

# Beyond the Water's Edge: How Political Parties Influence Foreign Policy Formulation in Belgium

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Based on the growing scholarly recognition of domestic influences on foreign policy, political parties are considered to be among the main drivers behind foreign policy in most parliamentary democracies. In order to understand party influences on the governmental foreign policy agenda, we examine what determines the congruence between party manifestos and the ensuing government agreements in Belgium from 1978 to 2008. We find that a combination of variables related to political parties' negotiation position during government formation and regarding their ideological left-right position co-determine their impact on the content of the coalition agreement in terms of foreign policy priorities. This study shows that political parties differ in their foreign policy priorities and that they compete to see these priorities included in the future government's policy program.

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## Introduction

In countries where coalition cabinets are the rule rather than the exception, the need for clear and binding policy guidelines is very strong. Since coalition parties want to implement specific policies and electoral pledges, managing the decision-making process within the cabinet could lead to political chaos without such guidelines. This is no less true for foreign policy, where unpredictable events abroad often require quick and decisive reaction. It is, of course, impossible to consider every single international event thoroughly, discuss it with all the coalition partners, come to an agreement, and then communicate an official reaction in a reasonable amount of time. Hence, there is a clear need for coherent general foreign policy guidelines that allow the executive, as well as the administration, to react promptly within well-defined and agreed-upon policy margins. Therefore, most coalition governments rely on the negotiation of a governmental agenda and the drafting of policy documents

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prior to the government formation (Müller and Strøm 2003). Government agreements are crucial to maintaining the coherence of governmental policies to which all parties stick and adhere (Timmermans 2006; Joly, Zicha, and Dandoy 2015).

Government formation and its policy negotiations provide a unique opportunity to study the influence of parties on the policy agenda, since it is one of the rare moments where political parties can be considered as unitary actors. Individual parties have no loyalty to pay toward a government or a coalition and speak as united entities at the negotiation table. Through their manifestos, approved by members at party conventions or general assemblies, parties “univocally” express their official priorities and preferences in light of coming elections and potential government negotiations. Issued before the elections, they are also a form of advertisement to the public, containing policy pledges to be executed when in government. Given their purpose and timing, manifestos constitute an important opportunity—and instrument—to study the impact of political parties on the executive agenda, and numerous authors have previously confirmed this impact in a variety of policy areas (Budge and Laver 1993; Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge 1994; Caul and Gray 2002; Keman 2007)

Many scholars consider foreign policy to be different from domestic politics (Quandt 1986; Collier 1991; Sjusen 2011). According to Wood and Peake, “foreign policy is fundamentally different from domestic policy and requires a different rationale for explaining the rise and fall of issue attention” (1998, 181). This overall feeling of foreign policy uniqueness is mostly due to its specific actors, its requirements of secrecy, its specific timing and speed of decision-making, and the impact of crises and other dramatic occurrences. At same time, lawmaking (and the weak role of parliament) in the field of foreign policy is less central than for other domestic policies, party discipline in parliament is less strong, and there is less room for compromise and moderation. As a result, and even if the potential impact of domestic determinants on foreign policy is itself no longer the subject of debate (see for example Putnam 1988; Collier 1991; Hagan 1993), it has long been believed that political parties—or even party politics—played an insignificant role in foreign policy, and more particularly on governmental foreign policy priorities.

In a pioneering study on foreign policy decision-making, Kaarbo (1996) showed that conflicts over foreign policy in Germany and Israel often occurred between partners in coalition governments and, thus, that party politics matter. Subsequent research focused mainly on the role of parties and (coalition) cabinets in foreign policymaking in parliamentary democracies. In this article, we argue that the involvement of political parties also occurs at an early stage of the coalition policymaking process, in particular during the important coalition agreement negotiations. So far, our knowledge about foreign policymaking during the government formation phase is very limited.

As foreign policy has too long been considered outside the realm of party politics, our ambition is to bring foreign policy and political parties into the same equation. The main goal of this study is twofold. First, we examine which political parties are most successful in defining and shaping the foreign policy priorities of a newly formed government. Second, we aim to understand and explain why certain parties are more successful at determining these foreign policy priorities than others.

To do so, our study examines the influence of *all* the main political parties over thirty years of government formations—from 1978 until 2008—in Belgium. Government agreements can be considered as a first bottleneck from party priorities to policy and are excellent predictors of policy outcomes in countries with coalition governments (Walgrave, Varone, and Dumont 2006; Costello and Thomson 2008; Moury 2011; Joly, Zicha, and Dandoy 2015). To explain how effective political parties are in influencing the governmental agenda, we rely on two main types of explanations: factors related to a party’s position during the negotiation process, and variables related to the policies of a specific party.

The Belgian case is relevant and useful for both theoretical and practical reasons. Belgium is known for its consensual democracy and complex coalition

formation process, often including a large number of parties and varying in its composition from one legislature to another. This variation in the composition of the coalition is of great value to this type of research, and one of the main motives for examining Belgium. Given its large coalitions and its often complex government negotiations, if parties matter in the Belgian context, it seems very likely that they also would matter in other countries with coalition governments. Moreover, foreign affairs consistently ranks among the five most important governmental issues in Belgium (Joly, Zicha, and Dandoy 2015). Hence, foreign policy is an important issue to Belgian political parties, and one on which they have different priorities.

Belgium conducts a low contentious foreign policy, similar to most other small and medium Western powers, with comparable resources and interests. However, Eurobarometer figures<sup>1</sup> (European Commission 2014) suggest that the Belgian public cares less about foreign policy and defense issues than in many other European countries. Therefore, if political parties are found to be influential in establishing foreign policy in Belgium, this would likely also be the case in coalition countries that care more about foreign policy and also have strong party systems like, for example, the Netherlands and Denmark. The explanatory model we propose here, thus, provides great potential for comparative research.

### The Program to Policy Linkage

Party manifestos are the only publicized official documents that present party preferences and priorities on a wide range of issues and allow for a comparative and longitudinal analysis (Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge 1994; Klingemann et al. 2006; Budge et al. 2001). In most countries, political parties draft a manifesto before the elections, which are used to assess the party agenda, since other potential sources of party positions, like speeches or press releases, do not exhibit the same characteristics of comparability. Given their primary objective to attract votes, party manifestos are considered as accurate representations of parties' ideal societal vision and their translation into governmental policies and priorities. According to mandate theory (Birch 1975; Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge 1994), winning parties receive a "mandate" from the voters and should not renege on their campaign promises but instead try to implement their electoral program as much as possible while in power. Therefore, given the purpose of party manifestos, as well as the temporal proximity between their publication and government formation, they constitute excellent potential explanations and predictors of future policies.

One way to examine the influence of parties on policy is by deriving ideological policy positions, based on the relative emphasis of different policy issues in party manifestos. This technique, championed by the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP), makes it possible to "match" these party positions to the subsequent governmental policy position. Different large-scale CMP studies found majority parties to influence government programs and declarations (Laver and Budge 1992; Budge and Laver 1993), as well as budgets (Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge 1994; Klingemann et al. 2006; McDonald and Budge 2005), in a variety of countries. This implies that governments composed of left-wing parties, for example, enact policies that are also more left leaning. Using a similar agenda-setting approach, Walgrave, Varone, and Dumont (2006) confirmed the congruence between the policy priorities of political parties and those of the government in Belgium.

