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Régis Dandoy^a, Geoffroy Matagne^b & Caroline Van Wynsberghe^c

^a Department of Political Science, NCCR Democracy, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland

^b Department of Political Science, University of Liège, Liège, Belgium

^c ISPOLE, Université catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

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The Future of Belgian Federalism: An Analysis of Party Preferences

RÉGIS DANDOY*, GEOFFROY MATAGNE** &
CAROLINE VAN WYNSBERGHE†

*Department of Political Science, NCCR Democracy, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland,

**Department of Political Science, University of Liège, Liège, Belgium, †ISPOLE, Université catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

ABSTRACT This article studies the political discourses regarding the future of Belgian federalism since the year 2000. Analysing party manifestos, it intends to identify patterns of preferences about the long-term evolution of Belgian institutions and the distribution of competences. The quantitative and qualitative analysis shows that the systemic duality of Belgian federalism largely explains the preferences of political actors: French-speaking parties overall oppose the broad state reform that the Dutch-speaking parties collectively support. Yet, each party has a specific position on the decentralization cleavage and a vision of Belgian federalism that cannot be reduced to its linguistic affiliation.

KEY WORDS: Belgium, federalism, political parties, party manifestos

Introduction

The Belgian federal system is quite complex (see Dandoy *et al.*, 2013 and the introduction of this special issue). After its institutional reorganization in 1993, the unitary Belgian State was formally transformed into a federation made up of three regions (Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia) and three communities (the Flemish-, French- and German-speaking communities). It is a dual and asymmetrical federation of both regions and language communities. These two types of sub-states overlap partly, but in a different way in both language communities. In Flanders there is one single public authority, combining the powers of the Flemish region and Flemish community. That Flemish community can also offer its services—such as education—in the Brussels region. On the Francophone side the two types of sub-states are kept separate. There is a Walloon region and a Francophone community. The latter can offer its services in the Brussels region.

This institutional construction is a compromise between two divergent views on the Belgian federation. The Flemish one stresses the importance of the language

Correspondence Address: Régis Dandoy, Department of Political Science, NCCR Democracy, University of Zurich, Affolternstr. 56, Zurich, 8050 Switzerland. Email: rdandoy@ulb.ac.be

communities and the fact that Brussels should belong to the Flemish community. The Francophone view stresses the importance of the three regions and thus of Brussels as a fully-fledged sub-state of Belgium. These different views are defended by the political parties of each language group. The Belgian party system is, indeed, split and the falling apart of the unitary traditional parties—as well as the emergence and electoral success of regionalist parties¹—in the 1960s and 1970s was exactly the result of these diverging and actually incompatible views on the future of Belgium. As a result of this absence of national political parties (Dandoy and De Decker, 2009), every aspect of today's political life is divided along community lines.

This dual federation is the institutional context in which the Belgian parties have to play their role. They participate in elections at the federal level and at the level of the regions. Coalition governments are formed at the federal level, in Flanders, in the Brussels region, in the Walloon region and in the French community. Election campaigns and policy making in the different institutions deal with the competences that have been distributed to the different levels. Yet elections and government formation are often also related to the state structure itself. The way in which Belgium should be organized remains a matter of discussion and of fierce debates between north and south.

In general the parties of the north defend the typical Flemish view, which aims at downgrading the full regional status of Brussels and at bringing more federal powers and financial means to the sub-state level. Francophone parties generally defend a status quo in the distribution of powers—in particular in areas related to social security—and defend the full regional status of Brussels. While in Flanders the sub-state level is defended as the most important, the Francophone parties prefer to keep a strong federal level. Yet within the two party systems there are also differences. More radical Flemish parties, such as *Vlaams Belang* (VB) and *N-VA* (heir of the *Volksunie*), not only demand more powers for the sub-states but actually defend full independence of Flanders (including Brussels). A Walloon regionalist party does not exist anymore, but a more radical position on Brussels—with the claim to expand its territory into the surrounding Flemish region—is defended by the *Front Démocratique des Francophones* (FDF).

The aim of this article is to analyse the political perceptions and discourses regarding the future of Belgian federalism since the 2000s. It looks at the debates on the future of Belgium from the angle of the political parties in order to identify patterns and models of preferences about the long-term evolution of the institutions, the distribution of competences and the nature of intergovernmental relations. The different scenarios will be observed through an in-depth analysis of the terminology and arguments used by political actors. The next section offers a quantitative and a qualitative analysis of national and regional party manifestos since 2003 in order to highlight the parties' underlying conceptions of the nature and the future of Belgian federalism. We look at the presence of specific manifestos for each level and at the length of them for each level. We offer both a quantitative and a qualitative analysis of the content of the manifestos.

The Future of Belgian Federalism in the Party Manifestos

In political science, the most commonly used instrument for assessing and measuring party policy preference is, without doubt and by far, the party manifesto (Marks *et al.*,

2007: 24), especially since the 1970s. According to Budge (2001: 51), “if one wants to study party policy . . ., one has to study the party manifesto”. Indeed, there is a wide consensus on the use of party manifestos as a way to assess the position and/or preferences of a party on a large variety of policy issues.

Following Budge and Farlie (1983: 131), most authors agreed that manifestos are authoritative party statements: they are the only campaign statements made on behalf of the party as a whole rather than in the name of a particular candidate, group or faction. Party manifestos are official documents and they originate from the party leadership and from within the party’s internal structures (Budge, 1992: 8). This question of authority and legitimacy is rather important, especially regarding its unitary character. Even if they reflect more or less the mean of all intra-party groups and factions weighted by their importance (Bräuninger and Debus, 2009), manifestos are impartial and authoritative statements of party preferences and represent the whole party, not just one faction (Volkens, 2001: 34; Dinas and Gemenis, 2010: 428). In addition, manifestos are approved and legally ratified by an authoritative party body, i.e. from a small committee or a council of elected party elites to a large party convention or party congress.

The future of Belgian federalism through the analysis of party manifestos can be studied across three territorial perspectives: the federal, the regional (the two main sub-national entities, i.e. Flanders and Wallonia/French-speaking community) and Brussels.² Each of these perspectives can be approached by each Belgian political party with a different standpoint and a different electoral platform. The federal scenarios can be assessed when analysing the electoral manifestos on the occasion of the federal elections, the scenarios for the future of each of the regions within the federal setting can be evaluated via the regional electoral manifestos for the Flemish and Walloon—and French-speaking community—elections, and the future of Brussels (capital city and city-region) can also be assessed within this larger framework as all political parties (from both linguistic community) drafted an electoral manifesto for the Brussels elections.

