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## Social Democratic parties as buffers against the extreme right: the case of Belgium

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While the Vlaams Blok (currently Vlaams Belang) became one of the most successful and electorally durable extreme-right parties in Europe in the 1990s, the francophone Front National has yet to achieve a stable basis of support. We argue that an important reason for this divergence has been the behaviour of Social Democratic parties in the two regions of Belgium. In Wallonia, the Parti Socialiste (PS) held onto its traditional electorate through both distributing material benefits and by keeping traditional economic themes, or issues that it ‘owns’, high on the political agenda. The SP (currently SP.A) in Flanders has done less well on both counts. Since Social Democratic parties across Western Europe have lost voters to the extreme right, our comparison suggests that their behaviour is an important variable in understanding cross-national variation in the extreme-right’s success.

**Keywords:** extreme-right parties; Social Democratic parties; clientelism; issue salience; Belgium

In recent years, the literature on extreme-right parties has turned to the important question of why such parties have been electorally successful in some states and not in others. Following Kitschelt’s (1995) seminal work on this subject, a number of scholars have engaged in cross-national quantitative comparisons (Jackman and Volpert 1996, Lubbers *et al.* 2002, Golder 2003, Carter 2005, Norris 2005, Van der Brug *et al.* 2005), while others have offered analyses of particular cases (Ignazi 2003, Rydgren 2004, Givens 2005, Art 2006). One potentially illuminating comparison that has received surprisingly little attention – Hossay’s (2002) chapter ‘Why Flanders?’ being a notable exception – however, is that between the two regions of Belgium: Dutch-speaking Flanders in the north and French-speaking Wallonia in the south. Since Belgium lacks a national party system, it is possible to treat these regions as separate cases, and the divergence of the extreme right in the two cases is striking. Whereas the Vlaams Belang (VB – previously Vlaams Blok) gained 19% in the 2007 parliamentary federal elections in the Flemish region, the Front National (FN) received only 5.6% in Wallonia. Over the last two decades, the VB has consistently outperformed its French-speaking counterpart (see Table 1).

What causes the strength of the extreme right in Flanders and its relative weakness in Wallonia? Since federal electoral rules do not differ across the two cases, these can be ruled out as possible explanations. Aside from the obvious difference in the desire for autonomy in the two regions, the single largest difference between Flanders and Wallonia is socio-economic.

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Table 1. Results obtained by the extreme-right parties in the federal parliament elections

<i>Year</i>	<i>Percentage VB</i>	<i>Percentage FN</i>
1978	2.1	
1981	1.8	
1985	2.2	
1987	3.0	
1991	10.3	1.7
1995	12.2	5.5
1999	15.3	4.1
2003	17.9	5.6
2007	19.0	5.6

Note: As Belgium has a confederal party model, we give the electoral results per region. National parties no longer exist and, except in the complex situation in Brussels, a Flemish citizen cannot vote for a French-speaking politician, or vice versa.

Source: Ministry of Interior.

In short, Flanders possesses a vibrant economy with a relatively low level of unemployment while Wallonia has yet to recover from industrial decline. Scholars who find a positive relationship between unemployment and electoral support for the extreme right (Jackman and Volpert 1996) would thus have trouble explaining the Belgian cases. However, if one posits a negative relationship between these variables (Knigge 1998, Lubbers *et al.* 2002), the success of the VB and the relative weakness of the FN make more sense.

The issue then becomes how socio-economic conditions are translated into political outcomes. Hence, we join a growing number of scholars who, following a distinction made by Norris (2005) among others, focus on the supply side of extreme-right voting rather than on the demand side. Our argument in this article also builds on a growing body of scholarship that locates the interaction between extreme-right parties and mainstream ones as a critical variable in the formers' success or failure (Bale 2003, Givens 2005, Meguid 2005, Art 2007). Divergent from most previous studies, however, is our focus on the pivotal role of Social Democratic parties. As noted below, Social Democratic parties across Europe have lost voters to the extreme right, and the situation is no different in Belgium. Yet we argue that the Social Democratic party in Wallonia, the Parti Socialiste (PS), has done a much better job than its Flemish counterpart, the SP.A (previously SP), in limiting its losses, for two reasons. Firstly, the PS's clientelism and its penetration of Wallonian society helped it to ensure loyalty during the 1990s, even in the wake of persistent economic decline under its stewardship. Secondly, the PS has managed to keep the electorate's concern focused on economic issues. Since extreme-right parties have historically campaigned on cultural issues such as anti-immigration and law and order, or the polar opposite of those issues important to Green parties, our study suggests – in line with theories of issue ownership – that Social Democratic parties that stick to their traditional economic issues have a better chance of holding off the extreme right than those that seek to modernize their message.

The following section outlines the origins and development of the VB and the FN, noting the contextual variables that are similar and different in Flanders and Wallonia. The second section then documents the shift of working-class voters from Social Democracy to the extreme right across Western Europe to ground our discussion of Belgium in a broader comparative perspective. We then develop the two parts of our explanation for the divergent outcomes of the VB and the FN during the 1990s, focusing on clientelism and issue ownership. Since we believe that the salience of economic themes is due not only to the PS's own strategy, we also analyse how the broader political environment in which Social Democrats exist influences

their ability to keep high salience of such themes. Finally, we describe the influence of the extreme parties on the political competition and salience of different policy issues. We draw on a variety of secondary survey data and studies which have been conducted during the 1990s, as well as interviews conducted by the author in relation to broader research on the extreme right in Belgium, for our evidentiary base. The last section concludes, notes several other possible explanations for our initial puzzle, and suggests some directions for future cross-national research.