<sup>1</sup>Eurobarometer Interactive Search System. Response to the question "What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment? (MAX. 2 ANSWERS POSSIBLE)," consulted in November 2014.

Pledge research also examines to what extent parties keep their promises once in office. These studies confirm the importance and relevance of party manifestos and government agreements as policy documents. Single-party cabinets (like in the UK and the United States)—whose manifestos hold similar value to government agreements as an expression of future policies—are most effective in carrying out policy pledges, especially in a country with very centralized powers, like the UK (Rallings 1987; Royed 1996). Parties in coalition governments, naturally, have lower enactment rates. However, looking at party pledges included in the government agreements considerably increases the pledge enactment rate of governing parties in coalition governments in the Netherlands (Thomson 2001) and Ireland (Mansergh and Thomson 2007; Costello and Thomson 2008).

Moury (2013) also found relatively high enactment rates for all pledges from the government agreement (not just those of majority parties) in Belgium (78 percent), Germany (78 percent), and the Netherlands (70 percent), and slightly lower ones in Italy (58 percent). Moury (2005) also tested whether governments with different partisan and ideological constellations have different enactment rates for foreign policy pledges. More specifically, she looked at two Belgian governments of varying composition and found that the first Dehaene government (a coalition of Christian Democrats and Socialists) enacted around 60 percent of its foreign policy pledges, while the first Verhofstadt government (a coalition of Liberals, Socialists, and Greens) did markedly better, with an 85 percent enactment rate. While this does not allow for much comparison, these figures do not suggest that the number of coalition parties or the ideological spread of a coalition affects the degree to which it can implement its policy promises.

Hence, an abundance of research confirms that party manifestos and government agreements are not just rhetorical tools of parties to attract voters, but actually bear significant influence on the policies of the future government. Coalition agreements do not merely focus on non-divisive issues or omit the most contentious matters, as Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge (1994) suggest. In fact, they include issues that are most salient to coalition parties (Thomson 1999; Timmermans 2003; Rihoux, Dumont, and Dandoy 2005) to avoid clashes along the way and reflect the image of a decisive, united body that will make it through the full four-year term (Timmermans and Moury 2006). Therefore, government formation can be seen as a policymaking arena where the government agreement is a true reflection of the policies and policy intentions of the future government (Peterson and De Ridder 1986; Timmermans and Moury 2006; Joly, Zicha, and Dandoy 2015).

### **Foreign Policy: Where Is the Party?**

Despite the rich research tradition on political parties, as well as the increasing recognition of domestic forces in foreign policy, research on the role of political parties in foreign policy has remained relatively scarce. In the United States, it was long argued and believed that “politics stop at the water’s edge,” and foreign policy was considered bipartisan, suggesting that investigating the role of politics and parties in foreign policy was inconsequential. However, several studies showed that domestic and political considerations were as important as international factors when deciding on the use of force, and that certain members of the US Congress voted in a partisan way on foreign affairs issues (Ostrom and Job 1986; James and Oneal 1991; DeRouen 1995, 2000; Smith 1996; Wang 1996).

The ideological oppositions found between political parties did not fully transform into a research agenda on the role of political parties in foreign policy at the executive level. Most studies examine decision-making only in times of crises and conflict (as noted by Kaarbo and Beasley 2008, 71) and do not consider individuals as delegates of their respective parties—as is often the case in coalition

governments (Hagan 1993; Kaarbo 1996; Hagan et al. 2001). Indeed, (foreign) policymaking in many parliamentary democracies occurs within the framework of a coalition government and requires negotiations between different political parties or their delegates (ministers). Despite the important role they play in general policymaking in numerous parliamentary democracies (Laver and Budge 1992; Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge 1994; McDonald and Budge 2005), we know little about the role of political parties in foreign policymaking in coalition governments.

Looking at foreign policy decision-making in the Netherlands, Hagan et al. (2001) showed how the Dutch government dealt with internal division and political polarization regarding the deployment of NATO nuclear cruise missiles in 1979. Generally, foreign policymaking in the Netherlands was “an elite affair in which critical issues were handled by a sub-group of cabinet ministers with responsibilities for foreign affairs,” enabled by “well-established norms of inter-party cooperation and intraparty discipline” (Hagan et al. 2001, 183). The authors detail the dynamics that are typical to divided coalition governments and emphasize the importance of well-established rules governing decision-making, thus preventing escalation into a deeper crisis. The Belgian coalition decision-making process is very similar to that of the Netherlands, generally managed at the core of the government and politically polarized exceptionally during (foreign policy) crises.

Analyses of coalition decision-making in Germany and Israel (Kaarbo 1996; Barnett 1999) confirmed the crucial role of political parties in important foreign policy negotiations and decisions in both countries. More importantly, these studies showed that decisions are not contingent on power of the numbers or size, as parties other than the largest are able to impose their policy preferences on the government. Hence, it is useful to examine which parties influence the policies formulated during coalition negotiations and try to find patterns in this influence.

More recently, research on parliamentary democracies confirmed the importance of coalition governments in foreign policymaking, compared to other types of governments. Clare (2010) demonstrated that coalition governments exhibit more extreme foreign policy behavior (more cooperative and more conflictual) than single-party governments, while oversized coalitions produce fewer foreign policy commitments (Oktay 2014). In these studies, the ideological (left-right) positions of the parties that are part of the coalition and the overall ideological coherence—or polarization—of the cabinet are crucial. Clare (2010), for example, demonstrated that right-wing governments are more belligerent and more likely to initiate disputes. Ideological outlier parties have a strong influence on foreign policy and, in the Turkish case, Ozkececi-Taner (2005) observed that a large ideological distance between partners produces important effects on foreign policymaking. Aside from their ideology, some parties have more influence on the coalitions’ foreign policy than others, depending on their status as pivotal parties (Palmer, London, and Regan 2004), as junior coalition partners (Oppermann and Brummer 2014), or on their control of a relevant foreign policy-related portfolio (Hagan 1993; Ozkececi-Taner 2005).

In most countries with coalition governments, the influence of parties occurs at an earlier stage, before cabinet negotiations or parliamentary votes, during government formation. Foreign policy issues are subject to the same dynamics as domestic issues and can cause debate or conflict among future coalition partners. Government negotiations not only determine the ensuing policies, but the survival of the cabinet can also depend on it (Kaarbo 1996; De Winter, Timmermans, and Dumont 2003). Prior arrangements and guidelines between governing parties are necessary to reduce potential conflict among the coalition partners and a possible fall of the cabinet. Though this might seem unlikely considering the generally low



public interest for such issues in Belgium, in 1991 the Martens VIII government fell over the decision to deliver weapons to an American–Saudi company.

Most coalition governments, like Germany, the Netherlands, or Belgium, make up their government agreements prior to government installment (Timmermans 2003). Given that they include the main public policies that will be carried out by the future government regarding all policy domains—often in great detail and with concrete proposals—they are of great value to study the impact of political parties on policy, including foreign policy.<sup>2</sup>

While it could be argued that foreign policy, especially in a small country like Belgium, is too contingent upon the international system and affected by external events to be studied at such an early stage, government agreements usually give a clear indication of the government's foreign policy priorities and how it will react to external events. While external events can definitely impact a smaller country's foreign policies, the way governments respond to them can vary greatly (see for example the differences between Belgium and the Netherlands in their participations to international military interventions) and indications can often be found in the government agreement. The agreement can, for example, emphasize its attachment to NATO or the EU, or stress the importance of the UN and vow to intervene only through humanitarian assistance.

