



Is there such a thing as a Muslim vote?

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ABSTRACT

This contribution explores to what extent there is such a thing as a distinct Muslim vote in flexible proportional list systems. We test in a new and reliable way whether the religious belonging and behavioural dimension of Muslim voters play a role in their decision-making process when casting preferential votes in a secular democracy. To achieve this, voter and candidate characteristics are modelled simultaneously in cross-classified multilevel analyses where the decision-making process of voters (the demand side) is studied while taking into account the list composition in terms of individual candidates (the supply side). We use data of an exit poll related to the local elections of 2018 in Belgium, especially at oversampled locations. The analyses show that voters who belong to Muslim faith are more likely to vote for Muslim candidates. Contrary, the behavioural dimension of Muslim voters – measured in mosque attendance - has no effect on voting primarily for Muslim candidates.

1. Introduction

Decades of immigration have changed the ethnic and religious make up of Western democracies. However, this diversity is not always reflected in the political arena. Ethnic and religious minorities tend to be underrepresented in many elected bodies around the world (Dancygier, 2014; Bergh and Bjørklund, 2011; Togeby, 2008; Kymlicka, 1995). At the same time different scholars argue that a better descriptive representation can increase the sense of belonging of (Muslim) minorities to the political community and the acceptance by general public (Sinno, 2012; Phillips, 1995). It also leads to a better communication among different groups in contexts of mistrust (Mansbridge, 1999) and last but not least to a better substantive representation of minority interests (Dancygier, 2014; Just et al., 2014).

Electoral studies on descriptive representation of minorities in Western democracies mostly focus on ethnicity as a salient marker for identity instead of religion, but scholars tend to stress that ethnicity is intertwined with religion, particularly Islam (Just et al., 2014; Zibouh, 2013; Sinno, 2012; Fleischmann et al., 2011). Some evidence shows that the Muslim identity is more important than the ethnic identity, especially in societies where Islam is politicized and problematized (Fleischmann and Phalet, 2018; Cesari, 2014; Dancygier, 2014). Maliepaard and Verkuyten (2018:76) state that the majority of West-European Muslims consider themselves primarily a Muslim and only in secondary order a national of the host country. Furthermore,

scholars highlight that little is going to change in the nearby future: religiosity has been found to be a resilient factor across generations with some second generations embracing their religious identities even stronger than their foreign born parents (Just, 2017; Voas and Fleischmann, 2012). This contradicts with the secularization thesis that religion would play a marginal role in modern societies but leans more to Habermas' concept of a post-secular society – and Berger's desecularization thesis (Berger, 1999) - acknowledging the revival of religion in West-European context, especially Islam (Habermas, 2008; Esmer and Pettersson, 2007).

Despite the increasing impact of Muslim minorities on the electoral outcomes in Western Europe (Heath et al., 2015; Dancygier, 2014), little systematic research is available on the relevance of Muslims' religiosity on political behaviour (Cesari, 2014; Just et al., 2014). Those studies that do exist in the field of political participation and religion focus on the effects of religious belonging on party vote (Michon and Tillie, 2011) or the effects of religious behaviour on non-electoral participation (Jamal, 2005; Ayers and Hofstetter, 2008; Jalalzai, 2009; Oskooi and Dana, 2018). However studies combining the effects of belonging to Muslim faith and the behavioural dimensions (e.g. mosque attendance) on electoral choice are scarce, especially in a context of electoral list systems with extensive electoral choices. Notably, it remains unclear to what extent Muslims are more inclined to vote for Muslim candidates and especially whether this can be explained by a sense of shared religious belonging or by the intensity of their religious behaviour?

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Furthermore, a growing body of literature on voter-candidate similarities demonstrates the preference of voters for representatives who embody their demographic characteristics (Cutler, 2002; Popkin, 1991). They point out that women are more likely to vote for women (Erzeel and Caluwaerts, 2015; Plutzer and Zipp, 1996) and ethnic minorities are more likely to vote for candidates with an ethnic minority background (Teney et al., 2010; Togeby, 2008; Baretto, 2007; Michon and Tillie, 2011). As far as we know, only Heath et al. (2015) study whether Muslims vote for Muslim candidates, using cross-sectional survey data and candidate data focussing on Uttar Pradesh (India) where Muslims feel extremely discriminated and excluded. The study revealed that respondents who belong to Muslim faith vote primarily for Muslim candidates, but in most instances on the condition that these Muslim candidates have a realistic chance on winning. The authors focus only on religious belonging, whereas we also focus on the religious behavioural dimension. Could Muslim candidates - in a post 9/11 era - evoke similar effects in secular democracies where religious conflicts are less violent but where there is nevertheless a fierce debate on the demographic presence and growth of Muslim minorities in Europe (Fadil et al., 2015)?