### The extreme right in Belgium

The VB is an amalgamation of two right-wing nationalist parties and participated in elections for the first time in 1978. In its first few years, the VB strove for the independence of Flanders and remained a small splinter party, recruiting its members from the ranks of activists in Flemish nationalist organizations with which it was in close contact. Its fortunes changed dramatically in the late 1980s, however, after resistance to immigration became the party's core issue. The VB conducted a fierce anti-immigrant campaign in the 1987 parliamentary elections, doubling its number of seats in parliament – from one to two – and winning for the first time in its history a seat in the Belgian Senate under the slogan *Eigen volk eerst!* (Our own people first!). The party's real breakthrough came in the parliamentary elections of 24 November 1991 – a day that was afterwards labelled as 'Black Sunday' – when it obtained 10.3% of Flemish votes. The VB continued to grow throughout the following decade. In the most recent elections (the federal elections of June 2007), the party reaped 19% of the vote in the Flemish region. However, despite being an important player in the Flemish political landscape, the party was never allowed to participate in government because of an agreement among all other political parties not to cooperate with it (the so-called *cordon sanitaire*). In November 2004, the party was convicted of racism and banned, but the organization merely regrouped under the new name Vlaams Belang (Coffé 2005b, Erk 2005).

Following the example of the Front National of Jean-Marie Le Pen in France, Daniel Féret founded the FN in Belgium in 1985. From the few documents that are available from the 1985 elections, it is clear that immigration was its central issue (Delwit and De Waele 1999), and this remains true today. Unlike the VB and despite its support for the principle of national sovereignty based on a redefinition of national identity, the FN does not seek greater autonomy for Wallonia, but rather is in favour of the Belgian state.

In 1991, the party for the first time submitted lists of candidates in every Wallonian province. With 5.5% of the overall Wallonian vote, the party made definite progress in 1995 and appeared to have achieved a modest electoral breakthrough. After a decrease in the 1999 elections, it won 5.6% of Wallonian votes in 2003 when, for the first time in its history, the party could send delegates to the two federal chambers. This meant that it was entitled to federal funding. But since an FN member of the Senate left the party, this funding has now been cut. Furthermore, a split within the party has recently resulted in a lack of clarity about the actual representative of the FN. Two groups are indeed claiming that they form the party Front National.

As Table 1 demonstrates, the VB has consistently outperformed the FN. Possible reasons for these divergent trajectories have been suggested previously. One plausible hypothesis is that the success of the VB is directly related to its support for Flemish separatism. Yet while there is no doubt that the members and the chief leaders of the VB care deeply about this issue, the same cannot be said for the party's voters. Electoral surveys show that separatist motives are important for only a small percentage of the VB's electorate. In 1999, only 4% of the VB's electorate mentioned Flemish nationalism as a reason for voting for the extreme-right party, as opposed to 27%

who mentioned immigration (Van Craen and Swyngedouw 2002). There is no comparable nationalist movement in Wallonia, largely because the French-speaking minority has historically strongly supported the Belgian state – a nationalism that does not have any organizational structure – and the FN has not mobilized around the issue of nationalism.

A second possibility is that differences in immigration between the two regions explain the divergent trajectories of the extreme right. Many scholars have argued that high levels of immigration increase support for extreme-right parties (Knigge 1998, Lubbers *et al.* 2000, Gibson 2002), although there is currently a scholarly debate over how much immigration matters and under what conditions (Golder 2003, Norris 2005). Yet the fact that Wallonia possesses nearly twice the number of foreigners as Flanders should cast considerable doubt about the importance of this variable for our case. Moreover, the percentage of Turks and people from Maghreb countries – the population groups that are particularly targeted in the extreme-right's propaganda as the scapegoat for a whole range of social problems and whose presence has been shown to have a highly significant and positive impact on extreme-right vote share (Coffé *et al.* 2007) – is the same in both regions.

A third possibility is that Wallonians are simply more tolerant of immigrants than the Flemish. Yet previous work shows that the regional difference in electoral results cannot be explained by differences in voters' attitudes (Coffé 2005a). Attitudes that are typical of the extreme-right electorate such as intolerance towards immigrants, political powerlessness and authoritarianism, are more widespread in Wallonia than in Flanders.

As noted above, the largest difference between Flanders and Wallonia is socio-economic. The socio-economic performance is much worse in Wallonia than in Flanders, and Wallonia has a high level of unemployment. Wallonia, the first industrialized region of the Continent, declined in economic terms after the Second World War, while the post-war industrialization of Flanders was based successfully on small and medium-sized enterprises and multinationals (Dewinter 2005). Hence, by the 1960s Flanders was in full expansion, while the Wallonian economy was in decline. Since then, Flanders has always been the wealthier region.

In short, considering the explanatory variables proposed in the literature, the different economic situation in the two Belgian regions seems an important factor for explaining the regional difference. Yet since there is disagreement on the link between (general) economic conditions as determinants of the electoral success of the extreme right, we assume that it is not so much the socio-economic environment that explains the salience of the issues but, following Schain *et al.* (2002), how different issues are translated into political terms by parties.

