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Fertile grounds for extreme right-wing parties: Explaining the Vlaams Blok's electoral success

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Abstract

The Vlaams Blok is one of the most successful extreme right-wing parties in Europe. We empirically identify contextual determinants that contribute to its political success in the municipal elections of October 8th, 2000 in Flanders. The use of the Tobit II estimator allows disentangling the party's decision to participate in an election and its (latent) political success. We find that the Vlaams Blok is particularly successful in municipalities with a small network of social organisations. The presence of Turkish or Maghrebian citizens and a high average income also foster extreme right success. Economic deprivation reduces the probability of Vlaams Blok participating in elections, while a high crime rate positively affects the party's decision to participate in the elections. The findings on municipal elections are confirmed by an empirical analysis of the Vlaams Blok's success in the federal elections of 1999. © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Extreme right; Local elections; Sample selection model

1. Introduction

The growth of right-wing extremism is a major concern in many Western European democracies. The anti-system attitude, combined with ethno-centrist positions of extreme right-wing parties is considered a threat for the well functioning of the democratic process. Whether or not this fear is justified, the fact remains that many countries have witnessed a growing popularity of these parties since the 1980s and that this growth in popularity is mirrored by a declining popularity of the more traditional political parties.

While the rise of extreme right-wing parties has been observed in many countries, it is by no means a universal

phenomenon. Whereas in countries like Austria, Belgium¹, France, Italy and Norway extreme right-wing parties have been highly successful, in Spain and the United Kingdom their success has been limited. Several studies have demonstrated that vote intentions or election outcomes for extreme right-wing parties are affected by economic, political and social variables. In the present paper we investigate the determinants of the electoral success of the Vlaams Blok in the Flemish municipal elections, thereby concentrating on four macro-variables: the economic situation, the presence of immigrants, the crime rate and the level of social capital. The focus on

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¹ Note the difference in success of the extreme right parties in Belgium. Whereas the Vlaams Blok achieved 24.2 per cent of the vote in Flanders in the most recent regional elections of June 2004, its Francophone counterpart, the Front National (FN), reaped 8.1 per cent in Wallonia.

the local — as opposed to the national — level offers the advantage that it provides a larger number of observations allowing for more robust statistical testing. Also, the interpretation of empirical results is facilitated by the homogeneity in the institutional and political setting.

Over the past decades, the Vlaams Blok has become one of the most successful extreme right-wing parties in Western Europe. Its successive electoral victories, both at the local, the regional and the federal level are probably the most notable political evolution in Flanders, and more generally in Belgium, since the beginning of the 1990s.

A brief description of the Vlaams Blok's (ideological) positioning and electoral evolution is given in the Section 2. As mentioned, our central question relates to four elements that may contribute to the (lack of) electoral success of extreme right-wing parties: the state of the economy and the presence of immigrants are two 'well-established' determinants in the empirical literature on extreme right voting. The evidence is, however, mixed. The level of crime and the role of social capital have received scant attention in previous work. In the second section we review the theoretical insights on each of these determinants as well as the existing empirical evidence. In our empirical analysis, presented in Section 4, we estimate a Tobit II model explaining both the Vlaams Blok's participation in the Flemish municipal elections of 2000 and its (latent) vote share. Indeed, since the party did not participate in all municipalities, we distinguish between the participation decision and the party's electoral success. This is a distinction that has not been made in previous empirical work on extreme right voting. We find that such a distinction proves highly relevant. Section 5 addresses the question to what extent the results on municipal elections can be generalised to other levels of government. A conclusion is given in Section 6.

2. The Vlaams Blok

The Vlaams Blok entered the political arena in the parliamentary elections of 1978 as an amalgamation of two dissident factions of the Volksunie (VU). At that time, the VU was the dominant Flemish regionalist party and, in the eyes of the Vlaams Blok, it was making too many concessions to French-speakers. The Vlaams Blok strove primarily for the independence of Flanders. This nationalist platform gave the party the stable but small support of between one and two per cent of voters. However, at its first municipal elections of 1982, the Vlaams Blok achieved a first modest electoral success in the city of Antwerp. It reaped 5.2 per cent of the vote. In the mid-1980s, the success of the Dutch Centrumdemocraten and the French Front National in

mobilizing people against immigrants provided a model that the Vlaams Blok was keen to imitate. The party conducted a fierce anti-immigrant campaign in the 1987 parliamentary elections. It doubled its number of seats in Parliament — from one to two — and won for the first time in its history a seat in the Belgian Senate using a new slogan, '*Eigen volk eerst!*' (Our own people first!). This slogan was based on the catchphrase of the French Front National, '*Les Français d'abord*'. At the same time, tension began to grow over the choice between prioritizing the immigration issue, which was electorally rewarding, and the original Flemish-nationalist ideology. The Vlaams Blok chose to follow the more electorally rewarding strategy, combining it with the original nationalism (Buelens and Deschouwer, 2002). In the municipal elections of 1988 the Vlaams Blok realised a local breakthrough in the city of Antwerp where it achieved 17.7 per cent of the vote. This success was an incentive for the other parties to install the strategy of a *cordon sanitaire*. Through this, they committed themselves not to conclude political agreements with the Vlaams Blok. The *cordon sanitaire* still exists today, despite being the subject of many debates.

The party's real breakthrough came in the federal parliamentary elections of November 24th, 1991 — a day that was afterwards known as 'Black Sunday' — when the Vlaams Blok obtained 10.3 per cent of Flemish votes. In Antwerp, every fourth voter supported the extreme right party, making it the strongest political force in the city. The Vlaams Blok continued to grow throughout the following decade. In the most recent regional elections (June 2004), the party reaped 24.2 per cent of the vote in the Flemish region. By that, it became the second largest party in Flanders.² The growth of the party is partly due to its populist rhetoric on racism and security and its anti-establishment discourse. In order to attract more voters, strongly worded ideological texts have been filtered and rewritten, and Vlaams Blok office holders have taken more moderate positions (Coffé, 2005). In November 2004 it was convicted for racism, the party changed its name into *Vlaams Belang* and wrote a new, more moderate party manifesto trying to present itself as a viable policy party.