In order to give a systematic account of the diverse visions of the different political actors about the future of Belgian federalism, the following sections offer an analysis of the national and regional party manifestos since 2003. Indeed, the elections in Belgium were organized simultaneously in 1995 and 1999 since the federal, regional (and even European in 1999) elections occurred on the same day. As the parties sometimes write a single and common manifesto for these simultaneous elections, it prevents the researcher from disentangling the two policy levels and evaluating the importance of a specific level of decision making among these mixed manifestos. The analysis of these party manifestos will be performed in four different steps. The first step concerns the question of whether parties have a distinct manifesto for each election, while the second one analyses the length of those documents. In a third step, we will perform a quantitative analysis of the content of the party manifestos for the federal elections by creating an indicator of party position on the decentralization issue. In a last section, these analyses will be complemented by an in-depth qualitative analysis of four key policy issues associated with the future of Belgian federalism (the reform of the Senate, the status of Brussels, the distribution of competences and the future of Belgium).

Federal vs. Regional Party Manifestos

The analysis of the presence or absence of a specific manifesto for some regions or some levels of decision making can be useful in order to grasp the importance a party attaches to a specific region or decision-making level. Even if ethno-regionalist parties do not always participate in national elections in some European countries (Schrijver, 2006; Barrio *et al.*, 2009) for strategic, ideological or financial reasons, in Belgium, all main political parties participate in federal elections, including regionalist parties. Furthermore, since 2003, all main political parties drafted a manifesto for these elections. Even when in an electoral cartel (for example, the electoral cartel of CD&V and N-VA for the 2007 federal elections), parties tend to draft completely separate manifestos besides the common electoral platform.

However, it is not the case for the regional elections (Table 1). All Belgian political parties also participate in the regional elections but do not always publish region-specific (or community-specific) manifestos. In our view, it reveals the symbolic importance that the party attaches to the concerned region or community. This phenomenon can be observed in 2009 in the French-speaking area (i.e. mainly Wallonia and Brussels) since the cdH included sections concerning the French-speaking community within its two regional manifestos and Ecolo wrote a common manifesto for the two regions and the French-speaking community. The absence of region-specific manifestos is even more frequent in the Flemish side of the country. The fact that the extreme-right and independentist party VB did not produce a specific manifesto for the Brussels regional elections in 2004 and 2009 is not a coincidence. It underlines the lack of interest for Brussels as a region as the party's ideology sees Brussels as an inherent part of the Flemish region (see below). The same explanation applies for the absence of a Brussels regional manifesto in the case of the Flemish nationalist N-VA while it is more surprising in the case of the Flemish socialists (sp.a).

Length of Manifestos

The variation in the length of party manifestos does not have to be proven and many authors have observed that there are significant differences in manifesto length across time, countries and parties (see, for example, Klingemann *et al.*, 1994). Among 19 countries, Belgium is ranked eighth in manifesto length between 1970 and 2005 (Daubler, 2010: 10). An obvious proof that length matters when one wants to analyse manifestos is the fact that almost every scientific research uses proportions rather than absolute figures. Length is expected to have an impact on the number of electoral pledges, the diversity of issues dealt with in a manifesto, etc. At the same time, length has often been considered as a weakness in the analysis of party manifesto. Regarding the Comparative Manifesto Project, Krouwel and van Elfrinkhof (2009) observed a large influence of the length of a manifesto or of the number of coded quasi-sentences, but the same reasoning also applies for computer-assisted methods, such as the Wordscores technique, which is said to work best with texts of the same length.

Yet, only a small number of empirical research projects have integrated the length variable into their model, mainly using it as a control variable (see, for example, Marks

Table 1. Length of manifestos (number of words)

| | 2003 Federal | 2004 Flanders/ Wallonia | 2004 French-sp. Community | 2004 Brussels | 2007 Federal | 2009 Flanders/ Wallonia | 2009 French-sp. Community | 2009 Brussels | 2010 Federal |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| <i>Flemish parties</i> | | | | | | | | | |
| CD&V | 40.058 | 32.186 | — | 14.300 | 39.237 | 38.555 | — | 23.263 | 34.544 |
| sp.a | 6.948 | 39.052 | — | — | 48.824 | 62.950 | — | 28.626 | 14.780 |
| Open VLD | 4.018 | 6.631 | — | 18.207 | 31.507 | 31.462 | — | 21.971 | 25.593 |
| Vlaams Belang | 24.052 | 23.939 | — | — | 5.375 | 62.699 | — | — | 5.375 |
| N-VA | 6.727 | 10.239 | — | — | 18.581 | 43.698 | — | 5.209 | 24.425 |
| LDD | — | — | — | — | 15.059 | 20.339 | — | 6.338 | 579 |
| Groen | 71.229 | 35.893 | — | 23.064 | 56.058 | 117.215 | — | 23.322 | 34.660 |
| <i>French-speaking parties</i> | | | | | | | | | |
| PS | 83.048 | 94.199 | 79.075 | 49.331 | 126.575 | 52.407 | 47.242 | 45.613 | 53.094 |
| MR | 81.957 | 987 | 73.854 | 1.015 | 129.575 | 81.824 | 45.481 | 72.927 | 115.303 |
| Ecolo | 16.813 | 11.102 | 16.634 | 27.816 | 173.361 | — | 342.038 | — | 93.534 |
| cdH | 143.448 | 74.109 | * | 68.493 | 124.540 | 173.349 | — | 161.903 | 151.012 |
| FN | 6.657 | — | 6.930 | — | 11.118 | — | — | — | 11.773 |
| PP | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | 7.453 |
| Total | 484.955 | 330.647 | 171.873 | 204.536 | 779.810 | 798.510 | 206.735 | 503.184 | 572.125 |

*Missing manifesto. For the calculation of the total, we artificially split the manifesto of FN and Ecolo in three equal parts, respectively, for the 2004 and 2009 elections.

et al., 2007; Duncan and Van Hecke, 2008). A few other studies used manifesto length as an independent variable (see, for example, McCluskey, 2008; Hans and Hönnige, 2008). According to Gabel and Huber (2000), the length of manifestos is a critical variable for the validity of data. Among other variables that make a 'good' manifesto, manifestos should be large enough to produce enough data. In their meta-analysis of manifesto-based approaches, these authors found out that manifesto length is the only variable that matters in explaining residuals in the positional models, with the exception of country dummies and extreme parties.