### **From social democracy to the extreme right**

The post-industrial development of Western societies has led to the decline of economic-related cleavages and the rise of non-material conflicts. The latter include both left-libertarian issues such as the environment and right-authoritarian demands such as a strict migration policy and a hierarchical state. These right-authoritarian attitudes are characteristic of the so-called 'losers' in post-industrial societies. They are unable to cope with the acceleration of economic, social and cultural modernization and/or are stuck in full or partial unemployment, and run the risk of falling into the new underclass (Betz 1994). Hence, they can be supposed to have insecure and resentful sentiments that may be canalized into support for policy proposals that stress the need to return to more traditional value-proposals that are typical of extreme-right parties. Kitschelt (1995) also refers to the social groups experiencing deprivation of life chances that has arisen as a result of the transformation from an industrial to a post-industrial economy. These groups were previously closely connected to the Social Democrats. The profile of the 'median' extreme-right voter that has been described by different scholars of individual

voters is indeed very similar to the profile of the socialist voter (Lubbers *et al.* 2002). Although one must be careful in equating extreme-right voters with the so-called losers of modernization (Norris 2005), the overlap between the two groups does appear to be substantial. Ignazi (2003) writes of ‘the massive presence of working-class people in the extreme-right electorate’, and surveys in different countries have indicated that working-class and former socialist voters have found their way to extreme-right parties (Luther 2003, Knapp 2004, Ivarsflaten 2005, McGann and Kitschelt 2005). A few examples from Western Europe help place the Belgian case in comparative context. The term *gaucho-lepénisme* (Perrineau 1997) refers to the fact that a significant percentage of FN voters migrated from the left of the political spectrum. In Scandinavia, the Danish People’s Party currently has the highest percentage of workers, while the Norwegian Progress Party is the only party in which unskilled workers are overrepresented (Bjørklund and Andersen 2007). In 1999, the Austrian FPÖ captured 47% of the working-class vote, far outpacing the Social Democrats, which claimed only 35% (Art 2006). Markovits (2002) concluded before the FPÖ’s implosion in 2002 that sociologically speaking, the party under Haider has assumed the profile of a traditional party of the Old Left.

In short, Social Democratic parties and extreme-right parties appear to be competing for many of the same voters. When the VB broke through in 1991, the Dutch-speaking Social Democratic Party was the main provider of voters for the VB: almost 19% of the VB’s electorate was taken from the SP. Also, more than 14% of socialist labour union members voted in 1991 for the VB. Hence, the VB claimed to be the largest ‘labour party’ in Flanders.

Social Democratic parties are certainly not the only ones losing votes to the extreme right, in Belgium or elsewhere. The Belgian electoral survey (ISPO/PIOP), shows that 16% of the VB vote at the 1991 elections came from the Christian Democrats (CVP – currently CD&V), while 12% came from the Liberals (PVV – currently Open VLD). Hence, it should be clear that Social Democratic parties are not the only ‘buffer’ against the extreme right. Indeed, in many (spatial) analyses it is the party to their immediate right that is viewed as the extreme right’s primary competitor (Meguid 2005). However, given the similarities between the extreme right and the traditional socialist electorate, the relative lack of attention in the scholarly literature to the relationship between Social Democrats and the extreme right, and the importance of the Social Democratic parties in our case studies, we feel justified in focusing our attention on them.

The transition to a post-industrial society has posed a major challenge to traditional Social Democratic parties. As Kitschelt (1994) indicates, not only do they have to decide on how to handle new leftist issues and parties but they also have to handle the attractiveness of extreme-right parties to their electorate, as Blomqvist and Green-Pedersen (2004) point out. They argue that the main problem for Social Democracy in Scandinavia is not the existence of new parties on their left flank but rather the fact that some issues on the political agenda may cause voters to support extreme-right parties. Green-Pedersen and van Kersbergen (2002) demonstrate for the Dutch and Danish cases that one of the main challenges for Social Democrats derives from the strong politicization of questions relating to refugees and asylum-seekers. Social Democratic parties thus struggle to prevent new political issues from becoming important, and to keep the political agenda dominated by traditional political issues, such as (un)employment and social welfare.

We explore this concept of issue ownership below. But first we consider a more structural explanation for the ability of Social Democratic parties to hold onto their traditional electorate. In short, we argue that the PS in Wallonia, in contrast to most Social Democratic parties in Western Europe, has remained strong because it has preserved its traditional social linkages. Similar to the Bavarian CSU, the PS in Wallonia penetrates Wallonian society to a large extent. In Flanders, however, the SP.A has far less contact with its traditional clientele. In general, the ‘pillarization’ or division of society into distinct and non-overlapping political



subcultures has unravelled more in Flanders than in Wallonia, and the erosion of a distinct working-class pillar is part of this phenomenon (Smits 1995).

### *Clientelism and pillarization of the Social Democratic parties*

Between 1945 and the most recent federal elections of 2007 – when the Liberals of the MR became the largest political French-speaking party formation – the PS has been the largest francophone political party. The PS is the central pillar of a network of organizations and maintains strong links to a number of important auxiliary associations in health and education policy (Maesschalck and Van de Walle 2007). The PS is a typical example of a so-called *mass party* (Duverger 1969) and the most ‘pillarized’ Belgian party. Billiet (2006) indeed concludes that whereas the impact of pillarization on voting behaviour is diminishing, the socialist pillar in Wallonia remains firm. Data from the 1991 Belgian general election survey (see Table 2) show that over 70% of the members of the socialist labour union voted for the PS. In Flanders, the SP could rely on only 57% of the socialist labour union members. Even though the percentage of labour union members voting for the PS declined during the 1990s, the figures still show a difference of more than 8% by the end of that decade. The PS also takes the ideas of the trade union into account when deciding on its economic and social programme, thus making it a real labour force or *travaillist* party. It is also important to note that only 28% of the largest labour union in Flanders, the Christian labour union, voted in 1999 for the political party (the Christian Democrats) with which they are affiliated. There is thus a much larger reservoir of ‘floating’ labour union members in Flanders than in Wallonia.

The Wallonian PS has always used a *socialism of proximity*: it is near its electorate (Demelenne 2005). Elio Di Rupo, current president of the PS, claims that the connection of the party with its voters is the party’s most important strength (Coffé 2005b). The party’s *socialism of proximity* has also been associated with clientelistic practices, offering party members jobs in state enterprises and treating them favourably in the attribution of public services and utilities (interviews with Guido Fonteyn and Olivier Mouton; Fonteyn 2002, Demelenne 2005). Indeed, given its strong position at the local level, the party has close contacts with the municipal (utility) companies. In addition, party-affiliated organizations administer public services (health care, public-sector jobs, unemployment benefits), which makes it possible for the party to distribute material benefits.