Generally, foreign policy priorities include foreign aid, the European Union, and investments in foreign trade—policies that can absolutely be planned and enacted without depending on the international system or external events. Moreover, given their prominence, we found that the foreign policy sections in the Belgian government agreements contain on average slightly more specific proposals than many other policy domains (Joly and Dandoy 2014). Therefore, the coalition agreement is most suitable to study the government's foreign policy agenda in coalition countries.

### Government Formation in Belgium

Government agreements “constitute the basis of what is presented officially by the prime minister when the new government takes office, the government program or declaration” (Timmermans 2003, 12). The government agreement is a crucial document to study the new government's policy priorities, as it is usually carried out to a high degree (Moury 2013). Negotiating the content of the government agreement thus constitutes the most intensive step toward establishing a new government and requires an important amount of time, often taking several weeks or even months. The characteristics of the negotiations and drafting process of the government agreements vary greatly (Timmermans 2003) according to the political environment, the personality of the formateur (the person appointed to form a new government and likely the future prime minister), the negotiating parties, and the balance of power between them.

While coalition agreements are only formal agreements that are not enforced by law, they are essential to coalition parties. Government agreements are signed by the presidents of all coalition parties and voted by their MPs, as well as by party members at special congresses to approve government participation. This way, government agreements bind coalition parties not only with each other, but also with different segments and factions within each party (De Winter, Timmermans, and Dumont 2003). The coalition agreement also heavily weighs on the parliamentary agenda, as the strict party discipline requires majority MPs to keep their initiatives within the boundaries of the agreement. After the government agreement is signed,

<sup>2</sup>Note that in her analysis of the Turkish case, Ozkececi-Taner (2005) could not determine a clear pattern regarding how the coalition agreement influences foreign policy.

the last step before swearing in the new government consists of negotiating the ministerial portfolios for each party, which usually takes no more than a few days.

As mentioned above, very few studies have investigated the link between the foreign policy priorities of political parties and those of the government. This article explores this particular relationship, examining party manifestos and government agreements from 1978 to 2008. The lack of prior research and the great potential in studying party effects on governments entails a large number of questions and ensuing hypotheses. The extensive time frame of this study, with different coalitions, ingoing and outgoing parties, offers a unique opportunity to explore and answer these questions. Government formation is an essential policymaking arena (Peterson and De Ridder 1986) where parties negotiating a new government coalition come together to agree on the future policies of this new government.

To do so, parties rely on their manifestos, as published before the elections. These manifestos represent the policy priorities and specific policy positions on a wide variety of issues for each party. When negotiators get together, each party wants to include as many elements from their program as possible in the government agreement. This also implies that no party will be able to include all or most of its program. If parties have some absolute priorities, they also have a number of issues on which they can make concessions. Programmatic concessions can be made before the elections as, in Belgium, parties that are willing to enter government tend to “soften” their manifesto stance and make it look more similar to those of their potential future partners (Dandoy 2014). But most concessions are made during the government formation phase, and particularly during the last days of the drafting of the government agreement. Yet, some parties have a bigger influence on the government agreement than others (Debus 2008). In that sense, the content of the government agreement directly reflects this game of concessions played by parties as a result of the balance of power between them.

Our first goal is to identify which parties are most influential when establishing the foreign policy agenda of the future government. Second, we want to explore whether there are patterns to this influence. Our hypotheses regarding the relationship between parties and government are grouped into a first set covering the position of the party during the negotiation process and a second related to the (foreign) policies of the party.

#### *Party Positions During the Negotiation Process*

Not all parties take part in the government formation negotiations. Some parties—like extreme-right parties—are *a priori* excluded from these negotiations in Belgium,<sup>3</sup> while others (chose to) remain in the opposition. Those parties forming a new government are considered to receive a mandate from their voters to carry out their policies once in office (Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge 1994; Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin 1999). Naturally, party positions are closer to the government agreement when they were part of the negotiations of the cabinet formation (Budge and Laver 1993; Laver and Budge 1992). In Belgium, Rihoux, Dumont, and Dandoy (2005) examined the link between party manifestos and government agreements between 1991 and 1999 and showed that opposition parties also influenced the governmental agenda, even if this was less than coalition parties.

Throughout recent Belgian political history, certain parties have participated more frequently in the government formation process than others, most notably the Christian-Democratic parties. This differentiated participation in previous cabinets and government formation means that some parties accumulated more

<sup>3</sup>A *cordon sanitaire* was established by all Belgian democratic political parties in order to prevent the extreme-right parties from entering national and regional cabinets.

negotiation and government experience than others, and dispose of larger research centers to support them during these negotiations. Hence, certain parties have a lot of expert negotiators from previous government negotiations who know the negotiators from the other parties very well: they know how they negotiate, what their strengths and weaknesses are and, especially, how to deal with them to obtain the most out of the negotiations. Timmermans (2006) also stresses the importance of former negotiators as most-qualified exegetes regarding coalition agreements. Parties with lots of government experience that are not included in the government formation may also find ways to influence policy. As a result,

*H1a: Parties with large government/negotiation experience have more influence on the foreign policy priorities of the government agreement than the other parties.*

The negotiations leading to the formation of a new cabinet are headed by the *formateur*. Since the role of *formateurs* is to chair and lead the negotiations, they do not, in principle, represent their party. This means that their party has two delegates instead of one, like the other parties. This numerical superiority does not necessarily translate into greater influence, as the *formateur* may need to make certain concessions to earn the trust of the other negotiators. However, most arguments and evidence suggest that the party of the *formateur* has more influence on the government agreement than the other parties. First, the *formateur* almost always belongs to the largest party in parliament and thus in the cabinet, potentially reinforcing its impact on the content of the government agreement. Prior research from Hearl (1992) confirms that the Flemish Christian-Democratic CVP, the party most often delivering the prime minister in Belgium during the time frame studied here, largely dominated its partners in terms of policy payoffs. Hence, the party of the *formateur* can be expected to have a larger influence than other negotiators on the content of the government agreement.

*H1b: The party of the formateur has more influence on the foreign policy priorities of the government agreement than other parties.*

It seems fair to assume that larger governing parties have more weight on the coalition agreement than smaller parties, especially since a party's size may also indicate that the party came closer to the median voter (McDonald and Budge 2005). The relative weight of a large party over the other (smaller) parties relies on both its higher number of seats in parliament and the higher number and greater quality of portfolios it is expected to obtain in the federal cabinet. However, opposition parties may be larger than certain small majority parties.