The analysis of the length of the different manifestos in Belgium also delivers interesting results. We observe large differences across parties and across communities. On average, French-speaking manifestos are much longer (from two to four times longer, depending on the election) than the Flemish ones at both the federal and the regional level (Table 1). And the two Christian-Democrats and the two green parties published the longest manifestos (respectively 1.118.997 and 1.042.739 words split on about nine manifestos), followed by the socialists (831.764 words) and the liberals (742.312 words). Extreme-right and populist parties produce significantly smaller manifestos.

More interesting is the trend observed in Flanders. In 2004, the manifestos for the regional elections were, on average, shorter than the ones drafted one year earlier for the federal elections. However, in 2009, the manifestos for the regional elections became significantly longer than the ones for the federal elections in both 2007 and 2010. This is particularly true in the case of the VB, *Lijst Dedecker* (LDD) and, more surprisingly, sp.a. On the contrary, the Brussels region seems not to be a priority for Flemish political parties as the average length of the manifestos for Brussels are more than three times shorter than the ones for the simultaneous elections in Flanders in 2009. In this regard, it clearly indicates that the priority for Flemish parties is now moving in the direction of the Flemish regional elections, when compared to the federal elections. If one cannot yet argue today that Flemish regional elections became the first-order elections, we clearly observe that they are gradually losing their second-order nature. This also translates the Flemish conception of the Belgian federalism based on communities and not on regions.

Besides one must keep in mind the asymmetry of the institutions, as community and regional parliaments have been merged in Flanders but not in the south of the country where the community parliament is composed of all the Walloon MPs and some French-speaking MPs from Brussels. The pattern is, therefore, different for the French-speaking parties: the federal elections remain the level with the largest manifestos, followed by the Walloon elections. Compared to the Flemish parties, the Brussels regional elections are not considered as less important (probably because of its demographic weight—one quarter—among the French-speakers). The French-speaking community is the 'ugly duckling' of the regional elections as little space is devoted to the issues related to this level in the party platforms, particularly in 2009. Finally, there are no clear differences when comparing across parties, with the exception of the liberal party (MR), which—on average—allocates more attention to the federal elections than the regional ones.

Quantitative Analysis

The third step of our analysis concerns a quantitative analysis of the content of the party manifestos for the federal elections, using a computational content analysis approach (Krippendorf, 2004), i.e. the so-called 'dictionary method'. This type of computer-assisted content analysis consists of the transformation of a text into representations. The text is analysed according to theories of representation and of signification that are presumed to operate within the context of the text.

The dictionary approach is based on taxonomy, meaning that texts can be represented at different levels of abstraction. It, therefore, implies comparing the analysed texts not in terms of words (or any other unit of analysis) but in terms of their categories of meanings (for example, word families, lemmas, etc.). The technique relies on a computer-based thesaurus or dictionary, according to which the text is coded into abstract categories. As a result, it combines the human building of dictionaries containing some *a priori* defined signal words with the computer coding of texts. For Krouwel and van Elfrinkhof (2009: 16), this technique is close to hand-coding procedures (using a pre-determined coding scheme), but at the word level. The form of linguistic representations (which words are used, which expressions, etc.?) is crucial in the content analysis (Krippendorf, 2004). Among the different methods of content analysis, the word is the most used unit of analysis (Ray, 2001: 150) and an analysis at the sentence level ignores linguistics and the importance of the use of some words and concepts. The key assumption is that actors do not use words randomly. Concerning political parties, it is argued that these actors will use some words more often and others less often or even never.

The most important element in this dictionary approach is not the coding procedure and the reading of the manifesto itself, but the establishment of the dictionary. The dictionary construction is a deductive process that requires a large dose of researcher's intervention (Ray, 2001: 155). The different steps in the establishment of the dictionary are the use of long reference texts of two extreme parties as a pool of keywords (De Vries *et al.*, 2001: 193), the comparison of the frequencies of the words in the two texts, the selection of the words used much more in one text than in another, and the assignment of these words to categories, using prior knowledge and identification of a word as belonging to one party. The dictionary construction is also an iterative procedure since word lists can be modified during the course of analysis.

With the help of the dictionary approach, our aim is to analyse the positions of the Belgian party manifestos on the decentralization issue, i.e. the territorial reorganization of the state. Decentralization is currently a key issue in Western Europe. In numerous countries, the debate around the creation or development of more autonomous decentralized institutions became salient on the political agenda and in the public debate (media and public opinion). Institutional reforms giving more autonomy to subnational levels are not regarded as exceptional and tend to be considered as 'normal' adaptations of the state structure to the evolution of the society and new political demands. A global trend towards more decentralization/federalism across West European countries has even been identified by numerous political scientists (see, for example, Hooghe *et al.*, 2010).

This is also the case for Belgium for which Budge (1992: 65) analysed the manifestos between 1945 and 1981 and demonstrated the rise of the issue of decentralization. More recently, Dandoy (2012) observed that decentralization is a relatively important issue in the Belgian electoral campaigns as it represents, on average, respectively 4.99% and 4.93% of the content of all Flemish and French-speaking party manifestos between 1977 and 2007. Important differences are to be observed across parties, between the quasi-absence of this issue for some parties to the 29.49% of importance in the case of the VB in 1978. However, this author observed that the importance of this issue in party manifestos has decreased since 1987 in both Flemish and French-speaking party systems. Still, while decentralization remains rather salient in the Flemish party system at around 5%, it drastically decreased in the manifestos of the French-speaking parties to reach 2.05% and 2.13% in the federal elections of 2003 and 2007.

We based the construction of our dictionary on the description of the categories on centralization and decentralization of the Comparative Manifesto Project (Budge *et al.*, 2001). As these categories have been used widely in political science, we expect that these categories would fit our case better than would a subjective definition made by experts. Compared to other fully automated computer-assisted content analysis, the dictionary method requires that the statistical treatment of the units of analysis is preceded by a coder assigning words to categories. Contrary to Laver and Garry (2000) who used two ‘extreme cases’ in reference texts in order to place words and partly create the dictionary, we used the Yoshikoder³ software in a different way. Yoshikoder, therefore, requires an implication of both the computer and the researcher. Another advantage of this computer-assisted content analysis lies in the fact that one or several issues or categories can be selected, in order to have a limited or a broader view of the content of the manifesto. In addition, a statistical comparison of the selected documents is possible, but only two by two. Finally, as with any other computer-assisted content analysis, an internal check for reliability is possible.