Table 2. Percentages of labour union members voting for their pillar party

	1991		1995		1999	
	<i>Pillar party</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Pillar party</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Pillar party</i>	<i>N</i>
Flanders						
Socialist Labour Union	57.0	<i>505</i>	53.5	<i>172</i>	42.1	<i>273</i>
Christian Labour Union	35.6	<i>263</i>	34.7	<i>291</i>	28.0	<i>457</i>
Liberal Labour Union	50.8	<i>61</i>	54.0	<i>50</i>	60.3	<i>68</i>
Wallonia						
Socialist Labour Union	71.5	<i>200</i>	60.9	<i>156</i>	50.5	<i>186</i>
Christian Labour Union	33.9	<i>118</i>	30.4	<i>92</i>	21.8	<i>124</i>
Liberal Labour Union	53.3	<i>15</i>	63.6	<i>11</i>	50.0	<i>12</i>
Sign.	***		***		***	

Note: The number of respondents (*N*) is shown in italics.

\*\*\*  $P \leq 0.01$ .

Source: ISPO/PIOP (1995, 1998 and 2001).



A survey by the Departments of Political Science of the VUB (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) and UCL (Université Catholique de Louvain) of Flemish and Wallonian local party leaders organized in relation to the Belgian 2000 municipal elections indeed shows that the PS is the party that provides the most 'services' to its constituents. Party leaders were allowed to interpret the meaning of 'services' themselves, but it could mean anything from arranging a building permit to providing a job in the public sector. It thus falls under the broad rubric of clientelism. As Table 3 indicates, 60% of PS party leaders claimed to have provided some sort of service over the past 12 months. The corresponding figure for SP party leaders in Flanders was only about 50%. In addition to providing services, party leaders were also asked whether they had organized an event, such as a public debate, movie, ball, or dinner party, for their constituents over the last 12 months. The PS beats the SP in every category except movies. Across the board, one can see that Wallonian party leaders report that they have organized more events for the electorate than their counterparts in Flanders. This emerging picture of an active Socialist Party in Wallonia is confirmed by the results of the Belgian general election surveys conducted in the 1990s (ISPO/PIOP) (see Table 4). Voters were asked whether they had contacted a politician within the last 12 months. In 1999, nearly 22% of PS voters answered this question in the affirmative, while only 13% of SP voters in Flanders did so. If we consider all of the above data as an indicator of the proximity of the party to the electorate, it is clear that the PS was in closer contact with its electorate than the SP in the 1990s.

Although the figures presented above indicate a declining trend in the pillarization of the PS and its closeness to the electorate, and although the percentage differences between the two Social Democratic parties are not always dramatic, every proxy confirms the hypothesis of a stronger pillarization and relation between the electorate and the party in Wallonia (Coffé and Stouthuysen 2006). This strongly suggests that, in line with conventional wisdom, Social Democratic parties have been better able to hold onto their traditional bases of support during the 1990s in Wallonia than in Flanders. Yet apart from distributing favours and organizing dinner parties, why else would voters in Wallonia continue to support the PS? Certainly, policy issues play a role as well.

Table 3. Organization of selected party activities in the previous 12 months (percentages)

	<i>Services</i>	<i>Political debate</i>	<i>Movie</i>	<i>Ball</i>	<i>Dinner party</i>	<i>N</i>
Flanders						
Agalev	4.3	49.3	0.7	4.3	31.2	<i>138</i>
SP	50.4	55.2	15.2	24.0	58.4	<i>125</i>
VLD	46.3	47.8	1.5	33.6	61.9	<i>134</i>
VB	13.8	37.9	8.6	6.9	46.6	<i>58</i>
VU&ID	17.8	46.6	2.7	8.2	58.9	<i>73</i>
CVP	23.3	58.7	0.7	22.0	53.3	<i>150</i>
Wallonia						
PS	60.0	62.2	14.4	41.1	62.2	<i>90</i>
Ecolo	2.5	79.0	12.6	4.2	42.9	<i>119</i>
PSC	42.9	55.2	5.7	15.2	66.7	<i>105</i>
PRL/FDF	42.9	60.5	8.4	28.6	72.3	<i>119</i>
Sign.	***	***	***	***	***	

Notes: Data were not available for the FN.

The number of respondents (*N*) is shown in italics.

\*\*\*  $P \leq 0.01$ .

Source: Survey of local party leaders, 2000.

Table 4. Percentages of voters having contacted a politician personally in the previous 12 months

	1991		1995		1999	
	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>
Flanders						
Agalev	12.5	<i>183</i>	5.6	<i>125</i>	7.5	<i>240</i>
SP	20.7	<i>455</i>	18.7	<i>359</i>	13.1	<i>327</i>
VLD	24.7	<i>450</i>	17.7	<i>373</i>	9.3	<i>492</i>
VB	10.3	<i>242</i>	17.4	<i>218</i>	8.9	<i>336</i>
VU&ID	14.2	<i>219</i>	13.6	<i>132</i>	10.4	<i>192</i>
CVP	17.9	<i>632</i>	16.6	<i>487</i>	11.1	<i>487</i>
Wallonia						
PS	32.3	<i>455</i>	26.9	<i>323</i>	21.9	<i>283</i>
Ecolo	11.9	<i>160</i>	15.8	<i>95</i>	17.3	<i>179</i>
PSC	31.8	<i>261</i>	25.6	<i>211</i>	17.7	<i>164</i>
PRL/FDF	25.5	<i>231</i>	21.5	<i>228</i>	18.7	<i>246</i>
FN	36.0	<i>25</i>	25.5	<i>47</i>	19.2	<i>52</i>
Sign.	***		***		***	

Note: The number of respondents (*N*) is shown in italics.