While majority parties have the largest impact on the Belgian governmental agenda, Rihoux, Dumont, and Dandoy (2005) also found the extreme-right party to have a significant influence on the government agreements between 1991 and 1999. This is not unusual for a consociational country like Belgium (Lijphart 1999), where governments try to take into account popular preferences from opposition parties to attract or win back voters, and potentially soothe organizations from civil society. That is why we include all parliamentary political parties—whether in government or in the opposition—in our analyses. Pledge studies in the Netherlands—another consociational country—confirm that governments enact pledges not only from parties that constitute the majority, but from opposition parties as well (Thomson 2001; Costello and Thomson 2008). Here, too, we expect larger and, thus, more popular opposition parties to have a larger influence than small, perhaps marginalized, opposition parties. Therefore, we argue that

*H1c: Large parties have more influence on the foreign policy priorities of the government agreement than the other parties.*



*Policy-Related Party Characteristics*

Size is of course not the only thing that matters. Smaller coalition partners can outsize their weight and (co-)determine the course of the coalition. This is especially the case in two-party coalitions where the “minority in cabinet may retain some power if its party is pivotal in the legislature, namely if the withdrawal of its support is able to bring down the government” (Laver and Schofield 1998, 55). In Germany, for example, Hofferbert and Klingemann (1990) showed that the manifesto of the smaller, pivotal, and critical FDP was a better predictor of foreign policy spending than the policy program of the larger coalition partner, or even the government declaration. In certain cases, critical junior parties may throw in all of their bargaining weight because a specific issue (e.g., non-participation in military interventions) is that important to them (Kaarbo 1996) and, so, have a disproportionate influence on foreign policy (Clare 2010). In their analysis of foreign policy in eighteen countries—including Belgium—Palmer, London, and Regan (2004) outlined the specific role of pivotal parties, that is, parties that are numerically necessary for the survival of the coalition.

However, there is another important way in which a party can outsize its weight. Coalition theory emphasizes the importance of the programmatic position of the parties and more particularly their central position (Budge and Laver 1993, 502). A central programmatic position is often associated with a higher probability of becoming an important player during negotiations. Debus (2008) included this programmatic position in his definition of the concept of “key player.” Moreover, Budge and Laver (1993) empirically found the party controlling the median legislator to be a policy dictator. In Belgium, Hearl (1992) also found the main centrist CVP to be the most influential party. Hence,

*H2a: Parties at the center of the ideological left-right scale have more influence on the foreign policy priorities of the government agreement than the other parties.*

The advantage of negotiation experience mentioned above can also be policy specific. Following studies on foreign policymaking that confirmed the (larger) impact of parties controlling relevant ministerial positions (Hagan 1993; Ozkececi-Taner 2005), incumbent parties can be expected to have a larger impact on the content of the government agreement. In Belgium, Budge and Laver (1993) observed that parties were closer to the government agreement when they were in government than when they were not. While general incumbency—having been part of the former government—can be a determining factor of the influence a party has on the government agreement, here, we disentangle incumbency and look at individual foreign policy-related incumbent positions.

Parties holding key foreign policy portfolios are then expected to weigh more heavily on the foreign policy priorities expressed in the government agreement. Therefore, we expect to observe incumbency effects concerning the portfolios dealing with foreign policy (i.e., the ministers or state secretaries<sup>4</sup> of foreign affairs, defense, foreign trade, development aid, and European affairs). Table 2 in Appendix 1 offers a detailed overview of the portfolios held by the different parties at the time of the government formation. Therefore,

*H2b: Parties holding a larger number of foreign policy-related portfolios at the time of the negotiations have more influence on the foreign policy priorities of the government agreement than other parties.*

<sup>4</sup>The foreign policy-related state secretaries (junior ministers) are often “attached” to the minister of foreign affairs.

The importance of foreign policy for a party can be assessed by the fact that it held positions related to foreign policy in the incumbent government, but also through its emphasis on this policy area in its electoral platform. The saliency of foreign policy issues differs from one political actor to another, and parties dedicating more attention to foreign policy issues in their manifestos can be expected to have a larger influence on the government agreement on this topic. Parties who have invested more in their foreign policy program may seek certain payoffs by trying to obtain concessions on these issues from the other parties. The analysis of the electoral platforms allows us to measure whether foreign policy is an important policy domain for each party. Ozkececi-Taner (2005) observed that parties who have a higher influence on foreign policy during the policy implementation phase are those where foreign policy is highly salient. Similarly, we expect that those parties for which foreign policy matters more will try to have a larger impact on the content of the government agreement regarding these issues during the policy formulation phase.

*H2c: Parties who dedicate proportionately more attention to foreign policy have more influence on the foreign policy priorities of the government agreement than other parties.*

### Data and Method

The content of all Belgian party manifestos and government agreements at the national level from 1978 to 2008 has been coded at the quasi-sentence level using an adapted version of Baumgartner and Jones's (1993) policy issue codebook. Only those parties obtaining at least one seat in the lower chamber are included in the analyses.<sup>5</sup> Student assistants coded the documents after extensive training and with continued feedback. Our codebook not only covers the main subfields of foreign policy, but also allows categorization of these subfields into even more specific sub-issues, which means that our detailed and encompassing codebook is particularly well suited for the analysis of party preferences regarding foreign policy. Twenty-seven specific policy issues related to foreign affairs, foreign trade, defense,<sup>6</sup> European policies,<sup>7</sup> and foreign aid were selected out of a codebook containing 249 specific policy issues and constitute our measurement of the party and government foreign policy agendas.

Our empirical analyses are carried out following a two-step procedure. First, descriptive and correlational analyses detail which parties' foreign policy priorities correspond best to those of the government agreements. These correlations are then used as a measure of influence, and a regression model explains what determines this influence in a systematic way for all the parties.<sup>8</sup>

We proceed as follows: first, we calculate proportional attention to each of the twenty-seven foreign policy categories in the manifestos of each party and in the government agreements for each election year. Taking into account the nature of the data and our goal to compare relationships between priorities from the different parties and government across time, we use Spearman rank correlations ( $\rho$ ) to study how well foreign policy priorities across the different parties match those of the government. Spearman correlations are preferred over standard Pearson

<sup>5</sup>Except for UDRT/RAD (three seats in 1981 and one seat in 1985) and ROSSEM (three seats in 1991). On the other hand, Groen! was included in our models even if the party had no direct representation in the lower chamber in 2003.

<sup>6</sup>Within the defense category, issues of a strictly domestic nature were not included.

<sup>7</sup>The "Europe" code includes sentences that specifically relate to the European Union, like integration, enlargement, or internal organization. It does not concern other policies that might be dealt with at the European level, as those items would be coded according to the policy itself.

<sup>8</sup>Additional bivariate tests examine the impact of each independent variable among majority parties only.

correlations because attention to foreign policy issues is distributed very unevenly. As certain issues (e.g., European affairs and general foreign policy issues) almost systematically receive high levels of attention while others are practically ignored, Pearson correlations tend to overestimate the correspondence between the different agendas. Moreover, rank correlations are most suitable for capturing the correspondence of priorities.

The temporal link (manifestos are drafted six to four months before the negotiations start), as well as the purpose of party manifestos (to express priorities and positions), makes these correlations a good indicator of influence. Hence, the higher the correlation between these two agendas, the larger the influence a party has on the foreign policy priorities of the governmental agenda. Correlations are commonly used in the analysis of party manifestos (Janda et al. 1995; Pétry and Landry 2001; Gabel and Hix 2002; Netjes and Binnema 2007; Ray 2007).

