷ Rural municipalities (thinly populated area), semi-urban municipalities (towns and suburbs/small urban areas), urban municipalities (cities/large urban area). For more information, see http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/degree_urbanisation/introduction The category of semi-urban municipalities has been used as reference category.

⁸ Weak party competition (one or two parties compete in the elections in the municipality), medium party competition (three or four parties), strong party competition (more than four parties). The category of medium party competition has been used as reference category.

national lists are not significant. Most of the effects related to the national lists are probably taken over by the presence of VIPs on the list (i.e. European, regional and national ministers or MPs). Together with the presence on the list of the incumbent mayor, the presence of these political personalities has a positive impact on the fact that the party manage to present a complete list. Finally, fewer complete lists are to be found in larger municipalities, which can be explained since the size of a municipality has a direct impact on the number of candidates on an electoral list. Other variables have no significant impact on the fact that a party presents a complete list.

Table 3. Logistic regression (dependent variable: complete list = 1)

| | | Estimation | Std. Error |
|------------------------|--------------------------|------------|------------|
| List Type | Quasi-local | -0.4180 | 0.2882 |
| | Quasi-national | 2.0174** | 0.5490 |
| | National | 0.5986 | 0.2214 |
| | Alliance | 14.3258 | 206.7 |
| Municipality Variables | Size | -0.4429* | 0.1515 |
| | Urban | 0.3422 | 0.2693 |
| | Rural | 0.0429 | 0.2666 |
| | Weak party competition | -0.7144 | 0.3046 |
| | Strong party competition | -0.1578 | 0.2707 |
| | Absolute majority | 2.1149 | 1.0696 |
| List Variables | Incumbent list | 0.1672 | 0.2009 |
| | Mayor presence | 2.0849** | 0.6269 |
| | VIP presence | 1.7933* | 0.5469 |
| Model | Intercept | 4.5233** | 1.3609 |
| | N | 1012 | |
| | Likelihood Ratio | 218.6302 | |
| | Score | 157.4151 | |
| | Wald | 80.1508 | |

4. VIPs from other policy levels

One of the characteristics of the rules concerning the candidate selection is that they do not prevent political actors from other policy levels to be candidates at local elections (see section 1). Indeed, the Belgian political system is characterized by an imbrication of the different policy levels. As a result, regional, federal and European MPs, as well as regional and federal ministers are allowed to be candidate and elected for the local elections. In addition, MPs are allowed to be part of the local executive (mayors or aldermen) and to cumulate this function with their mandate as regional, federal or European MPs. Obviously, having a candidate with such a political mandate and the resulting reputation and visibility on an electoral list can be an asset.

For the local elections of October 2012, no less than 142 political actors from other policy levels were candidates, out of a theoretical pool of 185 MPs and ministers. All together, 11,8% of the lists contained at least a member from the regional, federal or European assemblies or executives. Such lists were present in over one third of the Walloon municipalities. Overall and with the exception of the German-speaking MPs and ministers, almost all political actors from other policy levels were candidates for the local elections (see Table 4).

Table 4. Candidates from other policy levels

| Institutions | Mandates | Candidates | |
|-------------------------------|----------|------------|------|
| | | N | % |
| European Parliament | 6 | 5 | 83,3 |
| Federal Parliament | 60 | 46 | 76,7 |
| Federal Cabinet | 7 | 7 | 100 |
| Walloon Parliament | 75 | 63 | 84,0 |
| Walloon Cabinet | 8 | 7 | 87,5 |
| German-speaking Parliament | 25 | 13 | 52,0 |
| German-speaking Cabinet | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 185 | 142 | 76,8 |

But the presence of these candidates from other policy levels is not evenly distributed across types of lists. Out of the total amount of these candidates, 68,3% are to be found on a national list, 12% on a quasi-local list, 11,3% on a quasi-national list and 8,5% on an electoral alliance list.