Before analysing the results obtained by a computer-assisted method based on a dictionary, an exploratory work can be instructive. Indeed, the analysis of the words’ frequency statistics—removing the articles, prepositions, pronouns, etc.—for each manifesto delivers interesting results. We analyse the ‘top 10’ of the most used words in each manifesto (Tables 2–7). We observe that the differences across parties are to be explained by their ideological profile, transcending their linguistic distinction.⁴

Indeed, we observe clear ideological differences between party families as far as the content of their federal manifestos of 2003, 2007 and 2010 is concerned. However, the largest differences between party manifestos concern the decentralization issue. Even if many Flemish parties mention the European level (VLD, CD&V and Agalev in 2003; sp.a, Open VLD and CD&V in 2007; CD&V and N-VA in 2010), the Flanders vs. Belgium cleavage is directly present in many of these parties’ manifestos. Analysing manifestos for the federal elections, it is not surprising to find the presence of words such as ‘Belgium’ or ‘federal’ among the 10 most-used words of the VLD and CD&V in 2003 of CD&V and Groen! in 2007 and of almost all Flemish parties in 2010. But the importance of the references made to Flanders (‘Flanders’, ‘Flemish’, etc.) is more striking. They are basically the most used words of the manifestos of the regionalist party N-VA and of the extreme-right party (VB) in all the

Table 2. Top 10 of most frequent words (2003, Flemish parties)

| sp.a | No. | VLD | No. | CD&V | No. | Agalev | No. | VB | No. | N-VA | No. |
|-------------|-----|-----------------|-----|-------------------------|-----|------------|-----|-------------------|-----|-------------------|-----|
| mensen | 35 | fiscale | 10 | cd&v | 277 | agalev | 344 | vlaams | 220 | n-va | 86 |
| sociale | 29 | sociale | 9 | mensen | 150 | sociale | 243 | blok | 181 | vlaamse | 35 |
| kansen | 28 | euro | 7 | overheid | 129 | overheid | 173 | vlaanderen | 141 | sociale | 26 |
| samenleving | 23 | europese | 7 | zorg | 118 | europese | 158 | vlaamse | 82 | vlaanderen | 24 |
| gezondheid | 16 | legislatuur | 7 | federale | 101 | programma | 142 | Sociale | 49 | vlamingen | 22 |
| regering | 15 | maatregelen | 7 | parlements-verkiezingen | 86 | Groene | 132 | wallonië | 46 | vlaams | 16 |
| overheid | 14 | administratieve | 6 | sociale | 81 | mensen | 130 | belgië | 40 | overheid | 14 |
| recht | 14 | Beleid | 6 | blauwroodgroen | 74 | duurzame | 127 | land | 40 | parlement | 14 |
| veiligheid | 14 | belgië | 6 | samenleving | 60 | beleid | 108 | vreemdelingen | 39 | politici | 13 |
| kinderen | 13 | statuut | 6 | europese | 59 | democratie | 106 | beleid | 35 | wallonië | 13 |

Table 3. Top 10 of most frequent words (2007, Flemish parties)

| sp.a | No. | VLD | No. | CD&V | No. | Groen! | No. | N-VA | No. | VB | No. | LDD | No. |
|-----------------|-----|-------------|-----|-------------------|-----|---------------|-----|-------------------|-----|-------------------|-----|-------------|-----|
| sociale | 165 | resolutie | 194 | mensen | 211 | groen | 466 | n-va | 125 | vlaams | 61 | overheid | 67 |
| mensen | 153 | mensen | 165 | sociale | 89 | mensen | 186 | vlaanderen | 85 | belang | 54 | sociale | 48 |
| onderwijs | 96 | samenleving | 190 | overheid | 88 | sociale | 143 | overheid | 56 | vlaamse | 31 | Land | 31 |
| samenleving | 83 | land | 85 | beleid | 82 | overheid | 116 | vlaamse | 55 | vlaanderen | 25 | economische | 30 |
| sp.a | 70 | sociale | 63 | europese | 71 | ecologische | 103 | federale | 46 | sociale | 23 | Energie | 23 |
| kansen | 67 | overheid | 57 | kinderen | 55 | recht | 81 | Beleid | 40 | onderwijs | 13 | mensen | 21 |
| europese | 60 | landen | 42 | federale | 51 | belgië | 78 | gezondheidszorg | 33 | zekerheid | 12 | recht | 19 |
| Werk | 60 | kinderen | 38 | justicie | 50 | beleid | 76 | Recht | 33 | nederlands | 11 | vervoer | 17 |
| gezondheidszorg | 51 | Systeem | 37 | vlaanderen | 50 | kinderen | 73 | Toekomst | 29 | splitsing | 10 | belastingen | 16 |
| kinderen | 51 | europese | 35 | middelen | 47 | duurzame | 69 | Europese | 28 | wallonië | 10 | democratie | 16 |

Table 4. Top 10 of most frequent words (2010, Flemish parties)

| sp.a | No. | Open VLD | No. | CD&V | No. | Groen! | No. | N-VA | No. | VB | No. | LDD | No. |
|-----------------|-----|-----------------|-----|-----------------|-----|-----------------|-----|-------------------|-----|-------------------|-----|-------------------|-----|
| Sp.a | 62 | VLD | 123 | sociale | 102 | groen | 309 | N-VA | 135 | vlaams | 61 | sociale | 4 |
| recht | 41 | mensen | 77 | federale | 94 | mensen | 117 | sociale | 104 | belang | 54 | belgië | 4 |
| sociale | 37 | overheid | 72 | mensen | 83 | sociale | 11 | vlaanderen | 79 | vlaamse | 31 | vlaanderen | 3 |
| iedereen | 33 | 2020 | 69 | federaal | 77 | economie | 85 | deelstaten | 69 | vlaanderen | 31 | | |
| voortgang | 29 | sociale | 52 | beleid | 70 | duurzame | 80 | zekerheid | 63 | sociale | 23 | | |
| werk | 28 | werken | 52 | overheid | 68 | beleid | 73 | overheid | 49 | onderwijs | 13 | | |
| federale | 25 | federale | 47 | congres | 65 | belgië | 64 | economische | 46 | zekerheid | 12 | | |
| mensen | 24 | pensioen | 41 | regering | 54 | federale | 63 | land | 44 | nederlands | 11 | | |
| middelen | 22 | gewesten | 38 | maatregelen | 50 | werk | 56 | europese | 43 | splitsing | 10 | | |
| overheid | 21 | politiek | 37 | europese | 48 | energie | 49 | federale | 42 | wallonië | 10 | | |