3. What determines extreme right-wing parties' electoral success?

Many theories explaining extreme right-wing voting have been suggested. Since we are concerned here with

² The largest 'party' in the election was actually a cartel of two parties that formed two independent parliamentary parties (CD&V and N-VA). Thus, the Vlaams Blok became the largest party in the Flemish Parliament.

the influence of contextual variables, we restrict ourselves to theories that focus on the *macro level* and particularly to those that may help in explaining the electoral success of the Vlaams Blok in Flanders. We focus on two sets of determinants. A first set contains ‘economic conditions’ and immigration, two determinants that have been widely studied but on which the empirical evidence is mixed. A second set contains determinants that, to our opinion, deserve more attention in the context of explaining right-wing success: crime and social capital.

3.1. Economic conditions

Many authors have pointed to (general) economic conditions as determinants of the electoral success of extreme right. Still, there is disagreement about the precise nature of this relationship. Jackman and Volpert (1996) find *positive* effects of unemployment on vote (intentions) for extreme right. *Negative* effects have been identified by Knigge (1998), Lubbers and Scheepers (2000) and Jesuit and Mahler (2004).³

From a theoretical perspective, a positive effect from unemployment may be explained by *conflict theory* (Blalock, 1967; Olzak, 1992). This theory expects conflict to be more severe in regions with high levels of unemployment. Conflict then translates into exclusionistic reactions from majority groups. These reactions are supposed to be more common among manual workers with low education who are competing with immigrant groups for scarce resources such as jobs and houses. These *losers of modernity* (Betz, 1998) feel threatened by rapid social change and tend to support radical right parties out of general discontent.^{4,5} Negative effects from unemployment on electoral success for extreme

right are in line with the *clientele hypothesis* (Rattinger, 1981; Nannestad and Paldam, 1994) and the *issue salience theory* of party competition (Budge and Farlie, 1976). Both offer a partisan view on the relation between economic performance and electoral success. Leftist parties tend to have better records in reducing unemployment (Mueller, 2003). As a result, the electorate shifts to the left when unemployment is (considered to be) a major economic problem. In prosperous times unemployment is hardly an issue and right-wing parties (irrespective of whether they are in power or not) are expected to win votes. A positive effect from economic prosperity on right wing success may also be explained by the concept of *welfare chauvinism* (Kitschelt, 1995). This refers to the fact that people exclude out-groups to keep the wealth they have. Such an attitude translates into a rejection of redistribution to the worse-off.

3.2. Immigration

If any single issue dominates today’s extreme right-wing platforms, then it is certainly the issue of immigration. The *theory of economic interest* assumes that the presence of immigrants increases the competition for scarce resources and that this competition translates into inter-group conflicts. This explanation relates to *conflict theory*. Indeed, one may not only expect conflict to be more severe in regions with high levels of unemployment (see above), but also in regions where the level of immigration is high. On the labour market for instance, migrants are perceived as competitors. Since extreme right parties take advantage of these feelings of competition, the presence of immigrants may facilitate their electoral growth.⁶ However, it appears that even though attitudinal opposition to immigrants is related to support for the extreme right, the spatial variation of electoral support for the extreme right within countries and between countries is not simply correlated with the presence of immigrants (Schain et al., 2002). In his analysis of extreme right-wing success in European countries, Kitschelt (1995) does not find

³ Chapin (1997) and Swank and Betz (2003) find right wing success to be unaffected by unemployment.

⁴ A positive relationship between unemployment and extreme right voting may also be explained by the *reward-punishment* (or responsibility) theory that underlies the literature on *vote and popularity functions* (Nannestad and Paldam, 1994). The idea is that voters hold the government responsible for macro-economic conditions. Low (high) levels of unemployment or inflation and high (low) economic prosperity translate into electoral gains (losses) for the incumbent parties. To the extent that extreme right-wing parties are often (in the Flemish case: always) opposition parties, they are expected to benefit from bad economic conditions.

⁵ Moreover, in assessing their own situation people make comparisons with other people’s situation. Voters with a weak socio-economic position may evaluate this position more negatively to the extent that they live in a wealthier region. Hence, income inequalities may translate into support for extreme right parties.

⁶ Rival theories exist presuming that people who are in contact with immigrants have more positive feelings towards this community and are therefore less likely to vote for an extreme right party (Chapin, 1997). Perrineau (1997) argues that the fact that the immigrants are unknown to French residents in suburbs contributes to the support by the latter for extreme right-wing parties. Finally, a negative relation between the presence of immigrants and extreme right voting may also occur if people who are hostile towards foreigners leave places where many immigrants live and concentrate in jurisdictions with fewer foreigners (Martin, 1998). These theories have, however, limited empirical support.

any significant association between the presence of immigrants or political refugees in a country and success for extreme right-wing parties. More elaborated analyses (controlling for other relevant determinants) do reveal evidence for the fact that the foreigners' presence translates into electoral successes for extreme right. Mayer (2002) finds that the French Front National is more successful in neighbourhoods where many immigrants live. Similar results are found by Anderson (1996), Knigge (1998), Golder (2003), Lubbers et al. (2000) and Swank and Betz (2003). De Vos and Deurloo (1999) find that – within the city of Amsterdam – extreme right support is higher in districts where many Moroccans and Turks live whereas the presence of Surinamese, Antillean or other immigrants has no effect. This 'selectiveness' is in line with the observation in Meuleman and Billiet (2003) who show that the presence of South-European immigrants is perceived to be less problematic than the presence of immigrants from Islamic countries.

3.3. Crime

Apart from immigration, crime is a central topic of the extreme right-wing parties in general and of the Vlaams Blok in particular (Mudde, 2000). Radical right parties place a large emphasis on being tough on crime. Hence, it is expected that crime has a significant effect on the success of the extreme right parties. However, the relationship between crime and extreme right performance has rarely been studied empirically. Chapin (1997) provides some evidence. He finds that the German *Republikaner* party – while being less successful in areas where many foreigners live – is more successful in jurisdictions where foreigners comprise larger percentages of criminal suspects. Regarding the Vlaams Blok, Van Craen and Swyngedouw (2002) identify crime as an important motive to vote.