In order to examine this, we look at the case of Belgium. The flexible-list proportional system of Belgium makes it a very suitable case for this kind of research (van Erkel, 2019; Renwick and Pilet, 2016). The context of the city of Antwerp with a large district magnitude and long candidate lists is even more interesting. Furthermore, due to a sizeable Muslim minority, almost all ballot lists contain Muslim candidates. Our main question therefore is: To what extent does the religiosity of Muslim voters explain their preferential voting behaviour?

Specifically, our contributions are threefold. First, we fill in the gap on studies on preferential voting more specific of underrepresented groups – notably Muslim minorities in Western industrialized societies. Do they prefer one of their own? Moreover, we distinguish the effects of religious belonging and the religious behaviour in terms of mosque attendance. Secondly, while most research addressing religious voting of minorities have dealt with single-member districts, this study focuses on a flexible list proportional system where voters can either vote for a party, or for one or more candidates within a party. Lastly, in line with van Erkel (2019) we model voter and candidate characteristics simultaneously, while other studies generally tend to focus either solely on voters or on candidates. Combining the two simultaneously enables an investigation of the decision-making process of underrepresented voters (the demand side) – in this case Muslim voters - while taking into account the list composition in terms of individual candidates (the supply side). This is crucial in order to control for the fact that Muslim candidates tend to be underrepresented and in general have less political experience and occupy a lower position on the ballot list (van Erkel, 2019).

The results of our analyses show that due to the belonging dimension, Muslims are more likely to vote for Muslim candidates. Contrary, the behaviour dimension of Muslim voters – *in casu* attending worship places - has no effect on voting primarily for Muslim candidates.

2. In search for co-religious candidates?

Ample research has noted that religion was one of the primarily sociological determinants of political behaviour in the West (Putnam and Campbell, 2010; Verba et al., 1995; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). However, the declining saliency of the religious cleavage due to secularization and its diminishing impact on politics cannot be discarded although some exceptions to this predictable trend are present, notably in Muslim communities (Esmer and Pettersson, 2007). Several studies articulate the importance of religion for Muslim minorities in secular societies, also in the political sphere (Maliepaard and Verkuyten, 2018; Dancygier, 2014; Fleischmann et al., 2011; Phalet et al., 2010).

Generally, studies analysing the impact of religion on political behaviour focus on one - or a combination – of three distinct religious dimensions namely 1) identification with a particular religion

(belonging) 2) the importance in day-to-day life of religion (belief) and 3) the intensity of religious practice in terms of for instance attendance of worship places (behaviour) (Dana et al., 2017:173; Voas, 2009; Layman, 1997, 2001). Though the dimensions are related to each other, they constitute distinct aspects of religion. For example, it is possible to speak of non-practising members of a religious group (belonging without behaving) or differences in doctrinal orthodoxy (belonging with variation in believing) (Kotler-Berkowitz, 2001:524). These instruments originated from measuring Christian religiosity but are slowly translated into Islamic terminology (Voas, 2009; Layman, 2001). However some scholars argue that the believing dimension – pointing to the incorporation of religious principles in one's day to day life - is not associated with a Muslim's participation (Read, 2015; Cesari, 2013). Moreover, Islam has been referred to as an orthopraxis where the religious practice is emphasized instead of beliefs (Cesari, 2013).

Esmer and Pettersson (2007:9) argue that earlier studies of voting behaviour and religion fit into two broad categories. The first category compares the party choice of voters belonging to different religions and denominations, while the second category studies the impact of attendance of worship places on electoral behaviour. This study highlights both religious dimensions. Although the behaving and belonging dimensions are likely to correlate, they cannot be substituted for one another (Layman, 2001). We thus distinguish between two possible effects of Muslims' religiosity on casting preferential votes for Muslim candidates: namely the role of religious belonging and the role of mosque attendance (Oskooii and Dana, 2018; Jalalzai, 2009; Ayers and Hofstetter, 2008; Jamal, 2005). Does a candidate's religion matter to Muslim voters?

In general, the literature identifies two logic explanations why candidate characteristics - e.g. religion - are of importance for voters. First, the instrumental logic argues that demographic features provide a low information shortcut to estimating a candidate's policy preference (Cutler, 2002; Popkin, 1991). Voters rely on the social identity of politicians – e.g. age, ethnicity, gender or religion - to estimate the kind of policies they will pursue once elected to office (Heath et al., 2015; Popkin, 1991). In this sense voters expect candidates 'who are like them' to share similar experiences and ideas and therefore to be the best option to represent their interests (Erzeel and Caluwaerts, 2015).