In the second phase, we perform multivariate explanatory analyses using these correlation scores as the dependent variable to find out what determines the differential influence of parties. Our data consist of observations about manifestos that are not independent, as they are observed for the same parties over time and for different parties for the same election. We carry out pooled cross-sectional time-series analyses, since we are dealing with panel data depending on both party and time. Moreover, as our data set might be troubled by autocorrelation and/or heteroscedasticity, we opt for regression models with panel-corrected standard errors (PCSE).<sup>9</sup>

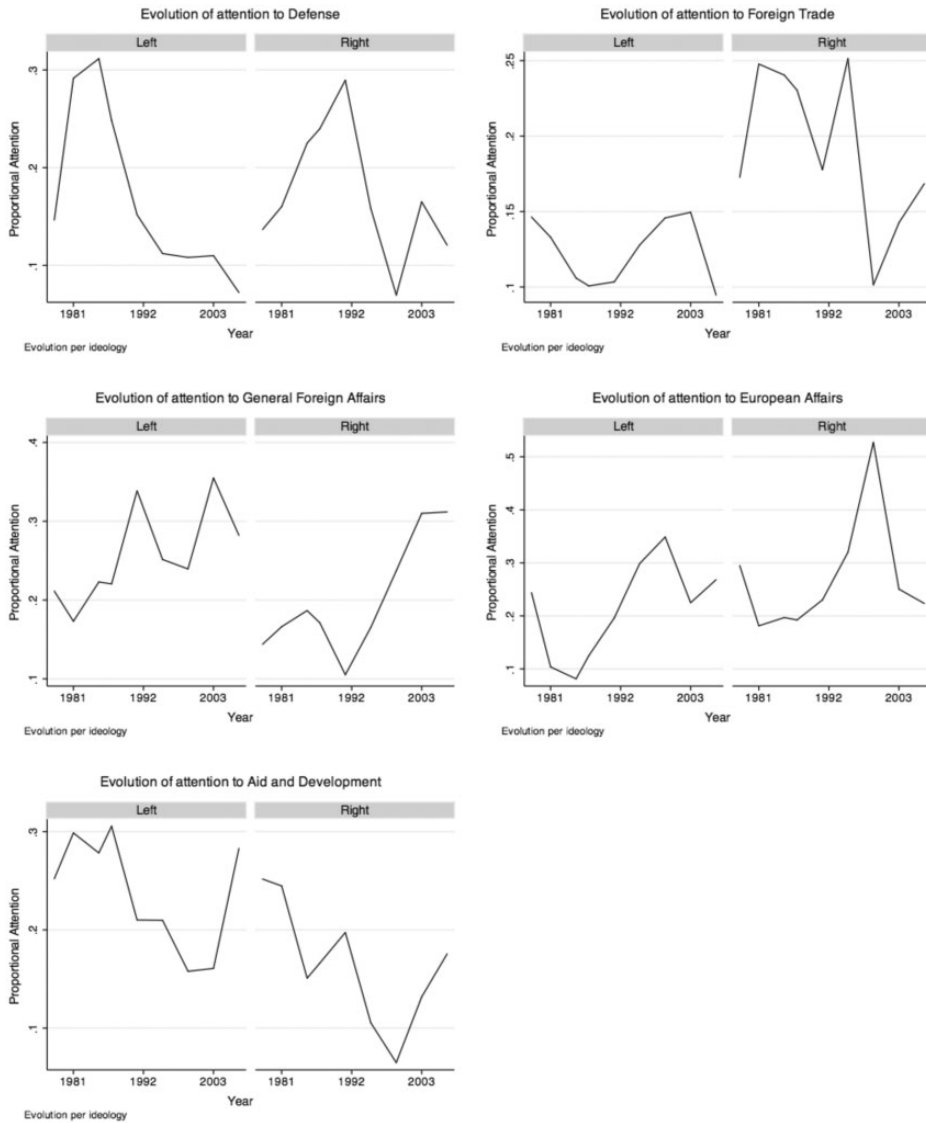
The independent variables are grouped into two batches: negotiation and policy variables. The first set includes a variable that determines the negotiation and government experience of a party and is based on the number of years spent in government since 1945. A *formateur* dummy indicates whether a party delivered the *formateur* of the negotiations leading to the government. The party size is measured in terms of the percentage of seats obtained in the lower chamber at the corresponding elections.

With respect to policy, the ideological position of a party is assessed on a left-right scale, for each party system—Flemish and French-speaking—as calculated by the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP). Foreign policy incumbency consists of a cumulative index of the portfolios related to foreign policy (including the ministerial portfolios of foreign affairs, defense, foreign trade, development aid, and European affairs) in the incumbent cabinet. Finally, the “foreign policy saliency” variable indicates the importance of foreign policy for each party and is based on the saliency of the twenty-seven foreign policy codes in each individual party manifesto, as a proportion of the entire manifesto.

Additionally, a first control variable measures the size of the coalition, that is, the number of parties that were directly involved in negotiating the government agreement. The larger the number of governing parties, the larger the number of policy positions and the possible ideological spread between coalition partners and, potentially, the more complex the negotiations. This may, then, affect how much individual parties are able to influence the foreign policy priorities of the government agreement.

A second “length ratio” variable then controls for the length of the different documents and is measured as the ratio of the length (in number of coded units) of the party manifesto to the length (in number of coded units) of the coalition agreement. As longer documents may emphasize a wider variety of issues, greater correspondence in the length ratio of the manifestos and the government

<sup>9</sup>Hierarchical models at the specific policy level for each party per election year could not be performed, since there is no variation on the independent variables between the different policy issues. The independent variables vary only per party and per year, the level of analysis of the models presented here.

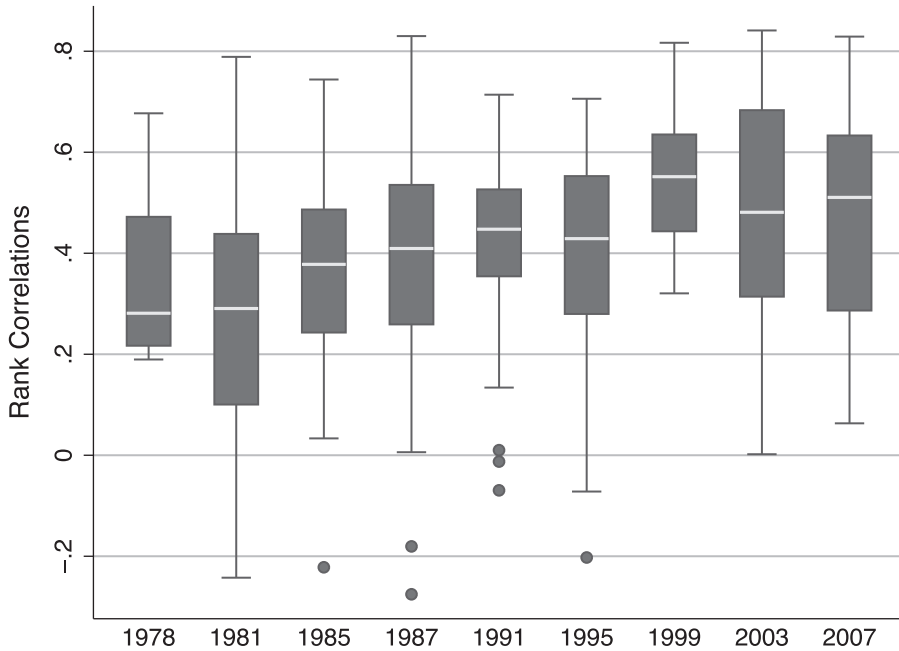


**Figure 1.** The evolution of attention to each main foreign policy domain for left and right-wing parties

agreement may also entail a better match in the issue emphasis. Other control variables (such as a language dummy variable or a variable measuring the number of days between the elections and the signature of the coalition agreement) were tested but not included in the models presented here, due to their lack of statistical significance.