\*\*\*  $P \leq 0.01$

Source: ISPO/PIOP (1995, 1998 and 2001).

### *Issue ownership and the salience of policy issues*

According to Budge and Farlie (1983), parties try to shift public attention to topics for which they feel they have a good reputation or that they 'own'. Parties can thus gain electoral support by increasing the *salience* of each of their issues during a campaign, giving them good reason to consistently emphasize 'their' topics. A good reputation regarding these issues results from a history of attention, initiative and innovation towards these issues and leads voters to believe that the party's candidates are more sincere and committed to doing something about them (Petrocik 1996). In recent years, several studies have provided strong empirical evidence that issue ownership is an important dimension of electoral campaigns (Sellers 1998, Petrocik *et al.* 2003, Blomqvist and Green-Pedersen 2004, Holian 2004). This research shows that parties tend to strategically emphasize issues on which they are perceived to be more competent and that the election outcomes reflect, in good part, the relative salience of the various parties' 'owned' issues.

These findings thus imply that Social Democratic parties will benefit when issues relating to the socio-economic dimension have a high salience in politics. The extreme-right parties, on the other hand, will try to give 'their' issues such as immigration and law and order a more prominent position on the political agenda (Ivarsflaten 2005, Rydgren 2005). If they succeed in doing so, they will render the benefits of owning the welfare state issue less important, which is potentially threatening to Social Democratic parties. Kriesi (1999) demonstrates that the relative strength of the traditional cleavages restricts the possibilities of the mobilization based on the new cleavages. A lack of salience of the traditional cleavages, on the other hand, makes the losers of the modernization process generally available for appeals by the extreme right. Givens (2005) shows how traditional cleavages appear to have a stronger influence in Germany where the extreme right has been relatively unsuccessful than in France or Austria where the FN and the FPÖ, respectively, have been electorally successful.

Taking these theories as a starting point, we hypothesize that the PS has been able to control the political agenda and preserve the traditional left-ideological dimension in domestic politics,

whereas the SP has failed to do so. In other words, we expect that issues other than those pertaining to traditional class-based politics have attracted Flemish voters' attention, which led to the continuing growth of the extreme right in the northern region during the 1990s.

The results based on data from the 1991 and 1999 Belgian general election surveys (ISPO/PIOP) presented in Table 5 confirm our hypothesis. In these studies, respondents were asked to indicate their main concerns when making their party choice. Whereas 56.6% of the Wallonian voters mentioned '(un)employment' when asked which problems they considered to be important when deciding how to vote, only 38.4% of the Flemish voters did so. On the other hand, 25.1% and 34.6% of the Flemish voters and only 12.3% and 29.2% of the Wallonian ones considered migration and law and order as salient issues, respectively. Hence, we can conclude that while in Flanders cultural issues have gained a high position on the political agenda, Wallonian politics continued to be dominated by issues relating to the welfare system. For sure, the francophone Social Democrats have also lost voters on account of new political issues such as the environment, but these issues have not been able to add a dimension to the domestic political debate that threatens the traditional left/right divide. Table 5 shows that the issue of the environment is far less important for Wallonian voters than the topic of (un)employment. Then how can the success of the francophone greens of Ecolo – which Bomberg (1998) considers as one of the electorally most successful green parties in Europe – during the 1990s be explained? One would expect that when a green party is successful, issues 'owned' by the greens (such as the environmental issue) would be salient. Research, however, revealed that (part of) Ecolo's success could be explained by its attraction of protest voters (Frogner 1994). These voters did not vote in favour of Ecolo, but against the mainstream parties. Ecolo fulfilled the function of an anti-establishment party and feelings of political powerlessness were omnipresent within the party's electorate.

The importance of traditional issues for the electorate is in line with findings from surveys of local party leaders. Table 6 shows that the francophone party leaders, and local leaders of the PS in particular, are generally more concerned with traditional themes such as social affairs and employment than Dutch-speaking party leaders. For example, more than 75% of the local party leaders of the PS considered traditional left/right issues such as social affairs and employment as very important policy themes. Of the local leaders of the SP, only 69% and 45%, respectively, considered social affairs and employment as important issues.

Table 5. Percentages of policy themes considered important when deciding how to vote

	1991			1999		
	<i>Flanders</i>	<i>Wallonia</i>	<i>Sign.</i>	<i>Flanders</i>	<i>Wallonia</i>	<i>Sign.</i>
(Un)employment	36.1	43.6	***	38.3	25.1	***
Migration	31.4	21.7	***	56.6	12.3	***
Environment	39.6	34.2	***	28.9	23.7	***
<i>N</i>	<i>2385</i>	<i>1388</i>		<i>2501</i>	<i>1341</i>	

Notes: In 1991 the respondents were asked to indicate five policy issues that they consider as being important from a list of 27 issues. In 1999, the respondents were asked to indicate only four issues in a list of 24. Hence, the percentages – which refer to the percentages of respondents who indicated the respective item – are not comparable between both years of survey. Unfortunately, the policy issues included in the 1995 election survey were different from the 1991 and 1999 election surveys.

The number of respondents (*N*) is shown in italics.

\*\*\*  $P \leq 0.01$ .

Source: ISPO/PIOP (1995 and 2001).