3.4. Social capital

Putnam's (1993) theory of *social capital* suggests that people divorced from community, occupation and association are first and foremost among the supporters of extremism. A flourishing social life is a source of democratic values, and voluntary associations are places where social and civic skills are learnt (Putnam, 2000). Hence, they may be described as *schools of democracy*. Some studies on the micro level have indeed shown that citizens who are involved in social organizations have significantly less sympathy for extreme right parties (Billiet and De Witte, 2001; Coffé, 2002).

However, the social capital school also claims that the voluntary associations function as *rainmakers*, Putnam's term to describe the way in which resources produced from civic engagement *rain* not only on those who are active participants but also on those who live in regions with a high density of social interactions. As such, it is assumed that more civic organisations (or more generally, higher levels of social capital) in a community dampen the success of extreme right parties. To our knowledge, no empirical macro analysis has investigated such a link.

4. Empirical analysis: explaining the electoral success of the Vlaams Blok

In order to examine the explanatory value of the different variables presented in the previous section, we estimate a regression model explaining the share of votes that the Vlaams Blok obtained in the municipal elections of 2000 in 307 out of the 308 Flemish municipalities.⁷ These municipalities have multi-purpose governments with a considerable autonomy, both at the expenditure and revenue side of the budget. Their major competences are in the field of education, public safety (police), welfare, refuse collection, and so on. On the revenue side, Flemish municipalities have a far reaching autonomy which is reflected in a highly diverse tax system (the average municipality levies around 20 different taxes). Within the council, a majority forms the local government (mayor and aldermen) that is the executive power in the municipality. Municipalities have a fixed electoral cycle of six years. In the elections, seats in the municipal council are allocated using a system of proportional representation (PR). It is a well-established fact that PR systems are characterised by fragmented political landscapes. The number of parties competing in elections and in the government is generally larger than under plurality rule. This is also the case in Flanders. Around 40 per cent of the municipalities have single party governments. Little over 40 per cent of the municipalities are governed by a two-party coalition. The remaining municipalities have coalitions of at least three parties.

In the most recent municipal elections of 2000, the Vlaams Blok obtained an average of 10.8 per cent vote share in the municipalities where it participated in the elections. This number of municipalities has increased enormously since the party participated for the first time in municipal elections: from 24 in 1982

⁷ One municipality – Herstappe – was left out because of lack of data.

to 180 in 2000. After the 2000 municipal election campaign, the party got seats in the council in 154 municipi-

municipalities (municipality specific subscripts are left out for convenience):

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Vote share Vlaams Blok} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Income} + \beta_2 \text{Unemployment} + \beta_3 \text{Income inequality} + \beta_4 \text{Immigrants} + \beta_5 \text{Crime} \\ & + \beta_6 \text{Associational life} + \beta_7 \text{Population density} + \beta_8 \text{District magnitude} \\ & + \beta_9 \text{Government fragmentation} + \beta_{10} \text{Government ideological distance} + \epsilon \end{aligned}$$

palities of the 180 in which it participated. It totalled 438 councillors.

Concentrating on the municipal level of government offers clear advantages over studies at more aggregate levels. First, our analysis can be based on a large set of data.⁸ Second, the institutional context — single district elections, the electoral rules, the fixed (six year) election cycle, and so on — is identical across observations.⁹ Third, as elections were held at one and the same date — October 8th, 2000 — no variation exists in terms of the federal and regional political situation. This allows concentrating on the inter-municipal variation in the electoral result of the Vlaams Blok, at the same time controlling for potential shocks in the party's federal (or regional) popularity. Besides, we have data that can help us shed light on different variables such as social capital and crime, which have been rarely empirically studied in analyses on the success of extreme right parties.

4.1. Empirical specification

In order to identify the impact of economic conditions, immigration, crime and social capital on extreme right-wing success in the municipal elections, it is necessary to control for the possible importance of rival explanations. Hence, we include control variables, based on the findings in earlier research. More specifically, we estimate the following empirical model for Flemish

The dependent variable is the share of votes obtained by the Vlaams Blok and is bounded within the interval [0,1]. The specific nature of the dependent variable should be accounted for through proper use of the estimation technique (see next section). β_0 to β_{10} are the coefficients to be estimated. ϵ is the normally distributed error term.

To capture the economic conditions we include not only the unemployment rate in our model, but also the per capita income and the income inequality, measured by the inter-quartile range coefficient. Given that the discussion in the previous section suggests that there may be an unequal attitude towards immigrants depending on their country of origin, we account for this in our specification. The share of immigrants is a vector that consists of two elements: the share in the population of foreigners from Turkey or Maghreb countries (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) and the share of the foreign population from other countries. Crime corresponds with the per capita number of crimes committed.

Our measure of social capital is the per capita number of local branches of socio-cultural associations within the municipality (Lauwerysen and Colpaert, 2004). These socio-cultural associations are primarily local branches of (inter)national associations for women, retirees, civil rights, and so on. They are both *bonding* and *bridging* associations (Putnam, 2000). Some organizations are inward looking and encompass people with the same background. Examples of such bonding associations include ethnic fraternal organizations. Other associations are outward looking and bring citizens into contact with people from a cross-section of society. These are generally called bridging associations. Some authors suggest that while bridging associations are a good form of social capital, bonding associations are not. They emphasize that positive experiences with dissimilar individuals will have greater effects on the development of generalized trust than will the cooperation that emerges among individuals who are more homogenous in terms of their characteristics, attitudes, or behaviours (Marshall and Stolle, 2004). However, Halpern (2005) points out that there is a fairly high, positive correlation between bonding and bridging

⁸ The number of observations is by definition a problem in empirical work that concentrates on actual election outcomes (compared to, for example, vote intentions). For example, while covering a long period 1981–1998 and a relatively large number of countries (16), the empirical work in Swank and Betz (2003) is based on only 83 observations. Similarly, the analysis in Jackman and Volpert (1996) uses data on 103 elections. This empirical constraint is, of course, unavoidable when one concentrates on actual outcomes of national elections.