Table 5. Top 10 of most frequent words (2003, French-speaking parties)

| cdH | No. | PS | No. | MR | No. | Ecolo | No. | FN | No. |
|--------------|-----|---------------|-----|---------------|-----|---------------|-----|-----------------|-----|
| cdH | 882 | PS | 554 | politique | 265 | ecolo | 107 | FN | 29 |
| politique | 267 | sociale | 269 | réformateur | 214 | développement | 79 | européenne | 28 |
| travail | 237 | politique | 229 | développement | 147 | politique | 73 | politique | 27 |
| enfants | 235 | travail | 215 | société | 134 | sociale | 58 | pays | 22 |
| services | 229 | services | 165 | programme | 133 | société | 52 | europe | 18 |
| personnes | 225 | développement | 155 | ouvrage | 127 | travail | 48 | sociale | 18 |
| enseignement | 209 | vie | 151 | sécurité | 119 | services | 47 | travail | 17 |
| formation | 208 | sécurité | 150 | travail | 114 | économie | 46 | belges | 16 |
| sociale | 208 | personnes | 145 | mesures | 108 | durable | 43 | belgique | 16 |
| parents | 181 | publics | 144 | entreprises | 106 | environnement | 41 | économique | 16 |

Table 6. Top 10 of most frequent words (2007, French-speaking parties)

| PS | No. | MR | No. | cdH | No. | Ecolo | No. | FN | No. |
|---------------|-----|---------------|-----|-----------------|-----|---------------|-----|-------------|-----|
| emploi | 296 | emploi | 297 | personnes | 277 | politique | 400 | national | 59 |
| politique | 284 | travail | 260 | politique | 230 | développement | 391 | front | 55 |
| services | 264 | développement | 253 | santé | 213 | durable | 301 | politique | 39 |
| sociale | 252 | MR | 233 | emploi | 206 | pays | 286 | europe | 27 |
| personnes | 251 | personnes | 233 | travail | 200 | personnes | 269 | travail | 26 |
| Travail | 234 | politique | 233 | services | 185 | sociale | 258 | européenne | 25 |
| développement | 206 | entreprise | 213 | entreprises | 172 | publics | 245 | vie | 21 |
| Santé | 189 | formation | 185 | système | 164 | santé | 230 | sociale | 20 |
| Pays | 182 | sécurité | 163 | belgique | 159 | politiques | 223 | économique | 19 |
| Droit | 181 | pays | 162 | vie | 157 | travail | 218 | entreprises | 19 |

Table 7. Top 10 of most frequent words (2010, French-speaking parties)

| PS | No. | MR | No. | cdH | No. | Ecolo | No. | FN | No. | PP | No. |
|-------------|-----|---------------|-----|---------------|-----|---------------|-----|---------------|-----|-----------------|-----|
| PS | 444 | MR | 264 | cdh | 787 | ecolo | 818 | publics | 53 | parti | 68 |
| sociale | 132 | travail | 233 | travail | 374 | emploi | 228 | pouvoirs | 47 | populaire | 65 |
| personnes | 118 | personnes | 188 | emploi | 359 | développement | 225 | pays | 34 | Belgique | 28 |
| publics | 118 | politique | 184 | personnes | 304 | politique | 211 | politique | 30 | politique | 28 |
| services | 107 | pays | 153 | formation | 271 | personnes | 208 | développement | 22 | pays | 21 |
| politique | 106 | sécurité | 150 | matière | 250 | axe | 203 | sécurité | 20 | citoyens | 17 |
| travail | 106 | emploi | 147 | niveau | 246 | sociale | 169 | droit | 19 | politiques | 16 |
| entreprises | 95 | développement | 143 | sécurité | 238 | pays | 164 | autorités | 18 | compétences | 16 |
| sécurité | 93 | entreprises | 142 | politique | 234 | sécurité | 158 | liberté | 18 | monde | 15 |
| emploi | 83 | sociale | 141 | développement | 225 | travail | 153 | matière | 18 | PP | 15 |

observed elections, even if these elections were not dealing with the regional level. Even more striking is the presence of references to Wallonia in the manifestos of the N-VA in 2003 and of the VB for every election.

Concerning French-speaking parties, one should note that none of them is dealing with the issues of the Walloon region or the French-speaking community among their priorities,⁵ while the Front national (FN) in 2003, the cdH in 2007 and the Parti populaire (PP) in 2010 are the only French-speaking parties that made reference to Belgium in their 10 most-used words in their manifestos.

In order to build an indicator of the position of each party regarding the decentralization issue, we used Laver and Garry's (2000) method, according to which the position of a party (P) on an issue (i) equals the relative balance of pro- and con- text units, taken as a proportion of all text units on this issue.

$$P_i = (P_{i \text{ pro}} - P_{i \text{ con}}) / (P_{i \text{ pro}} + P_{i \text{ con}}) \tag{1}$$

Thanks to this indicator, we are able to represent the position of the Belgian parties on the decentralization cleavage when using a dictionary-based computer-assisted content analysis for the federal elections of 2003, 2007 and 2010. This indicator varies between 1 and -1 , the maximum meaning that all references to the multi-level organization of the country are in favour of a decentralization, while the minimum (-1) is reached when all the references to this issue are in favour of centralization. Theoretically, since the observed manifestos deal with the federal elections, one could expect all figures to be negative. Similarly, the issues related to the regionalization and decentralization of the country should be left for the regional (and community) manifestos. None the less, the obtained results reveal that electoral manifestos deal with decentralization issues and basically confirm the previous observations (Figure 1). This is in