## Results

Figure 1 shows the evolution in attention to each of the main foreign policy domains for left- and right-wing parties. Parties are ideologically categorized using CMP scores for each election. It is clear that there is much variation over time for each policy domain, but especially between left- and right-wing parties. Whenever



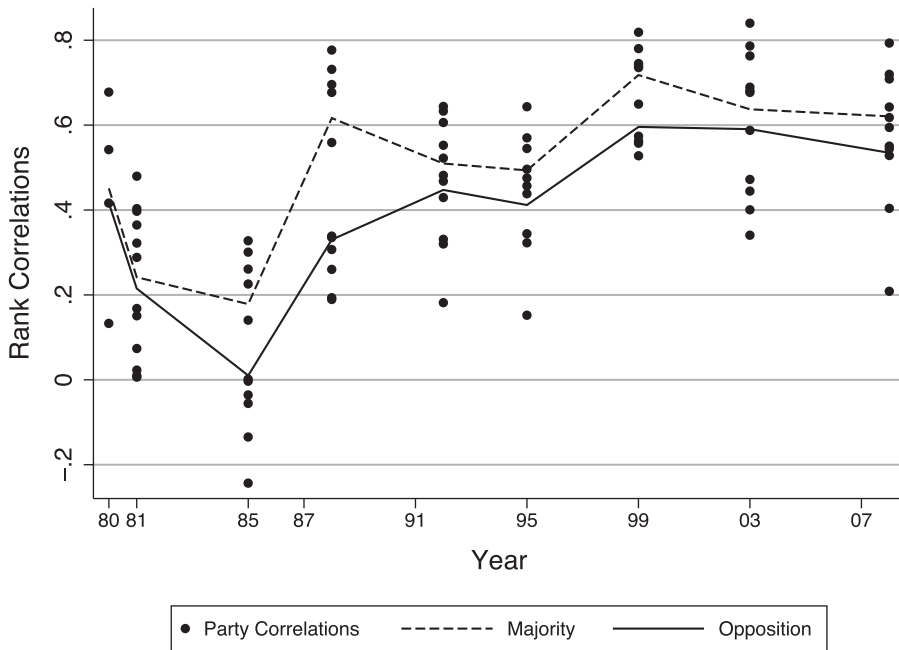
**Figure 2.** The distribution of dyadic rank correlations on foreign policy priorities between all parties for each election year

parties from both sides of the spectrum follow similar trends, it is mostly at different levels of attention. *T*-tests confirm some of these differences statistically; left-wing parties, for example, pay significantly more attention to development aid while right-wing parties pay more attention to foreign trade ( $p < .05$ ). There are also significant differences between parties from both linguistic communities, as Flemish parties pay significantly more attention to defense and EU policies than Francophone ones ( $P < .05$ ).

Another way to assess the differences in attention between parties is by looking at dyadic correlations between all parties for each year, using their attention to each of the 27 sub-policies. The box-plot graph in [Figure 2](#) shows the distribution of correlations for each election year. While there is a slight tendency toward convergence in foreign policy priorities between parties, the figure clearly shows that there is great variation in this correspondence, even when correlations are high on average. In 2003, for example, correlations range between .002 (VU and FN) and .84 (PS and cdH), while the average is .50. Consistent with previous findings from [Walgrave et al. \(2014\)](#), parties from the same “ideological family” correspond significantly higher ( $P = .055$ ), while parties from the same language community do not. From these data and figures, we can conclude that political parties have very different foreign policy priorities. Hence, we also expect the influence of each political party on the government agreement to vary greatly. Before explaining these differences in influence, we explore the relationship between parties and government.

[Figure 3](#) shows the correspondence in priorities between each party and the government for each government formation year. It seems the overall influence of parties has increased since the mid-1980s. The greater correspondence between the government’s priorities and those of the parties confirms the converging trend between parties, but also emphasizes the increasing consensual nature of the government agreement when it comes to foreign policy. In 1985 and 1988, majority parties clearly had a higher influence on the government agreement





**Figure 3.** The correspondence in foreign policy priorities between each party and the government agreement for each government formation year

than opposition parties. In consociational Belgium, it is not unusual for governments to include popular policies from parties that are not part of the government (Lijphart 1999; Rihoux, Dumont, and Dandoy 2005). Hence, as party priorities and their correspondence with the government agreement differ, it seems relevant and important to analyze what exactly determines these differences in correspondence.

A series of regression models tests our two sets of explanatory variables and the different hypotheses in Table 1. Our dependent variable is the degree of association between party manifestos and government agreements, as measured through the aforementioned rank correlations of the saliency of the twenty-seven foreign policy issues. Diagnostic tests (see Tables 3–8 in Appendix 2) show no problems of multicollinearity for any of the regression models presented in Table 1. Model 1 examines the impact of factors related to the (power) position of each political party in the negotiation process on the link between electoral platforms and government agreements. First, experience in prior government negotiations affects the impact of a party on the government agreement (H1a); the more experienced a party, the higher its influence. Per additional year in office since 1945, the correlation—and influence—of the party on the government agreement increases by .005.<sup>10</sup> Independent sample *t*-tests show that more experienced parties do not have more influence among negotiating parties only.

Contrary to our expectations, the party of the formateur is not able to exploit its position in terms of policy rewards (H1b). In fact, the coefficient is negative and only slightly above the 5 percent significance threshold ( $P=0.052$ ). *T*-tests

<sup>10</sup>We also find that parties included in the negotiation process have more influence on the government agreement than those who are not. This variable is not shown in our explanatory model here, as it is correlated too highly with the negotiation experience of parties. As a result, we ran two separate models (one with a “majority” variable and another with “negotiation experience”) and decided to keep the model with the largest explanatory power ( $R^2 = .32$  vs.  $R^2 = .20$ ).

**Table 1.** Regression models explaining the congruence between party manifestos and government agreements

		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<b>Negotiation variables</b>	Negotiation experience	0.005** (0.002)		0.005** (0.001)
	Formateur	-0.145 (0.078)		-0.059 (0.065)
	Party size	0.370 (0.512)		
<b>Policy variables</b>	Left-right		-0.006** (0.002)	-0.006** (0.002)
	FP incumbency		0.029 (0.027)	
	FP specialization		0.008 (0.006)	
<b>Control variables</b>	Coalition size	0.112** (0.029)	0.108** (0.025)	0.104** (0.023)
	Length ratio	-0.000** (0.000)	-0.000** (0.000)	-0.000** (0.000)
	Constant	-0.155 (0.135)	-0.117 (0.130)	-0.095 (0.113)
	$R^2$	0.32	0.39	0.45
	$N$	91	91	91