Table 6. Percentages of policy themes considered very important

	<i>Social affairs</i>	<i>Employment</i>	<i>N</i>
Flanders			
Agalev	54.0	17.0	<i>135</i>
CVP	43.2	24.3	<i>146</i>
SP	69.1	45.1	<i>122</i>
VB	50.9	40.4	<i>55</i>
VLD	35.1	50.0	<i>130</i>
VU	45.7	25.4	<i>70</i>
Other Dutch-speaking parties	50.0	31.8	<i>22</i>
Wallonia			
Ecolo	69.5	46.0	<i>115</i>
PS	76.4	75.9	<i>89</i>
PSC	51.0	48.5	<i>102</i>
PRL	53.1	57.0	<i>113</i>
FDf	50.0	16.7	<i>6</i>
Other French-speaking parties	51.5	58.8	<i>34</i>
Sign.	***	***	

Note: The number of respondents (*N*) is shown in italics.

Source: Survey of local party leaders, 2000.

These findings demonstrate the relevance of issue ownership theories and lend support to our argument that Social Democratic parties tend to do best if traditional political issues dominate political debates. In Flanders, the traditional economic debate has clearly eroded, undermining electoral support for the Social Democratic Party. For the extreme-right party on the other hand, this decline in importance of the traditional economic debate and the growing salience of the migration issue offered favourable conditions to attract voters. In their examination of issues in the 2002 French presidential election, Mayer and Tiberj (2004) also provide evidence to suggest that, while by 1995 most French voters already considered Le Pen's Front National as the party best able to address crime, this factor probably bolstered the party's share of the vote in 2002 because the issue of insecurity suddenly became highly salient.

Given that parties select strategies in an *interactive* environment, it could be argued that the strategic choice of the francophone Social Democrats' competitors has shaped a political agenda in which traditional and social issues take a central place. Furthermore, the dominant position of the PS in Wallonia may have created a 'power legacy' that helps to preserve the traditional distinction between 'left' and 'right' in Wallonian politics and thereby structures the choices of its competitors which benefit the Social Democrats.

### ***The political competition and the salience of policy issues***

The Social Democratic parties do not operate in a political vacuum, and their behaviour and policy choices are influenced by the attitudes and choices of the other mainstream parties. Deschouwer (2004) argues that in the francophone part of Belgium, the policy ideas advocated by the Liberal (MR – previously PRL) and Christian Democratic (CDH – previously PSC) parties are to a significant degree determined by the overriding goal of standing united against their common enemy, the Social Democratic Party. This fixation on becoming larger to better attack the PS paradoxically appears to have benefited the PS. For one thing, it tends to preserve a political agenda dominated by the traditional distinction between 'left' and 'right' and class-based loyalties. Secondly, the preservation of so-called *bloc politics* in Wallonia seems to mean that discontented Social Democratic voters have preferred to turn to

the leftist party rather than, as has happened in Flanders, cross over the bloc line and support a populist right-wing party. The Belgian general election surveys (ISPO/PIOP) indicated that whereas a significant part of the SP electorate moved to the VB during the 1990s, the PS lost most votes to the Green Party. Of the 1995 PS electorate, for example, 11% voted for Ecolo in 1999, whereas only 3% voted for the extreme-right Front National.

Regarding the left/right cleavage in the political field, Kitschelt (1995) hypothesizes that a convergence between the moderate right and moderate left is a good environment for the emergence of right-wing populist parties. In instances of such a convergence, the parties of the extreme right are more likely to play the anti-establishment card. They argue that if voters wish to see a real alternative to both the government and the mainstream opposition, they should put their support behind the right-wing extremist party. By contrast, when the mainstream parties are ideologically distinct from each other, it is more difficult for the extreme-right parties to adopt this populist strategy.

Figures 1 and 2, which draw on the data and analysis of the Comparative Manifesto Project (Budge *et al.* 2001, Klingemann *et al.* 2006), demonstrate how the traditional pillar parties converged. The Social Democrats, but particularly the Liberals, moved to the centre. Although this process of convergence has taken place in both Flanders and Wallonia, the process is more striking for the Dutch-speaking parties where the Liberal Party (PVV – renamed VLD in 1992 and currently named Open VLD) changed its economic programme from outspoken right in the beginning of the 1980s to a centre-oriented programme in the beginning of the 1990s. Since the VLD entered government in 1999, it has continued trying to expand its electoral base by orienting itself towards the centre of the political space, a centre position traditionally defended by Christian Democracy (CVP – currently CD&V). Indeed, it should be noted that the Christian Democratic Party, presenting itself as an ideological centre party, has been dominating Flanders for several decades. Consequently, the traditional economic left/right division has always been weaker and less important in Flanders than in Wallonia (Deschouwer 2003). Also, although the ideological position of the SP and the PS was similar in 1991, this position near the centre of the left–right divide did not lead to an electoral loss in favour of the extreme right for the PS, whereas it did for the SP. Two reasons can be proposed to explain this divergence. Firstly, in Flanders all parties held approximately the same position, whereas a difference between the traditional left and right in Wallonia was stronger. This is likely to have alienated more socialist

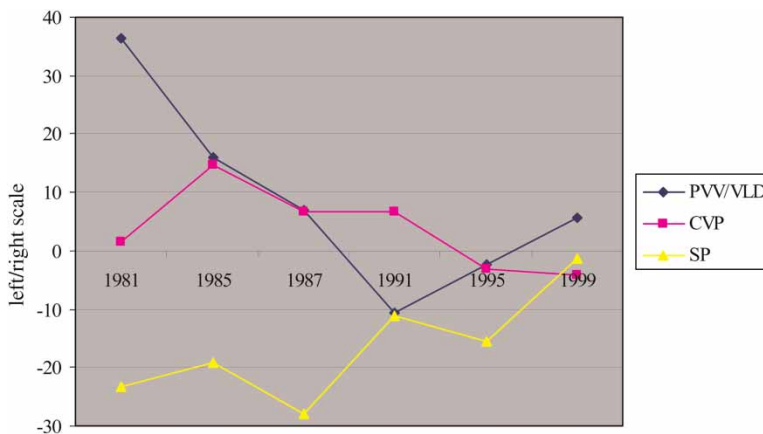


Figure 1. Evolution of the traditional Dutch-speaking parties on the left/right scale. Source: Budge *et al.* (2001) and Klingemann *et al.* (2006).