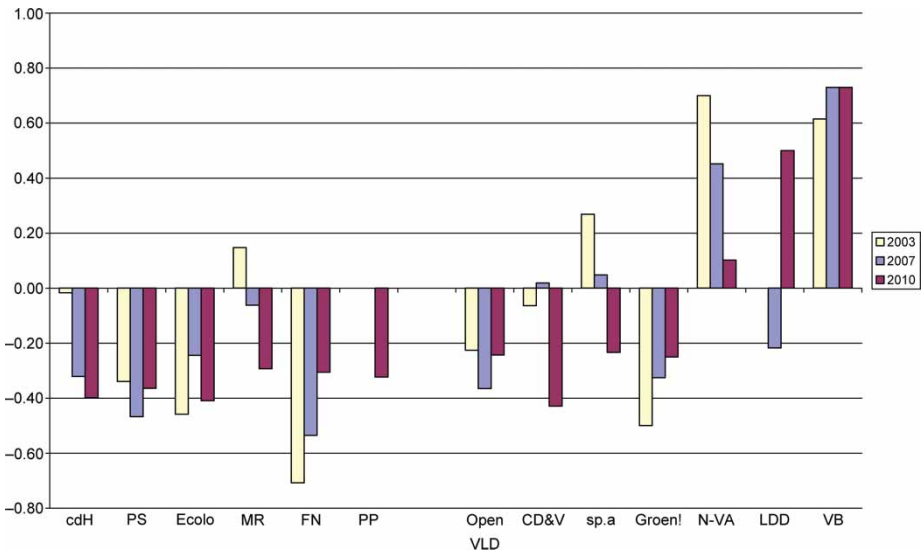


Figure 1. Position of the Belgian parties on the decentralization cleavage (2003–10)

line with the observed pattern of the territorial reforms in Belgium. Institutional changes are negotiated at the federal level while regional actors are poorly involved in this process.

As expected, we can observe differences between Flemish and French-speaking parties (Table 8). With the exception of the MR in 2003, none of the French-speaking parties makes more references to decentralization (positive figures) than centralization (negative figures). Their decentralization scores range from -0.71 (FN in 2003) to -0.02 (CDH in 2003). But if the majority of the French-speaking parties display a stable score over time, around -0.30 for the PS, CDH (with the 2003 exception) and Ecolo, the liberal party MR demonstrates a different position. For the three observed elections, this party is significantly less in favour of centralization. This position can probably be explained by the fact that the MR was constituted as a federation of liberal movements and a regionalist party (FDF) that defends the interests of the French-speaking majority in and around Brussels and, therefore, emphasizes the importance of this issue in its party manifesto.

But the observed pattern concerning the Flemish parties is less uniform. The Flemish manifestos contain relatively more diverse positions on the decentralization issue. Only two Flemish parties scored negatively during the three observed elections (Open VLD and Groen!), while the socialist (sp.a) and the Christian-Democrats (CD&V) were in favour of decentralization in 2003 and 2007 but made more references to centralization in 2010. This move can be explained by the fact that the sp.a was in an electoral cartel with the regionalist party Spirit in 2003 and 2007, while the CD&V formed a similar cartel with the regionalist party N-VA. Keeping these exceptions in mind, we can state that the four mainstream party families (Christian-Democrats, socialists, liberals, greens) on both sides of the linguistic border adopt a rather similar position on decentralization in their manifestos.

As expected, the three Flemish parties that dedicate much more attention to decentralization are the regionalist (N-VA), the populist (LDD) and the extreme-right (VB) parties. Compared to all other parties, these political movements clearly stress the importance of the community level and, as the indicator is a relative measure, do not dedicate much attention to the federal level in their manifestos for the federal elections. None the less, we observe two opposing trends on this cleavage: a radicalization of the decentralization discourse in the case of the populist LDD and, more interesting, a softening of the positions of the N-VA. It probably softened its discourse in order to become an 'acceptable' partner in the negotiations for the government formation.

Qualitative Analysis

The length of the party manifestos renders their qualitative analysis quite complex. Very often several pages (out of a text of more than 100 pages) are dedicated to the community conflict, the state of federalism and the various linguistic, economic or political issues related to them. As a result, any assessment of the positions of all the political parties on these issues may seem difficult as they not only evolve over time but also are not dealt within each manifesto. Numerous issues are of interest: linguistic facilities around Brussels, the electoral constituency of Brussels–Halle–Vilvoorde, social security transfers, the ratification of the framework convention for the protection

Table 8. Number of references to centralization and decentralization issues in federal manifestos (2007 and 2010)

| | 2003 | | | 2007 | | | 2010 | | |
|----------|----------|----------|-------|----------|----------|-------|----------|----------|-------|
| | Central. | Decentr. | Score | Central. | Decentr. | Score | Central. | Decentr. | Score |
| cdH | 482 | 466 | -0.02 | 679 | 349 | -0.32 | 892 | 384 | -0.40 |
| PS | 379 | 187 | -0.34 | 840 | 305 | -0.47 | 309 | 144 | -0.36 |
| Ecolo | 70 | 26 | -0.46 | 988 | 600 | -0.24 | 620 | 260 | -0.41 |
| MR | 339 | 456 | 0.15 | 617 | 545 | -0.06 | 554 | 303 | -0.29 |
| FN | 105 | 18 | -0.71 | 132 | 40 | -0.53 | 96 | 51 | -0.31 |
| PP | — | — | — | — | — | — | 88 | 45 | -0.32 |
| Open VLD | 19 | 12 | -0.23 | 142 | 66 | -0.37 | 202 | 123 | -0.24 |
| CD&V | 209 | 184 | -0.06 | 184 | 191 | 0.02 | 338 | 135 | -0.43 |
| sp.a | 15 | 26 | 0.27 | 100 | 110 | 0.05 | 74 | 46 | -0.23 |
| Groen! | 375 | 125 | -0.50 | 277 | 141 | -0.33 | 242 | 145 | -0.25 |
| N-VA | 23 | 130 | 0.70 | 124 | 328 | 0.45 | 189 | 232 | 0.10 |
| LDD | | | | 70 | 45 | -0.22 | 3 | 9 | 0.50 |
| VB | 144 | 603 | 0.61 | 26 | 166 | 0.73 | 26 | 166 | 0.73 |
| Std dev. | | | 0.453 | | | 0.376 | | | 0.379 |

of national minorities, the role of the European Union and of the Europe of the regions, the enlargement of Brussels borders, public debt, the creation of a so-called 'federation Wallonia–Brussels', etc. All these issues are related to the future of Belgian federalism.

In this part of the article, we will focus mainly on institutions and competences. These institutionalized aspects are directly related to the federal system of Belgium: the reform of the Senate, the status of Brussels and its relations with the other two regions, the demanded competences to be (de-)federalized, and the future of the Belgian federation itself.

Reform of the Senate

The reform of the Senate is a highly discussed topic in Belgian manifestos and concerns many different positions and arguments. The State reform of 1993 led to a weakening of the Senate regarding various issues and competences. Currently, the assembly is a complex combination of directly elected senators (based on linguistic constituencies), community senators (appointed by community parliaments) and co-opted senators. But, more importantly, is the fact that the debate on the place of the Senate within the federal system of Belgium is yet not over.⁶ The proposals for the reform of the Senate basically oppose the French-speaking and left parties with other parties.