⁹ Yet, a sizeable difference in district magnitude (the number of seats in the council) exists between municipalities. The district magnitude ranges from 7 to 55. Hence, it will be included as control variable in our model.

social capital. This suggests, according to Halpern (2005), that we may not have to worry too much about the distinction. If a community is rich in one type of social capital, it is probably rich in the other type too.

Besides our central variables, discussed above, we include a set of control variables. To control for the anonymity and alienation that are characteristic of large cities, we include population density, expressed as the number of inhabitants per m². A last set of variables in our model are political control variables. The district magnitude, measured by the number of seats in the municipal council, is an indicator of the barrier to entry for new parties. Lower barriers allow small parties to enter the political arena more easily. Government fragmentation and the implied impact on public policy has also been identified as a potential factor favouring the growth of opposition parties in general and extreme right parties in particular. It is measured as the effective number of government parties (Laakso and Taagepera, 1979). Finally, large ideological differences (and potential disagreement) may inhibit the well-functioning of government and the possibility of coalition partners to take clear stances on a number of issues. This may again benefit the Vlaams Blok. To test for this, and following Volkerink and de Haan (2001), we use the maximum ideological distance between any two government parties in the regression.

Summary statistics for the different variables are reported in Appendix 1. The data sources are in Appendix 2.

4.2. Estimation method

The estimation method should account for the bounded nature of our dependent variable (the Vlaams Blok's vote share). As actual vote shares range from 0 to 33 per cent, especially the lower bound deserves special attention. Indeed, the Vlaams Blok did not participate in the elections in 127 of the 307 municipalities. It is well known that estimating by ordinary least squared (OLS) would lead to biased results as it disregards the latent popularity of the Vlaams Blok in municipalities where they did not formally participate in the elections. Therefore, and following the bulk of the literature (Golder, 2003; Jackman and Volpert, 1996; Jesuit and Mahler, 2004; Swank and Betz, 2003), we proceed by estimating a Tobit regression (Tobin, 1958) that relates the (latent) popularity of the Vlaams Blok to a set of explanatory variables derived from the theories in Section 3.

The Tobit estimator makes full use of the information that is available by accounting for the popularity of the Vlaams Blok in those municipalities where the

party participated in the elections *as well as* the latent popularity in municipalities where it did not participate. Such estimator is, however, only valid as a measure of electoral success defined in terms of the 'demand' by citizens as expressed in the ballot box (or left unexpressed if the party does not present a list). While our interest and hypotheses lie clearly on this demand side, supply side arguments (i.e. the Vlaams Blok's decision whether or not to participate in the election) interfere. District magnitude forms a clear illustration. Indeed, the importance of district magnitude plays at the side of both the political entrepreneurs and the voters. Party elites devote more resources in municipalities with a larger district magnitude and the electorate may not take the risk to vote for a party that may not pass the electoral threshold.¹⁰ Hence, district magnitude may affect the vote share of the Vlaams Blok through its influence on *strategic voting* (demand) as well as through its influence on the decision of the party to participate (supply). The situation is similar as the one in Hug (2000). This author shows how determinants of the emergence of new parties differ from the determinants of their political success given that they have decided to participate in the election. To disentangle demand and supply aspects, and following Hug (2000), we also estimate a sample selection model (Tobit II model).¹¹ This corresponds to simultaneously estimating a selection equation (participation in the election by the Vlaams Blok or not) and an outcome equation (vote share of the party given that it does participate). This selection mechanism of party participation is ignored in the Tobit I model which is used in most earlier studies on the subject.¹² Hence, false conclusions may be drawn when using Tobit I. Indeed, variables that seem to explain the success of an extreme

¹⁰ However, Norris (2005) concludes that the effect of electoral systems works through determining the radical right's share of seats, not votes, and states that effects in this regard can be regarded as mechanical rather than psychological. Carter (2002) suggests that electoral systems have a different, and possibly weaker, impact on right-wing extremist party supporters than other voters. Carter (2002), as well as Van der Brug et al. (2005) challenge the general theory that electoral rules shape extreme right party appeal. They find no evidence that a proportional electoral system or the district magnitude help extreme right parties to obtain popular support.

¹¹ See Breen (1996) for a good introduction to Tobit models.

¹² Of course, in national elections the selection generally does not relate to the question whether an extreme right party decides to participate in the elections but to the question whether an extreme right party exists. Also, estimating a sample selection model for panel data is less straightforward than estimating a sample selection model for cross section data. Several estimators for panel data sample selection models exist and there exists little evidence on the performance of these estimators (see however, Jensen et al., 2001).

right party may only have an impact on the party's decision to participate in the elections and not on its electoral outcome. We therefore believe that the use of the Tobit II estimator is an improvement over the existing literature.

The Tobit II estimator assumes that the dependent variable (the vote for extreme right) is only observed when *another* variable exceeds a certain value. We can write the sample selection model as (Breen, 1996):

Selection equation :

$$z_i^* = w_i' \alpha + e_i \quad \begin{cases} z_i = 0 & \text{if } z_i^* \leq 0 \\ z_i = 1 & \text{if } z_i^* > 0 \end{cases}$$

Outcome equation :

$$y_i^* = x_i' \beta + u_i \quad \begin{cases} y_i = y_i^* & \text{if } z_i = 1 \\ y_i \text{ not observed} & \text{if } z_i = 0 \end{cases}$$

As mentioned, the model contains a selection equation and an outcome equation. The selection equation can be thought of as estimating the supply by the Vlaams Blok. The variable z_i^* is of course not actually observed. We do observe, however, z_i , i.e. the fact that the Vlaams Blok participates in the elections (when $z_i^* > 0$). The outcome equation estimates the Vlaams Blok's popularity (or success) y_i^* . This popularity is observed as the vote share in those municipalities where the Vlaams Blok participates in the elections ($z_i = 1$). It is unobserved (latent) in the other municipalities.