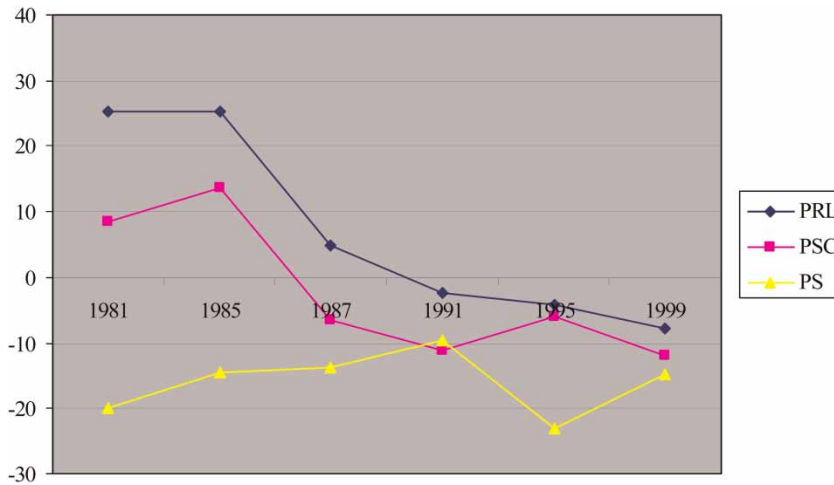


Figure 2. Evolution of the traditional French-speaking parties on the left/right scale.  
Source: Budge *et al.* (2001) and Klingemann *et al.* (2006).

voters in Flanders than Wallonia. Secondly, the move towards the left/right position in 1991 of both the Liberals and the Social Democrats was stronger in Flanders than in Wallonia, given their more rightist and leftist position, respectively, in 1987 in Flanders than in Wallonia. This may indicate that it is, as the hypothesis suggests, particularly the convergence between left and right that is important when explaining the success of the extreme right.

Regarding the convergence of the traditional left and right parties, it is also important to note that the Flemish socialists revised their welfare policy in the 1990s into a *Third Way* orientation and moved from an outspoken left position during the 1980s to the centre at the end of the 1990s. This *Third Way* direction also implied that economic and welfare policies became a more consensual area, with limited party disagreement. Hence the welfare state became a so-called *valence issue*, where there is agreement on goals in Flemish politics (Blomqvist and Green-Pedersen 2004). As such, it receives less attention in political debates, thereby leaving more space for other political issues. Moreover, the mainstream left and right party have governed together since the 1999 elections, and even though such *grand coalitions* have been formed both in Flanders and Wallonia, the PS clearly holds less of the discourse of an *Active Welfare State* than the Dutch-speaking sister party did. Although it is governing together with the Liberals, the PS consequently takes a strong leftist position and maintains a traditional socialist discourse.

### ***The influence of the extreme-right parties on the salience of policy issues***

The salience of the traditional left/right dimension is certainly not determined only by the strategy of the Social Democrats and their interaction with the other mainstream parties but is also determined by the extreme-right parties themselves. In particular, in countries or regions where the extreme right has become an important political player, it has an influence on political competition and strategic choices of political parties. In Flanders, the VB has clearly influenced the political arena and the political agenda with its populist discourse on criminality and migration. Through its professional, large-scale and continuous campaigns, it raised the salience of the issues of immigration and criminality. Besides, the party could frame the migration issue in a campaign of Flemish nationalism that is more than a century

old (Hossay 2002). Indeed, the VB combined the anti-immigrant issue with Flemish nationalism. The premise of Flemish nationalism is that a people or cultural group should be able to exercise, as much as possible, sovereignty within the territory to which they have historically been tied. The abiding presence or unchecked influx of other groups triggers negative feelings, as the concern arises that this other group will also have cultural and political ambitions (Jaspers 2003).

Studying the political parties' 2003 election programmes, Van Aelst and Walgrave (2003) conclude that the parties paid more attention to these issues in their campaigns than ever before. As such, the VB achieved – as the party itself recognizes – one of its goals by making its political programme the subject of political debate (Coffé 2005b). Erk (2005) concludes that the Dutch-speaking parties have felt the necessity to incorporate aspects of the extreme-right agenda and have endorsed the VB's emphasis on law and order. As Rydgren (2004) argues for the Danish case, the incorporation of extreme-right ideas had the effect of revealing for the voters the indirect influence and power of the extreme-right party, as well as lending legitimacy to the extreme right.

Dutch-speaking mainstream parties (including the Social Democrats), have not only paid more attention to issues that are central in the extreme-right's discourse (such as criminality and immigration) but, according to Lubbers' (2001) expert survey, the parties have also taken stricter positions regarding these issues since the electoral breakthrough of the VB. As Erk (2005, p. 499) concludes: 'the Vlaams Blok has managed to pull the political centre towards the right in Flanders'. Hossay (2002) mentions the debate on voting rights for foreign residents in which Flemish political leaders appeared significantly less in favour of extending these rights than their Wallonian counterparts. For the socialist Minister of Internal Affairs (Louis Tobback), fear of the possible electoral consequences of the introduction of voting rights for immigrants was a reason not to implement voting rights (Jacobs 1998). The Social Democrats felt particularly threatened by the VB that would appeal to its voters by linking the presence of immigrants to the increasing level of unemployment.