The French-speaking cdH, PS, Ecolo and, more surprisingly, the Flemish sp.a all claim for a Senate based on a parity basis. The reformed Senate would be composed of a parity of Dutch and French speakers, coming from the main regions and/or communities' parliaments. The Senate would be competent for the revisions of the Constitution and legislative initiative, would be a place for dialogue, negotiation and compromise between the two main communities and would act as a court of arbitration for any conflict between subnational entities. If the CD&V, LDD and PP do not even mention the Senate in their manifesto, the MR merely proposes a reform of the whole legislative power, including the House, while the FN proposes that one third of the Senate should be composed of representatives of 'social bodies', i.e. the actors of socio-economic life (labour unions, employers' unions, industries, etc.). Finally, in 2010, four parties demanded a suppression of the Senate: VB, N-VA, Open VLD and Groen!. The reason invoked by the Flemish liberals is that this institution is expensive and not essential (its duties could be taken over by the House), while the green party thinks that the actual Senate is not a warranty for democracy and is not transparent enough.

Status of Brussels

Brussels is first and foremost the field where two different conceptions of the relations between regions and communities oppose each other. French-speaking parties see Brussels as the economic, social and cultural capital city of the French-speaking community. The future of Brussels is linked with that of Wallonia and more co-operation is needed between both regions. Concerning its institutions, there is a consensus among French-speaking parties to say that Brussels may not be ruled by the two main communities but that the Brussels region should rather enjoy more autonomy.

If some Flemish parties do not mention the Brussels issue in their manifestos for the federal elections of 2007 (LDD, Open VLD, Groen!, sp.a), some others would like to witness a strengthening of the relations between Flanders and Brussels (CD&V, N-VA). Regarding governance, even though they constitute a demographic minority, Flemish citizens still have to be included at every level of the decision-making process in Brussels and the interests of the communities have to be defended by the communities themselves. In other words, the community commissions have to be safeguarded and even reinforced. Finally, one has to mention the extreme position of the VB according to which Brussels is seen as the—bilingual—capital of an independent Flanders.

Distribution of competences

In Belgium, each state reform is not only the occasion for a change in the overall institutional setting but also an opportunity to allocate more powers and competencies to the regions and communities. French-speaking parties, which since the last reform in 2001 were opposed to any new state reform, arguing that the country needs a “community peace” and that the federal system has “reached its equilibrium”, realized after negotiations broke down in 2007–08 that such a reform is needed to conciliate Flemish demands. They are no longer opposed to a new delegation of competencies from the federal to the subnational levels. But still, using the arguments of efficacy and homogeneity, these parties demand the de-federalization (or re-centralization) of certain competencies as, for example, the policies dealing with night flights regulation, health prevention or even rest homes for elderly people. In this regard, the Flemish green party (Groen!) is the only Flemish party advocating for such de-federalization reforms (in parallel with other federalization reforms). This party demands that the federation should regain competencies such as foreign trade, development aid or weapons trade. One has to note, however, that not a single Belgian party claims for the return to a unitary state or even to the institutional setting preceding the federalization of the country in 1993.

All Flemish parties estimate that a new state reform is necessary and new competencies and powers have to be given to the subnational level for, among others, reasons of coherence and subsidiarity. Regarding the policy domains concerned by these scenarios of state reform, few issues, notably employment policy, constitute a common demand in all party manifestos for the federal elections of 2007 and 2010. For example, the sp.a demands a regionalization of the large cities’ policy and housing investments, Groen! claims for a regionalization of health care and family policies, the Open VLD demands competences regarding taxation of companies while the VB focuses on socio-economic domains. In this regard, the CD&V and the N-VA (who were together in an electoral cartel until 2008)—can be considered, as having ‘maximalist’ demands,⁷ going from employment to mobility, from telecommunication to scientific policy and from taxes to justice. But, even if the split in the national social security scheme is part of the community demands of the extreme-right party VB (and it is, in a lesser extent, the case for the regionalist party, N-VA), all main Flemish political parties (Open VLD, CD&V, sp.a and Groen!) reaffirmed the importance of national solidarity in Belgium in their manifestos.

Future of Belgium

Finally, we will deal in this section with the scenarios for the future of Belgium as drawn in the party manifestos for the latest federal elections. Basically, these scenarios do not simply oppose the French-speaking and Flemish conceptions of federalism. Indeed, the large majority of Belgian political parties still believe that Belgium as a federation has a future. It is the case of the socialists (sp.a and PS), the greens (Groen! and Ecolo) and of the French-speaking liberal (MR), centre, ex-Christian-Democrat (cdH), populist (PP) and extreme-right (FN) parties. Even if the current form of federalism should be adapted and modernized (e.g. the cdH would like to introduce more elements leading to a federalism of co-operation while the PS favours the inclusion of solidarity and prosperity among the federal principles), they are broadly satisfied with the organization of the federation and the relations between the federal and the subnational levels.

None the less, five parties do not believe in this federal model for Belgium. The Open VLD, CD&V and N-VA are in favour of a confederal model. This Flemish conception of confederalism implies that the subnational entities are at the centre of the organization and that they are responsible for the allocation of competences and budget to other political levels and not the contrary. This would be a radical change in the state structure since, up to now, the federation has always been at the centre of the changes. According to K.C. Wheare, we will not only observe an inversion of the decision-making location, but also be the witnesses of a change of interlocutors. Indeed, in a federal framework, “both federal and regional governments operate directly upon the people, whereas in a . . . confederation it is the regional or state governments alone which operate directly upon the people” (Wheare, 1964: 13).

While the Belgian federation was established by dissociation, it appears that a move of the “centre of gravity” (according to the CD&V and Open VLD in 2010) from the federal to the federated level would be synonymous with confederalism. The confederal setting would, therefore, look exactly like a typical federal setting: the regions and/or communities agree on the competences that the federation will exercise. This scenario would be compatible with the preservation of the unity of the country as the Open VLD argued that it would avoid separatism.

For the N-VA, forthcoming state reforms and regionalization of more competences are only ‘steps’ in the direction of its ultimate goal, i.e. the independence of Flanders. However their understanding of confederalism differs formally from the scholars’ definition as they consider a confederal co-ordination structure for the policy domains that remain (*‘overgebleven’*) managed in common, as if a confederation could also be established by dissociation. As far as the populist party LDD is concerned, its vision of the future of Belgium is ambivalent as they argue that Flanders will grow “with Wallonia if possible, without Belgium if we have to”, meaning that this party prefers, in the first instance, to co-operate with Wallonia but that it does not rule out the end of Belgium and the independence of Flanders. On this topic, the extreme-right party VB is more straightforward as it demands the unconditional independence for Flanders, but pleads for a confederal Europe.