When estimating the Tobit II model we will assume the determinants that were identified in Section 3 to be valid both for the selection equation and the outcome equation. A rationale for this empirical assumption is the interdependence of supply and demand. Expected demand is likely to be a major determinant of supply: a party is more likely to participate in an election if it expects to obtain a good electoral result.

Before turning to the results, a final methodological note should be made. Sigelman and Zeng (1999) warn that Tobit II is not efficient for exclusively non-negative data. The estimation method deals with the sample selection bias, but it does not restrict the value range of the dependent variable. Sigelman and Zeng suggest that the non-negativity of the data can be dealt with by applying a non-negative function on the dependent variable y . Therefore, when we estimate by Tobit II, we transform the dependent variable in the outcome equation. More specifically, the transformed vote share

is $v = \ln(V/(1-V))$ (with V the vote share of the Vlaams Blok) and is restricted to the interval $[0,1]$.

4.3. Empirical results

The results of our empirical analysis are summarised in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 gives the Tobit I estimation in line with most of the literature. Table 2 gives the Tobit II results.¹³

The first important conclusion that follows from our analysis is that Hug's (2000) warning – that the same variables do not necessarily explain participation in the elections and the subsequent vote share – should be taken seriously also in the context of analysing the popularity of extreme right parties. Indeed, a comparison of Tables 1 and 2 reveals that – in terms of the significance and signs of the coefficients – the results of our Tobit II regression are similar to the Tobit I regression. Still, most variables that are significant in the Tobit I estimation have a significant impact on the selection or the outcome but not on both. This demonstrates that the methodological distinction between the participation decision and the party's (latent) vote share proves highly relevant. Previous empirical results on the popularity of extreme right parties – based on Tobit I estimators – should therefore be treated with caution.

In what follows we concentrate on the Tobit II results as given in Table 2. Our main interest lies, of course, in the *outcome equation* that tests the demand side theories described in Section 3.

From Table 2 we see that income exerts a significant and positive effect on the Vlaams Blok's (latent) vote share. Apparently, under favourable economic conditions the electorate turns to the extreme right party. This observation is in line with Knigge (1998), Lubbers and Scheepers (2000) and Jesuit and Mahler (2004). It also corresponds with recent findings on the individual level which shows that the supporters of extreme right parties may not only be portrayed as “losers of modernity” (Van der Brug and Fennema, 2003; McGann and Kitschelt, 2005). It has been shown that extreme right parties have been able to appeal to a broad electorate from across all social groups. Note, however, that the positive effect of favourable conditions is only found for income and not unemployment (at least not

¹³ To check the robustness of our results, we re-estimated the regressions excluding the city of Antwerp (the largest city in Flanders and the municipality where the Vlaams Blok is the most successful). Excluding the observation did not affect the tenor of our results (available upon request).

Table 1
Tobit I estimation of Vlaams Blok's (latent) vote share

	(Latent) Vlaams Blok vote share
Intercept	−0.003 (−0.04)
Per capita income	0.024*** (3.93)
Unemployment rate	−0.799** (−2.09)
Income inequality	−0.004*** (−4.40)
Population from Maghreb and Turkey	1.810*** (4.20)
Population from other countries	−0.174 (−1.44)
Crime	0.284* (1.72)
Associational life	−11.132 (−1.42)
Population density	22.803* (1.94)
District magnitude	0.005*** (6.07)
Effective number of parties in government	0.021** (2.13)
Maximum ideological distance government	−0.004 (−0.83)
Sigma	0.067
Number of observations	307
LL	147.186
Likelihood ratio χ^2	194.58
Likelihood ratio prob	0.000

Notes: *t*-values are in parentheses, ***significant at 1%; **at 5% and *at 10%; LL is the maximised value of the log-likelihood function; likelihood ratio χ^2 is calculated as 2(LL − LO) with LO the log-likelihood of the constant only model.

in the outcome equation).¹⁴ Our results may be taken to support the *clienteles hypothesis* (and *issue salience theory*) stating that voters will turn to the left-wing parties under unfavourable economic conditions. They are also in line with the notion of *welfare chauvinism*: favourable economic conditions create welfare and those that benefit from this defend their position by taking extremist political positions.¹⁵

From a practical and policy perspective it is not only important to know whether a contextual variable exerts an influence or not. It is also relevant to know the *size* of the effect. Therefore, we calculate the *marginal effects*

¹⁴ We do find a significant positive effect of unemployment when we use the total share of foreigners (result available upon request). When we use the share of immigrants from Turkey and the Maghreb separately this effect disappears. This is probably due to the fact that unemployment is highly correlated with the presence of Turkish and Maghrebian immigrants (correlation of 0.53). This shows how important it is to distinguish between types of immigrants when analysing the effects of immigrants and unemployment on the extremist vote.

¹⁵ Our empirical approach does not allow discriminating between the two possible explanations. Still, in support of the *clienteles hypothesis*, we do find a (small) negative correlation between aggregate income and respectively the vote for the socialist party (−0.24) and the vote for the Christian democratic party (−0.32). We also find a small positive correlation between aggregate income and the vote for the (right) liberal party (0.21).