5. Incumbent candidates

Candidates holding a local political mandate – from the local executive (mayors and aldermen) and the local assembly (councillors) – are also present on electoral lists. In this paper, we will mainly focus on the local councillors. Given the importance of mayors in a municipality (and since the mode of designation of the mayor reinforces its importance for an electoral list), it is not surprising to observe that 242 out of the 262 incumbent mayors were candidates for the local elections (92,4%). Even when a mayor decides to step down, (s)he is often present on the list as the last candidate. Incumbent aldermen were also heavily present on the electoral lists, but in a smaller proportion (81,1%). At least one alderman is present on an electoral list in almost all municipalities.

Compared to mayors and aldermen, incumbent local councillors are less present on electoral lists. Only a short majority of them (50,6%) were present in the lists. No less than 750 lists (out of 1012) contained at least one incumbent local councillor. Obviously a larger number of councillors is found in the largest municipalities (as they potentially have a larger number of councillors). Similarly, a larger presence of local councillors is found in municipalities where the party competition was the largest, as well as in urban municipalities.

Similarly to the lists that present a complete number of candidates (see section 3), there are important differences according to the list type. Table 5 shows the percentage of the lists that contain at least one incumbent local councillor. The proportion of national (and quasi-national) lists and alliances that present a least one incumbent local councillor is significantly higher than in local (and quasi-local) lists.

Table 5. Lists with incumbent local councillor (per type)

| List type | N | % |
|----------------|-----|------|
| National | 343 | 75,4 |
| Quasi-national | 81 | 81,8 |
| Quasi-local | 69 | 61,1 |
| Local | 129 | 62,2 |
| Alliances | 128 | 93,4 |
| Total | 750 | 74,1 |

6. 'Candidats d'ouverture'

Finally, this paper investigates the presence of the so-called 'candidats d'ouverture'. This concept refers to 'external' candidates that are not party members and cannot be related to an existing party. These candidates do not originate from the political arena but, on the contrary, from the civil society, the media, sports or culture arenas. Lists often use the presence of these candidates in order to demonstrate their 'openness' to non-partisan and non-political candidates and concerns. In addition, 'opening' the list to these candidates helps to propose a complete list.

Overall, the recruitment of 'candidats d'ouverture' occurs relatively often. These candidates are present on 42% of the list for the local elections. If we analyse the presence of 'candidats d'ouverture' per list type, we observe a large variation (see Table 6). 'Candidats d'ouverture' are to be found on national lists (35,4%), quasi-national lists (55,6%) and in electoral alliances (54,7%)⁹. The analysis of the local and quasi-local lists is more complex as lists without connection to a national party and composed by a majority of opening candidates have been defined as local or quasi-local. Still, we observe a smaller proportion of lists that presents 'candidats d'ouverture' in the case of local (33,7%) and quasi-local lists (33,6%).

⁹ Interestingly, two-thirds of the electoral alliances with 'candidats d'ouverture' are lists composed of opposition parties.

Table 6. Lists with ‘candidats d’ouverture’ (per type)

| List type | N | % |
|----------------|-----|------|
| National | 161 | 35,4 |
| Quasi-national | 55 | 55,6 |
| Quasi-local | 38 | 33,6 |
| Local | 70 | 33,7 |
| Alliances | 75 | 54,7 |
| Total | 399 | 39,4 |

Unsurprisingly the presence of ‘candidats d’ouverture’ also varies according to (national) parties¹⁰. First of all, we have seen that party-specific procedures regarding the selection of opening candidates either reflects the strategy of some parties for the composition of their lists or may even caused it (see section 1). Indeed, Ecolo regulates in a detailed manner the recruitment of ‘candidats d’ouverture’ and we observe that 46,4% of the lists connected to this party have such candidates. On the contrary, the MR barely mentions this phenomenon and we observe that 37,2% of these lists have opening candidates. The figures for PS and CDH are located between these two extremes (respectively 41,4% and 39,6%). In sum, parties that have institutionalized procedures related to the presence of ‘candidats d’ouverture’ tend to open more their list to this type of candidates.

¹⁰ We only focus on national and quasi-national parties here.

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