Overall, the cleavage between French-speaking and Flemish parties significantly contributes to the understanding of different elements of the future institutional settings

of Belgium. These parties often oppose each other, based on linguistic distinctions. But our analysis of the party manifestos for the 2007 and 2010 federal elections on four main issues (the reform of the Senate, the status of Brussels, the competences to be regionalized and the future of the Belgian federalism itself) reveal interesting ideological differences. The Flemish green (Groen!) and socialist (sp.a) parties tend to be closer to the French-speaking parties than to the other Flemish parties on some specific issues. None the less, even if the Flemish extreme-right party (VB) demonstrates a radical position regarding the future of Belgium, its French-speaking counterpart (FN) has a federalist profile very close to the one of the other French-speaking parties. Finally, one can observe a relative stability over time of the content of the manifestos of the different political parties notwithstanding different and evolving electoral strategies, such as cartels. The CD&V—probably the party that, on these issues, is the most distant to its sister party, the cdH—did not change its position after the implosion of its electoral cartel with the N-VA in 2008. It was also the case for the end of the cartel between sp.a and Spirit, another regionalist party coming from the implosion of the VU, as we did not witness any change regarding the demands of the Flemish socialist party in 2010.

Conclusion

The political crisis of 2010–11 questions the capacity of decision making of the Belgian federation and its very future. Our introduction outlined the political and institutional factors that contribute to explain the existence of asymmetrical visions regarding the future of Belgian federalism. The systemic duality largely explains the diverse preferences of the political actors analysed in political manifestos. The influence of the ideology and electoral strategies, but also contextual political factors (political crisis, proximity of elections, etc.) as well as the very nature and position of the different political actors (incumbent vs. opposition parties, regional vs. federal cabinets, etc.) contribute to the explanation of the ambiguous—yet functional—and periodically re-negotiated federal accord, as the special issue editors have also pointed out.

We have argued that the linguistic cleavage significantly contributes to the understanding of different visions on the future of Belgian federalism. The disagreement on the adequate devolution of competences and overall institutional equilibrium, as well as new and uncertain intergovernmental relations, threaten the capacity of decision making of the federation, creating a joint-decision trap problem. While French-speaking and Flemish parties often oppose each other, our analysis of the party manifestos for the 2007 and 2010 federal elections on four main issues (the reform of the Senate, the status of Brussels, the competences to be devolved to the federated entities and the future of the Belgian federalism itself) reveal ideological differences that cross the linguistic cleavage. Strikingly, Groen! and sp.a tend to be closer to the French-speaking parties than to the other Flemish parties on some specific issues. The electoral strategies also play a role in the manifestos of the different political parties, as in the case of the common positions of the CD&V and the N-VA who formed an electoral alliance for the 2007 elections. It was not the case for the cartel between sp.a and Spirit, as we did not witness any radicalization of the community demands of this party. In short, a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the political manifestos showed that French-speaking parties overall collectively oppose broad state reform,

while the Dutch-speaking parties collectively support this idea. Yet, a detailed analysis shows that each party has a specific position on the decentralization cleavage and a vision of Belgian federalism that cannot be reduced to a linguistic affiliation.

The actors' perceptions and preferences are, therefore, a key variable to understand new Belgian political dynamics. This diversity of 'visions' is mediated by the structural elements presented in the introduction and hence translated in coalition agreements into ambiguous common 'visions' about the future of Belgian federalism. Ambiguity is, indeed, at the centre of the dynamics of state reform in Belgium (Beaufays and Matagne, 2009). The slow pace of the process and the complexity of the policy 'packages' help the actors to reach an agreement. The resistance of the coalition 'partners' is used for legitimizing the need to compromise. The logic of 'constructive ambiguity' (about a hypothetical final step in the federalization process) is at the core of state reform dynamics. The impossibility to objectively identify the 'losers' and the 'winners', as well as the nature and the sustainability of the next institutional equilibrium at the moment of the decision, enables the political party elites to negotiate, compromise and face their party members and electorate, in spite of their diverging preferences about the future of Belgian federalism.

Notes

¹The Volksunie in Flanders, the Front Démocratique des Francophones (FDF) in Brussels and the Rassemblement Wallon in Wallonia. The most extreme and nationalist (Flemish) party, the Vlaams Blok (now Vlaams Belang) appeared at the end of the 1970s, more or less simultaneously with the green parties (Agalev—now Groen!—and Ecolo).

²We will not deal with European electoral manifestos, nor with manifestos concerning the German-speaking community (as they represent only 0.7% of the Belgian population and do not have relevant weight on the content of the political discussions on the future of federalism in Belgium).

³Yoshikoder is an open-source software, officially defined as a 'cross-platform multilingual content analysis program'. It has been developed by Will Lowe as part of the 'Identity Project' at Harvard's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs. With this software, the researcher can construct and view keywords-in-context, and is able to input content analysis dictionaries. The outputs of the software consist of a summary of documents, either as word frequency tables or according to the content analysis dictionary made by the researcher. The method uses individual words as units of analysis and is based on a dictionary building (as in Laver and Garry, 2000), meaning that the words belong to (hierarchical) categories. Yoshikoder allows three levels of hierarchy. Ideally, every defined category that is associated with a policy direction and its opposition (its antithesis) is also part of the dictionary, transcending the pure saliency. This dictionary analysis can also be applied to the results of a concordance, i.e. a visualization of the words in their local contexts (semantic, grammatical, etc.). Yoshikoder basically allows two functions. The first one concerns the establishment of frequency counts of both keywords and categories of words (words can be clustered into different dimensions and that the categories themselves can be analysed in terms of relative frequency). The second function concerns the establishment of a 'keywords-in-context analysis'. This type of analysis consists of a listing of all the occurrences where a particular word is mentioned in a text. This function is very useful for examining the word in its context, semantic sequence or even language.

⁴The manifestos for the VB for 2007 and 2010 have a similar content.

⁵Unsurprisingly, any reference to Flanders is also absent from the top 10 of these manifestos.

⁶In December 2011, a reform of the Senate was included in the coalition agreement. It was adopted in the summer of 2012.

⁷Note that the LDD did not draft such an exhaustive list in its manifestos and, therefore, renders the comparison more complex.

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