Table 2
Tobit II estimation of Vlaams Blok's electoral success (FIML)

	Selection equation	Outcome equation
Intercept	−3.820** (−2.43)	−2.133*** (−4.36)
Per capita income	0.354*** (2.69)	0.073* (1.86)
Unemployment rate	−15.324* (−1.74)	1.102 (0.44)
Income inequality	−0.055*** (−3.13)	−0.006 (−1.00)
Population from Maghreb and Turkey	44.066 (1.61)	13.516*** (5.50)
Population from other countries	−2.530 (−1.05)	−0.901 (−1.11)
Crime	8.315** (2.02)	0.273 (0.27)
Associational life	162.353 (1.01)	−232.710*** (−4.42)
Population density	293.485 (0.95)	192.268*** (2.71)
District Magnitude	0.204*** (6.63)	−0.004 (−0.62)
Effective number of parties in government	0.409* (1.76)	0.066 (1.12)
Maximum ideological distance government	−0.105 (−0.98)	−0.035 (−1.24)
Rho	−0.519	
Sigma	0.359	
LL	−190.374	
Number of observations	307	
Number of uncensored observations	180	

Notes: *z*-values are in parentheses, ***significant at 1%; **at 5% and *at 10%; LL is the maximised value of the log-likelihood function. The dependent variable in the outcome equation is the transformed vote share: $\ln(V/(1 - V))$.

on the untransformed latent vote share — that is, y^* , the popularity of the Vlaams Blok.¹⁶ The size of the effect of aggregate income is non-negligible. An increase by one standard deviation in per capita income leads to an increase in the latent vote share of 2.30 percentage points (which is substantial, compared to an average vote share of 10.8 per cent in those municipalities where the Vlaams Blok is present). Remember that in those municipalities where the party participated the latent vote share is the vote share that it actually received. In those municipalities where it did not participate it is the vote share that it would have received if it had participated.

¹⁶ In Table 3 we give the marginal effects on the transformed latent vote share. The effect on the untransformed vote share can be calculated as: $(\beta \exp(\beta x))/(1 + \exp(\beta x))^2$, where β is the marginal effect on the transformed latent vote share. As x we take the sample mean of the explanatory variable. The effect of an increase in one standard deviation is found by multiplying this effect with the standard deviation. The mean and standard deviation of the explanatory variables are shown in Appendix 1. Note that the marginal effects on the transformed latent vote share — $\ln(V/(1 - V))$ — are the coefficients in the outcome equations of Table 2 (i.e. β).

Table 3
Marginal effects Tobit II estimation of Vlaams Blok's electoral success

	Selection equation	Outcome equation
Per capita income	0.120	0.073
Unemployment rate	-5.195	1.102
Income inequality	-0.019	-0.006
Population from Maghreb and Turkey	14.938	13.516
Population from other countries	-0.858	-0.901
Crime	2.819	0.273
Associational life	55.038	-232.710
Population density	99.492	192.268
District magnitude	0.069	-0.004
Effective number of parties in government	0.139	0.066
Maximum ideological distance government	-0.036	-0.035

Notes: For the selection equation we give the marginal effects on the probability of being selected. For the outcome equation we give the marginal effects on the transformed latent vote share. The latter marginal effects are the same as the coefficients of the outcome equations in Table 2.

As regards the electoral impact of immigration, we find that the share of people from the Maghreb countries or Turkey has a highly significant and (anticipated) positive impact on the extremist vote share. This is in line with the conclusion of de Vos and Deurloo (1999) regarding the presence of Moroccan and Turkish immigrants in Amsterdam.¹⁷ The share of foreigners from other countries than the Maghreb or Turkey has a negative – though insignificant – effect. This may be taken to reflect that immigrants from those countries (in practical terms: mainly from the Netherlands and Italy) are well integrated in the Flemish society and that their presence is more easily accepted by the autochthons. This striking difference between electoral reactions to the presence of foreigners from Muslim countries and foreigners from other countries shows a difference in (perceived) cultural distance. It is also particularly the Turks and Moroccans who are targeted in the Vlaams Blok's propaganda as the scapegoat for a whole range of social problems. It is fair to say that the issue of immigration of these population groups is the party's most distinctive issue. The effect of the presence of Turkish and Maghrebian immigrants on the Vlaams Blok's popularity is substantial. Calculating the marginal effect on the latent vote share, we find that an increase by one standard deviation results in a 4.05 percentage points higher vote share.

Voting for extreme right is negatively affected by a municipality's social capital as measured by the per capita

¹⁷ We find no effect from the total share of immigrants (results available upon request).

number of socio-cultural associations. The Vlaams Blok is more successful in municipalities with a small network of organisations. Hence, our results are in line with Putnam's (1993) hypothesis that social capital has an important influence on the performance of societies (both at the political, social and economic level). A dense associational life allows people to overcome collective action problems more effectively and at lower cost, which will prevent them from voting for an extremist party with radical standpoints. The effect of social capital is large. An increase of one standard deviation in this variable leads to a decrease in latent vote share of 5.51 percentage points. This shows that the presence of social capital and the presence of Turkish and Maghrebian immigrants have the largest impact on the vote share of the Vlaams Blok.

Our last central variable, crime, has no significant effect on the party's popularity. The same holds for our political control variables. Population density, however, has a significantly positive effect. This suggests that the problems associated with urbanization benefit the electoral success of the party (see also Billiet and Swyngedouw, 1995). Calculating the marginal effect, we find that an increase by one standard deviation in population density leads to an increase in the latent vote share of no less than 2.11 percentage points.

Turning to the *selection equation*, we find that our three variables to measure the economic conditions have a significant effect on the probability that the extreme right-wing party participates in the election. The Vlaams Blok is more likely to present lists in high income, low unemployment and low inequality municipalities.¹⁸ Lacking a (formal) model of the supply decision, it is not evident to draw clear-cut conclusions from this.¹⁹ Crucial to us is that by taking into account the

¹⁸ These effects are sizeable. Table 3 gives the marginal effects (computed at the sample mean) on the probability of being selected (here, the probability that the Vlaams Blok participates in the election) for the models in Table 2. In municipalities with one standard deviation higher (than average) income, the probability that the Vlaams Blok participates in the elections is around 17.76 percentage points higher (we get this number by multiplying the marginal effect on the probability of being selected (0.120) by the standard deviation (1.48)). An unemployment rate that is one standard deviation lower leads to a 9.87 higher probability of a Vlaams Blok list. A standard deviation increase in inequality, translates in a 19.72 percentage points lower probability of a Vlaams Blok presence in the municipality.