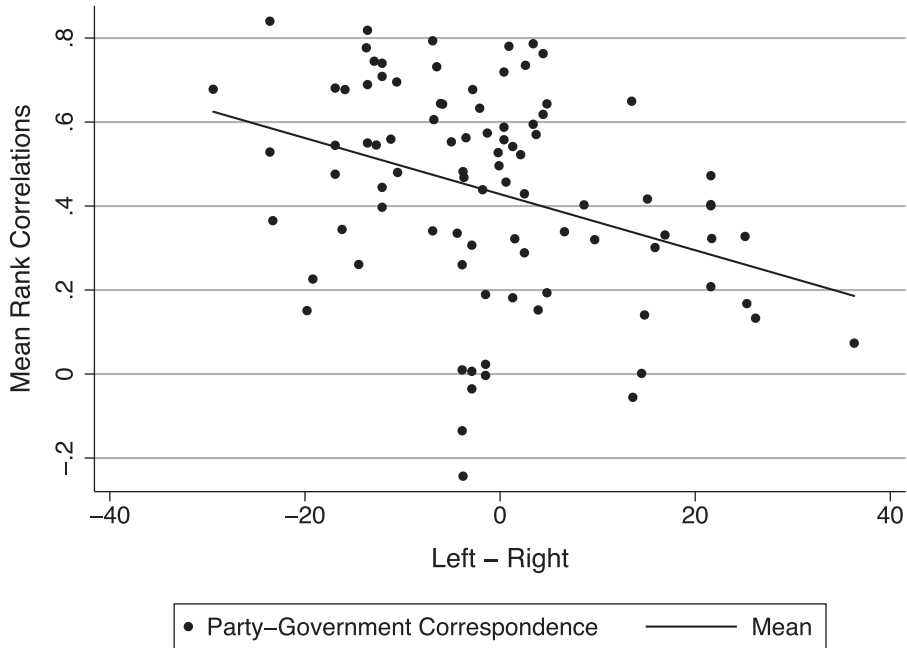
\* $P < 0.05$ ; \*\* $P < 0.01$

among majority parties only also do not reveal any difference in impact between the party of the formateur and the other negotiating parties. The main objective of the formateur might be a fast and effective government formation rather than the maximization of policy gains for his/her party. Foreign policy might be one of the policy domains where the party of the formateur makes concessions, as part of the greater government deal. The size of a party clearly—and unexpectedly—has no bearing on its impact on the government agreement (H1c), even when we bivariate test the differential impact among coalition parties only. In that sense, larger parties and/or parties providing the formateur do not seem to have a comparative advantage over the other parties.

The second set of hypotheses tests the impact of policy-related variables on the influence parties have on the government agreement (Model 2). When it comes to party ideology, we consistently find left-wing parties to have more influence on the government agreement, and not the central parties, as we hypothesized (H2a). Figure 4 shows that the relationship between ideology and influence is *not* curvilinear, countering the possibility that an inverted U-shape with lower impact of the left and right parties might underestimate the effect of centrist parties. Hence, the influence of parties increases the more left-wing they are, an effect that persists when we examine negotiating parties only.

This is, however, not due to a higher investment in foreign policy issues, as different tests—categorizing parties according to CMP data, or looking only at the traditional left-wing Socialist and Green parties—show that left-wing parties do not significantly differ from right-wing parties in the proportional attention they pay to foreign affairs issues in their manifestos. It also needs to be noted that left-wing parties do not have more negotiating experience (on average fifteen vs. twenty-one years) and that they are, on average, smaller than right-wing parties.

We also argued that the parties holding ministerial portfolios related to foreign policy at the time of the negotiations of the government agreement would have a larger impact on its content than the others parties (H2b). Our analyses, however,



**Figure 4.** The relationship between ideology (left-right) and each party's correspondence with the government agreement

do not confirm this hypothesis. Moreover, among negotiating parties, incumbency does not increase a party's influence on the government agreement. Finally, those parties paying relatively more attention to foreign policy issues generally do not have a higher influence on the ensuing foreign policy agenda (H2c). However, investment in foreign policy pays off once a party is included in the coalition negotiations.

Our two control variables have a significant and consistent impact throughout all the regression models. First, the number of parties included in the negotiations has a positive impact, meaning that the average impact of parties on the content of the government's agenda is higher when there are more participants around the table. This is not surprising, as concessions have to be made to each of these parties—more partners means more concessions—and this certainly extends to foreign policy considerations. The second control variable relates to the length ratio between the manifesto and government agreement. We find that the priorities of both documents are more alike when the differential in terms of absolute number of references to foreign policy issues is smaller.<sup>11</sup> As Belgian manifestos are particularly long—they can reach up to 300 pages—it is unsurprising to observe that a short government agreement has less correspondence to these party documents than long agreements. A longer document allows getting into the details of the forthcoming foreign policy plans that will be implemented during the legislative term.

Finally, Model 3 includes the five variables that have a significant impact on the influence parties exert on the governmental foreign policy agenda in both previous models. The goal of this third model is to verify whether these variables exert

<sup>11</sup>We also examined the difference between parties from Belgium's two main communities and did not find a significant difference in their impact on the content of the GA. The time between the elections and the establishment of the government agreement also did not affect the degree to which parties are able to influence its foreign policy priorities.

their influence independently from one another. This is an important step, as the number of observations does not allow us to reliably test all the independent variables together. Model 3 confirms the importance of all these variables except for the party of the formateur, which is no longer close to significance at all. This explanatory model, combining the negotiation position of parties, as well as their policies, manages to explain considerably more variance on the dependent variable ( $R^2 = .45$ ) than Models 1 and 2 separately ( $R^2 = .32$  and  $.39$ , respectively). Hence, our analyses reveal that a number of negotiation and policy variables play an important role in explaining why some parties are able to exert more influence on the government agreement than others. To summarize our findings, it seems clear that a first crucial step for parties is to take part in the government negotiations. Once included in these negotiations, left-wing parties and parties that invested more in foreign policy in their manifestos are better able to impose their priorities in the government agreement.

### Conclusion

Despite the widely recognized and studied impact of political parties on policy throughout the different stages of the policymaking process and on different political arenas, the role of parties still remains largely ignored when it comes to foreign policy. By examining the role of partisan politics and coalitions in foreign policy, our goal is to move beyond simple neoclassicist or American-derived notions of foreign policy explanations and, in this way, contribute to the understanding of foreign policymaking in parliamentary democracies. More particularly, the role of political parties in one of the earliest stage of policymaking—that is, during the government formation and coalition agreement negotiation phases—is investigated. As parties communicate their policy priorities through carefully drafted manifestos before the elections, once in office, they try to carry out as much of these policies as possible. While this is pretty straightforward in majoritarian countries, where one party holds all government positions and a majority of seats in parliament, in coalition countries, different parties need to get together to form a government with a parliamentary majority.

The model proposed here aims at understanding why certain political parties are better able to impose their policy priorities on the future government than others. This model relies on theoretical explanations that relate to the negotiation process and the distribution of power during these negotiations, as well as on the substantial and strategic importance of foreign policy for each party. While our study cannot definitively or exhaustively explain why some parties have more influence over the government agreement's foreign policy priorities than others, it shows which types of parties are better able to influence the government agreement, regardless of their government or opposition status. Hence, it confirms the relevance and importance of studying the role of political parties and their influence in the field of foreign policy. Political parties, especially those negotiating a new government, are able to determine or shift the foreign policy course of the country to an important degree. Descriptive and correlational results confirm Rathbun's argument (2004) that the interest of a country can be defined and interpreted in many different ways, depending on the ideological and ideational inclination of the parties, and changing over time.

Our study finds that both the party's status during coalition negotiations and its policy-related position matter in influencing the future government's foreign policy priorities. While both types of explanations explain a great deal of variance, they clearly perform best when combined. More specifically, prior negotiation experience increases a party's influence on the government agreement. Neither the

parliamentary size of parties, nor leading the negotiations, however, increases a party's influence on the future foreign policies. Perhaps those parties consider foreign policy as a potential domain of compromise, especially important to the smaller (left-wing) coalition partners.