In general, and even though research on the influence of the extreme right on policy making is still underdeveloped, it seems that extreme-right parties have an impact on the salience of issues and policy making. Besides, it may be 'easier' for Social Democrats to defend the socio-economic dimension when they are not challenged by a successful extreme-right party. One may indeed note that it has been 'easier' for the PS to keep the focus within the political system on the economic dimension than for the SP, which has been confronted with a well-organized and successful extreme-right party with a well-developed communication strategy. Yet it has been argued that Social Democratic parties – as well as other (mainstream) parties – need not be passive spectators and can attempt to minimize the impact of issues for which they cannot convincingly claim 'ownership' (Petrocik 1996) or 'present alternative frames of how to understand social problems and ills' (Rydgren 2004, p. 497). Also, the historical strength of the PS in Wallonia makes the hypothesis of 'reversed causality' – that the PS would have remained strong and therefore able to concentrate on its core (economic) issues because the extreme right in Wallonia has been weak – unlikely. That is, the weakness of the extreme right since its inception in 1987 cannot have caused the Social Democrats to be strong even prior to the existence of the extreme right.

Before turning to our conclusion, it should be noted that in Flanders the media picked up politicized issues such as criminality and migration. An analysis revealed that the attention within the Dutch-speaking media on topics such as migration and criminality increased significantly during the 1990s (Walgrave and De Swert 2004). This attention obviously increases the salience of these issues, which positively affects the extreme-right's success. Furthermore, the Dutch-speaking media started to devote more and more attention to the extreme-right party



and their charismatic and well-spoken leaders, giving the party the much-needed publicity and a 'respectable' image. Contrariwise, the French-speaking media have consequently neglected to inform their audience about the extreme right (Coffé 2005b).

## Conclusion

Our analysis of the different success of the extreme-right parties in the Flemish and Walloon region has emphasized the importance of the role of the Social Democratic parties in explaining the difference in level of success. The PS's ability to keep material issues at the centre of the political agenda and its close (clientelistic) contact with its electorate helped to keep the extreme right from succeeding in Wallonia during the 1990s. Contrariwise, the de-pillarization of Flemish society and economic growth have freed working-class voters from traditional parties and turned their attention away from economic issues towards cultural ones, particularly immigration, that redound to the extreme right. However, it is not only the strategy of the Social Democratic parties that explains the success of the extreme right, as their strategy is also influenced by the strategies of the other mainstream parties. Besides, the extreme-right parties themselves also influence the salience of different policy issues and the mainstream parties' strategies. The mainstream parties may indeed move rightwards in order not to push their supporters towards the extreme right, as has been the case in Flanders where the mainstream parties took stricter positions with regard to criminality and immigration.

We should also note that while we have rejected several alternative explanations for the puzzle 'Why Flanders and not Wallonia?' there are other variables to consider. Hossay (2002, p. 184) focuses on the (historical) presence of the Flemish nationalist movement 'which provided ideational, programmatic, and organizational coherence for Flemish extremists'. The long history of nationalist agitation in Flanders has indeed provided the VB with a reservoir of party activists and leaders that have helped it to become one of the most professional and best-organized extreme-right parties in Western Europe. The FN lacks such a tradition and sub-culture upon which to build, and it has been organizationally weak from its inception. While we do not believe that such an argument about historical continuities (or the lack thereof) challenges the argument we have presented in this article, we do believe that arguments about historical legacies and organizational capacities have received short shrift in the literature on the extreme right (although Carter 2005 is an important exception), and that there is much to be done in this area. Indeed, in contrast to the FN, the VB is an efficiently structured, well-organized party with charismatic leaders. In terms of policies and campaigns, the FN does not represent much at all. Apart from its virulent views on migration, it has little to say and lacks a real programme. These supply-side elements obviously need more attention in future research on the extreme-right party family.

Further research could also add more cases to our analysis, which is limited to a comparison of two regions. Adding more countries or regions may help to confirm the role of the Social Democratic parties in the success of the extreme-right parties. To a greater extent than Christian Democratic and Liberal parties, which are obviously closer to extreme-right parties in spatial terms, Social Democrats have lost voters to extreme-right competitors. The 'median' extreme-right voter fits the profile of the old Social Democratic one very closely. It seems clear to us that, as in the cases of Flanders and Wallonia, Social Democratic parties across Western Europe have had varying success in holding onto their traditional base and the enduring high salience of 'their' issues. In Sweden, enduring class loyalties (especially for working-class voters) and the enduring high salience of the economic cleavage dimension have worked against the emergence of a strong extreme-right party (Rydgren 2002). The degree of class voting is still very high among Swedish working-class voters, and Swedish voters seem to make the right and

left classification mainly on the basis of the economic cleavage dimension. As in Wallonia, the class voting behaviour of the working class as well as the salience of the economic cleavage may thus explain the relative failure of Swedish extreme-right parties during the 1990s. In Germany, the salience of economic issues has also been related to the lack of electoral success of extreme-right parties (Kriesi *et al.* 2006). Comparing six West European countries, Kriesi *et al.* (2006) show that over recent decades economic issues have lost in salience in all countries except Germany, which confirms their expectation that extreme-right parties will be electorally less successful in countries where the traditional left–right divide is strong and where economic issues are salient in the party system. The opposite of the German case is the Danish one, where issues relating to the socio-economic dimension have lost salience and where the extreme-right People’s Party has become successful by mobilizing working-class voters, while the Social Democratic Party has lost its hegemonic position (Rydgren 2004).

Finally, considering a longer time period may provide additional insight into the role of the Social Democrats with regard to the success of the extreme right. Party constituencies can change with time, and other factors such as economic conditions also change with time. The ability of the Social Democrats to adapt to or react to such changes can have an influence on their success. The current research has focused mainly on the 1990s. Although we found that the endurance of the PS in Wallonia helps us to explain the weakness of the FN, future research will have to investigate whether this is still true today and will be in the future, as we find a decreasing level of party loyalty during the 1990s, as well as a growing convergence in political space.

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