¹⁹ For example: the positive effect of income may reflect the supply-effect of the party participating in elections as it expects sizeable electoral support (as evidenced by the outcome equation discussed above). Alternatively, a positive effect of income on the participation decision may indicate that formally organising a local division of a party is easier in richer municipalities (where setting up any type of organisation may be facilitated because setting up an organisation has a non-negligible monetary cost).

participation decision we are able to single out the demand effects that are the central interest of our analysis, as discussed above. The analysis in Table 2 demonstrates the relevance of using the appropriate Tobit II estimator. Indeed, comparison with Table 1 shows that estimating by Tobit I as is done in most previous research on the subject would lead us to conclude that income inequality has a negative impact on extreme right voting. Our current result questions this finding and suggests that this empirical effect may mainly be due to supply side effects. Similar conclusions can be drawn with respect to the observed effect from crime. Table 2 reveals that the Vlaams Blok is more likely to present a list in the elections in those municipalities that are confronted with higher levels of crime. A rise in the crime rate with one standard deviation increases the probability of a Vlaams Blok presence with 9.30 percentage points. This may reflect the fact that the party expects to reach higher levels of popularity in ‘problematic’ areas. That this ‘crime-effect’ is not apparent in the outcome equation shows that the level of crime does not — after all — influence the party’s success as much as expected (hoped?) by the Vlaams Blok.

With regard to the political control variables, we find that the effective number of government parties has a significant positive effect on the probability of a Vlaams Blok list. This suggests a politically fragmented context benefits the existence of an extreme right party. A standard deviation increase in government parties increases the probability of a Vlaams Blok list with 8.40 percentage points. Of course, one could add that the causality could be the reverse, i.e. the presence of the Vlaams Blok leads to more politically fragmented governments.²⁰ The district magnitude has the expected positive effect on the supply decision. The Vlaams Blok is more likely to present lists in municipalities with larger district magnitude. This confirms the result obtained in Golder (2003) and Swank and Betz (2003) for a sample of European countries. A larger number of seats in the municipal council makes it easier for a relatively young political party (like the Vlaams Blok) to enter the political arena. Calculating the marginal effect demonstrates that district magnitude has a very powerful effect on

the probability of the Vlaams Blok participating in the elections. A standard deviation increase in the district magnitude increases the probability of Vlaams Blok’s presence with no less than 42.64 percentage points. Clearly, the district magnitude has the largest effect on the likelihood that the Vlaams Blok participates in municipal elections. That the district magnitude fails to reach statistical significance in the outcome equation, shows that the district magnitude does not make any difference to voters considering casting a vote for the Vlaams Blok. Generally, what may be referred to as the *political opportunity structure* thus particularly plays a role in the party’s decision to participate in elections. It determines whether the party will participate in elections, but does not explain its subsequent success. Hence, our study challenges the agreement in much of the literature that the political opportunity structure in general and the district magnitude in particular affects the electoral outcome of extreme right parties.

5. Generalising to other levels of government

The results obtained in the previous section point towards a clear effect of economic and particularly social determinants on the electoral popularity of the Vlaams Blok in the municipal elections. A crucial question is whether our findings on municipal elections can be generalised to higher levels of government (notably to the Vlaams Blok’s success in federal elections). To test this, we repeat the regression for the municipal elections as presented in Section 4, now using data on the federal election nearest to the municipal election of 2000. This federal election was held on June 13th, 1999.

Unfortunately, there are no federal vote results available at the municipal level. The lowest level for which election results are available is the *canton* (Flanders has 103 cantons). Hence, the dependent variable is the vote share of the Vlaams Blok at the cantonal level in the federal elections of 1999. The empirical specification corresponds with an adapted version of the specification in the previous section:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Vote share Vlaams Blok} &= \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Income} + \beta_2 \text{Unemployment} \\ &+ \beta_3 \text{Immigrants} + \beta_4 \text{Crime} + \beta_5 \text{Associational life} \\ &+ \beta_6 \text{Population density} + \beta_7 \text{District magnitude} + \epsilon \end{aligned}$$

Due to lack of data at the cantonal level we cannot account for income inequality. Also, there are no crime

²⁰ To test for this, we estimated our model, leaving out the municipalities where the Vlaams Blok was present in the previous elections of 1994 (i.e. those municipalities where the causality might be reverse). We did not find an effect of the effective number of government parties anymore. The absence of an effect in this subsample suggests the hypothesis of reverse causality might be true.

data available prior to 2000. Therefore we use the 2000 crime data for the 1999 election. The number of socio-cultural associations per capita is from Lauwerysen and Colpaert (2004) who collected the data in 2001. Regarding the political control variables, we include the district magnitude. It should be noted, however, that the district magnitude is defined at a higher level than the canton (there are several cantons in an electoral district). For each canton we introduce the district magnitude of the district to which it belongs. As the federal government was the same for every canton, we do not include the fragmentation and ideological distance of the government in the model.

We estimate the regression by OLS. The Vlaams Blok is present in every canton, so estimation by Tobit is not in order (there are only non-zero observations). As in the previous section we transform the dependent variable ($v = \ln(V/(1 - V))$), with V the vote share of the Vlaams Blok). The results of our regressions are shown in Table 4. Since the Vlaams Blok participated in all cantons, these regressions regard the electoral results of the extreme right party. Hence, the results can be compared with the Tobit II outcome equation for the municipal level (Table 2). From this comparison, it is clear that the observations made at the municipal level broadly hold when analysing federal elections data. We again find a significant impact of the income, the number of socio-cultural associations, the proportion of Turkish and Maghrebian immigrants and population density on the party's electoral outcome. The coefficients also have the same sign as in the municipal regressions. We can thus conclude that the results of Section 4 appear to generalise to the federal level. The only difference is that here immigrants from other

countries (than Turkey or the Maghreb) appear to have a significantly negative effect on the vote for the Vlaams Blok.