Indeed, a party's ideological left-right position consistently predicts the degree to which its foreign policy priorities match those of the next government. While it is beyond the scope of this study to unravel the casual mechanisms and explain why exactly this is the case, our analyses show that the larger impact of left-wing parties is not due to their size (as they tend to be smaller than right-wing parties) or their pivotal position (as this position is occupied by the Christian Democrats). Yet, one possible explanation could be that parties and party families each have their own privileged policy domains whereby foreign policy is a "mainly left" domain. Palmer, London, and Regan (2004), for example, investigated the difference between foreign policy issues and defense issues and confirmed previous findings by Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge (1994), according to whom right parties are pro-military while left parties are anti-military and pro-peace. We similarly demonstrated that left-wing parties care more about development aid while right-wing parties pay more attention to international trade, which is in line with their "classic" position on socio-economic policy issues. As international trade has been allocated to the regions in 1980, it may seem logical that parties focusing on this issue can no longer emphasize it in the coalition agreement at the federal level.

Additionally, the impact of parties increases as more parties take part in the negotiations. The ideological spread that a wider coalition inevitably entails likely prevents one of the parties or political families (both Flemish and Francophone parties from the same ideology) to singularly dominate foreign policy priorities at the expense of the other parties. As a consequence, more priorities from very different parties are being incorporated.

Political parties, thus, exert their influence at different moments—not only during government negotiations, but also in parliament (McCormick and Wittkopf 1990; Fordham 1998; Kesgin and Kaarbo 2010) or in cabinet negotiations (Kaarbo 1996; Barnett 1999). So, despite the widespread belief that foreign policy is a mainly reactive policymaking process, this study shows that, in coalition countries, the bargaining on foreign policy already starts during the negotiations of a new government.

Moreover, we know that the decisions made during those negotiations, and included in the government agreement, are effectively carried out to a large degree (Moury 2013). While some might argue that foreign policy is too unpredictable and dependent on current events to include specific policies in the government agreement, in fact, the foreign policy sections of government agreements contain, on average, more concrete policy proposals than other policy domains. Hence, we can assume that the decisions and concessions made during government formation are meaningful and specific.

As we argue and urge for more research on the role of political parties and party politics in the field of foreign policy, a future research agenda should, foremost, focus on comparative studies examining the generalizability or specificity of some of these findings. While there are many coalition countries with a similar low contentious foreign policy agenda, Belgium is a rather particular case of party governance where parties are involved at every stage of the policymaking process (De Winter, Della Porta, and Deschouwer 1996; De Winter and Dumont 2006). While left-wing parties might not dominate foreign policy in other countries, a different portfolio allocation process might, for example, generate different findings in other countries. However, if political parties are heavily invested in foreign policy in a country like Belgium, we may expect to find similar effects in countries where foreign policy is considered more important—even if political parties hold less power than they do in Belgium.



**Appendix 1. Incumbent Ministers at Time of Drafting the Government Agreement**

**Table 2.** Incumbent ministers at the time of drafting the government agreement

Year	Prime minister		Foreign affairs		Defense		Foreign trade		Development aid		European affairs	
	Name	Party	Name	Party	Name	Party	Name	Party	Name	Party	Name	Party
1979	Vanden Boeynants	PSC	Simonet	PS	Vanden Boeynants	PSC	De Bruyne	VU	Outers	FD	-	-
1980	Martens	CVP	Simonet	PS	Desmarests	PSC	Urbain	PS	Eyskens	CVP	-	-
1981	Martens	CVP	Nothomb	PSC	Swaelen	CVP	Urbain	PS	Coens	SP	-	-
1985	Martens	CVP	Tindemans	CVP	Vreven	PVV	Kempinaire	PVV	<i>de Donnée</i>	PRL	<i>De Keersmaeker</i>	CVP
1988	Martens	CVP	Tindemans	CVP	<i>de Donnée</i>	PRL	Knoops	PRL	<i>Kempinaire</i>	PVV	<i>De Keersmaeker</i>	CVP
1992	Martens	CVP	Eyskens	CVP	Cœme	PS	Urbain	PS	Derycke	SP	<i>De Keersmaeker</i>	CVP
1995	Dehaene	CVP	Derycke	SP	Pinxten	CVP	Urbain	PS	<i>Derycke</i>	SP	<i>De Keersmaeker</i>	CVP
1999	Dehaene	CVP	Derycke	SP	Poncelet	PSC	Di Rupo	PS	Moreels	CVP	Urbain	PS
2003	Verhofstadt	VLD	Michel	PRL	Flahaut	PS	Neyts	VLD	<i>Boutmans</i>	<i>Agalevo</i>	-	-
2008	Verhofstadt	VLD	De Gucht	VLD	De Grem	CID&V	-	-	Michel	MR	-	-

Note: Italic= State Secretary.

\*De Keersmaeker was in charge of EU affairs, while Lizin was in charge of preparing the Belgian presidency of the EU Council.

**Appendix 2: Regression Diagnostics****Model 1****Table 3.** Correlation matrix for variables used in regression Model 1 of Table 1

	Negotiation experience	Formateur	Party size	Coalition size	Length ratio
Negotiation experience	1.00	.	.	.	.
Formateur	0.38	1.00	.	.	.
Party size	0.64	0.56	1.00	.	.
Coalition size	0.08	0.05	0.10	1.00	.
Length ratio	-0.01	0.03	0.12	-0.14	1.00

Although the correlation matrix shows relatively high correlations between the party size on one hand, and negotiation expertise and formateur status on the other, VIF diagnostics do not suggest multicollinearity problems in regression Model 1. Moreover, removing the party size variable from the regression model does not affect the significance levels of the other variables in the model.

**Table 4.** VIF and 1/VIF regression diagnostics for multicollinearity

Variable	VIF	1/VIF
Party size	2.20	0.46
Negotiation experience	1.73	0.57
Formateur	1.45	0.68
Length ratio	1.05	0.95
Coalition size	1.04	0.97
Mean VIF	1.49	

**Model 2****Table 5.** Correlation matrix for variables used in regression Model 2 of Table 1

	Left-right	FP incumbency	FP specialization	Coalition size	Length ratio
Left-right	1.00	.	.	.	.
FP incumbency	-0.11	1.00	.	.	.
FP specialization	-0.11	0.07	1.00	.	.
Coalition size	-0.06	0.03	-0.02	1.00	.
Length ratio	-0.07	0.06	0.14	-0.14	1.00

Here, too, the correlation matrix and VIF diagnostics indicate no problems of multicollinearity in regression Model 2.

**Table 6.** VIF and 1/VIF regression diagnostics for multicollinearity

Variable	VIF	1/VIF
Length ratio	1.05	0.96
FP specialization	1.03	0.97
Left-right	1.03	0.97
Coalition size	1.03	0.97
FP incumbency	1.02	0.98
Mean	VIF	1.03

**Model 3**

**Table 7.** VIF and 1/VIF regression diagnostics for multicollinearity

Variable	VIF	1/VIF
Party size	1.23	0.81
Negotiation experience	1.19	0.84
Formateur	1.06	0.94
Length ratio	1.03	0.97
Coalition size	1.03	0.97
Mean	VIF	1.11

VIF diagnostics for regression Model 3 again indicate no problems of multicollinearity.

**Table 8.** Correlation matrix for variables used in regression Model 3 of Table 1

	Negotiation experience	Formateur	Coalition size	Left-right	Length ratio
Negotiation experience	1.00	.	.	.	.
Formateur	0.38	1.00	.	.	.
Coalition size	0.08	0.05	1.00	.	.
Left-right	-0.05	0.18	-0.06	1.00	.
Length ratio	-0.01	0.03	-0.14	-0.07	1.00

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