6. Conclusion

Since it entered the Flemish (and Belgian) political arena, the extreme right-wing Vlaams Blok has been highly successful. Its first successes in the city and the province of Antwerp have been followed by electoral progress in the rest of Flanders. Led by theories in the field of extreme right-wing voting which focus respectively on the economic conditions, the presence of immigrants, the crime rate and the level of social capital, we analyse the electoral success of the Vlaams Blok using data on the 2000 municipal elections. An analysis at the local level of government allows us to empirically assess the contextual determinants of actual election results (as opposed to vote intentions) and still have a sizeable amount of observations. Analysing the Flemish case has the advantage that all municipal elections are held on the same date and that — as a consequence of the *cordon sanitaire* — the Vlaams Blok is a 'systematic' opposition party. This facilitates inter-municipal comparison. Yet, the Vlaams Blok did not participate in all municipalities. To account for this, we use a Tobit II estimator that distinguishes an outcome equation from a selection equation. The outcome equation investigates the relevance of the theories described in Section 3 and looks at the effect of economic conditions, immigrants, social capital and crime on the latent popularity of the Vlaams Blok. The selection equation analyses which variables explain the party's participation in the elections. Our study demonstrates the relevance of this method: some of the contextual variables explain the Vlaams Blok's participation in the elections, while others help in explaining the subsequent success at the polls.

As regards the economic determinants, we find that the Vlaams Blok is supported more heavily in more prosperous municipalities (higher income). Participation by the Vlaams Blok is also more likely in prosperous municipalities with a low level of unemployment and low income inequality. This is in line with the concept of *welfare chauvinism*, which states that people who benefit from favourable economic conditions defend their position and do not want to share their goods with people who are less well-off. As such, we confirm recent findings in the empirical literature which show that the electorate of extreme right

Table 4
OLS estimation of Vlaams Blok's vote share in federal elections 1999

	Vlaams Blok vote share
Intercept	−2.630*** (−6.43)
Per capita income	0.052* (1.84)
Unemployment rate	2.344 (1.35)
Foreign population	
Population from Maghreb and Turkey	7.096*** (2.99)
Population from other countries	−1.542* (−1.73)
Crime	0.804 (0.77)
Associational life	−111.149** (−2.22)
Population density	277.534** (2.47)
District magnitude	0.006 (0.79)
Number of observations	103
Adjusted R squared	0.518

Notes: t -values are in parentheses. The dependent variable is the transformed vote share: $\ln(V/(1 - V))$.

parties may not only be portrayed as *losers of modernity*. Our result also corresponds with the observation that Spain, with one of the highest unemployment rates, has little extreme right activity, whereas the recent success of the extreme right in Austria and Switzerland took place in countries with relatively low levels of unemployment (Eatwell, 2000). The finding that favourable economic conditions have a positive effect on the Vlaams Blok's support may also be explained by the concept of *issue salience*. As economic issues become less salient, issues such as immigration get more attention and this benefits the Vlaams Blok.

The presence of Turkish or Maghrebian citizens has a positive effect on the Vlaams Blok's popularity. We do not find an effect for the number of foreigners in general. This suggests that it is not so much the presence of foreigners, but rather the fear of the Islamic way of living that leads to extreme right voting.

With regard to contextual variables which have received only little attention in the extreme right studies, we find that the Vlaams Blok is more successful in municipalities with a low number of associations. Hence, we subscribe Putnam's (2000) focus on civic engagement for the socialization to and reproduction of democratic values. Yet, it has no effect on the probability of a Vlaams Blok list. The level of crime on the other hand, is significantly higher in municipalities where the Vlaams Blok participates in the elections, but it does not determine the party's electoral success.

Our results — which generalize to the federal level — demonstrate that considering contextual determinants is indispensable in any inquiry into the electoral success of extreme right-wing parties. Basing such empirical work on actual electoral outcomes at the municipal level has proven to be a productive research strategy, particularly since we have been able to include variables such as social capital and crime that have rarely been studied empirically. As such, our analysis sheds new light on the study of the success of extreme right parties, and clearly supports the inclusion of additional variables — such as income, crime and social capital — in research on extreme right parties.

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Appendix 1. Summary statistics for municipal data

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Vlaams Blok vote share	0.063	0.066	0	0.330
Per capita income	11.13	1.48	7.40	15.78
Unemployment rate	0.053	0.019	0.021	0.135
Income inequality	95.84	10.38	69.50	132.50
Population from Maghreb and Turkey	0.005	0.012	0	0.073
Population from other countries	0.031	0.045	0.003	0.360
Crime	0.061	0.033	0.018	0.264
Associational life	0.002	0.001	0.001	0.006
Population density	0.00051	0.00044	0.00005	0.0031
District magnitude	23.64	6.18	7	55
Effective number of parties in government	1.59	0.604	1	4.481
Maximum ideological distance government	1.13	1.27	0	3.50

Appendix 2. Data sources

Variable name	Definition	Source
Vlaams Blok vote share	Vote share Vlaams Blok	Electoral Database of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Jo Buelens)
Per capita income	Per capita income, in 1000 EUR	NIS/INS
Unemployment rate	Number of unemployed divided by labour force	Administratie Planning en Statistiek Vlaanderen (collected by Steunpunt WAV)
Income inequality	Interquartile range coefficient per capita income	NIS/INS
Population from Maghreb and Turkey	Share of population from Maghreb and Turkey	NIS/INS
Population from other countries	Share of population from other foreign countries than Maghreb and Turkey	NIS/INS

Appendix 2 (continued)

Variable name	Definition	Source
Crime	Number of crimes per capita	Federal Police, Directie van de Nationale Gegevensbank-Beleidsgegevens
Associational life	Number of socio-cultural associations per capita	Lauwerysen and Colpaert (2004)
Population density	Number of inhabitants per m ²	NIS/INS
District magnitude	Number of seats municipal council	Electoral Database of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Jo Buelens)
Effective number of parties in government	Inverse of the sum of the squared shares of cabinet posts of the coalition parties	Own calculations
Maximum ideological distance government	Difference ideological positions most left-wing and most right-wing coalition partner	Own calculations based on data from Deschouwer (1996)

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