Second, according to social identity theory - and the so-called expressive or symbolic logic - voters who identify themselves as members of a social group will behave accordingly by supporting lookalikes or in-group members (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Casting a vote for someone like you can in this sense be seen as a symbolic action to support the own group. So far, most research point out that sharing visible characteristics drives voters to express a candidate preference (Teigen et al., 2017; Dolan, 1998; Plutzer and Zipp, 1996; Sigelman and Sigelman, 1982).

2.1. The role of belonging

Political scientists point to the belonging dimension or the idea of a larger sense of common belonging and identity with those sharing your faith, since it may socialize individuals to certain political and partisan preferences (Kotler-Berkowitz, 2001:524). In this respect, earlier research mentions that those who identify with Muslim faith vote for leftist parties because of minority interests (Bergh and Bjørklund, 2011; Michon and Tillie, 2011). However, it remains unclear whether voters that identify with the Muslim faith will vote for Muslim candidates on the lists of these parties. An interesting study on candidate choice in India, a strongly ethnically divided democracy, presented evidence of Muslims voting for Muslim candidates, but in most instances when they had a chance of winning (Heath et al., 2015).

In addition, scholars demonstrate that perceived unfair treatment by Muslims due to religious background goes hand in hand with a higher awareness of their religious identity and thus belonging to a Muslim community (Oskooii, 2015; Fleischmann et al., 2011; Phalet et al.,

2010). Consequently, Muslims were more likely to politically mobilize on their Muslim identity (Fleischmann et al., 2011: 643). Hence, Muslim identification plays a pivotal role in explaining politicization and political action. This is in line with the belief in the Islamic concept of the *Ummah* – a community of believers showing a certain collectivity and sense of belonging - in particular during times of crisis (Maliepaard and Verkuyten, 2018). The idea that their fate is linked makes Muslims evaluate their situation more in communal terms.

2.2. The role of behaving

The behavioural dimension, more specific attending worship places, could reinforce socialized preferences since religious attendees are likely to receive political information and cues of co-religionists (see also Kotler-Berkowitz, 2001) and thus might shape their electoral choice. Furthermore, the feeling of Muslim belonging can be amplified due to the participation in religious activities such as attending mosque activities and services. Joint activities create a strong and visible boundary between the religious in-group and out-group. Previous studies show that citizens with an intense religious practice tend to be less accepting of religious out-groups than those who partake less in religious activities (Verkuyten, 2014; Kotler-Berkowitz, 2001).

Empirical studies of electoral and non-electoral participatory behaviour of Muslims focus primarily on the effect of the religious behaviour dimension on political participation. Muslims who participated weekly or more in religious activities of their mosque were more likely to report to have voted in the general elections (Moutselos, 2019; Oskooii and Dana, 2018). Moreover, one third of the Muslim respondents answered that the mosque encouraged them to vote (Oskooii and Dana, 2018). These findings make clear that mosque attendance in the US cannot be linked to withdrawal from the electoral process as some may suggest (Oskooii and Dana, 2018). Other research confirms the positive association between Muslims who actively engage with their religious identity and voting (Ocampo et al., 2018) but also points at a stronger belief in political integration in a secular political community among Muslims (Dana et al., 2017). The latter has been explained by referring to a comprehensive review of Islamic doctrines stating that Muslims have “to uphold the social contracts of non-Muslim societies, so long as they are free to practice their religion” (Dana et al., 2017:178).

Moreover, multiple studies provide proof that Muslims who attend worship places frequently are politically more active (e.g. protesting, rallying, contacting politicians) than those who do not frequently visit mosques (Dana et al., 2017; Oskooii, 2015; Jalalzai, 2009; Ayers and Hofstetter, 2008; Jamal, 2005). Scholars therefore conclude that for Muslims religious institutions function as a broader group socialization context exerting political and social influence. Interestingly, all these studies are conducted in the US, where religion is more imbedded in society (Cesari, 2014; Esmer and Pettersson, 2007). Less scholarly attention has been devoted to the impact of Islam as minority religion on electoral – in casu preferential - behaviour in West-European democracies.

Although a growing body of research finds evidence of religion fostering political participation among Muslims, the understanding of the mechanism supporting those effects remains limited. Moreover, research on the effect of the behavioural dimension of Muslims on preferential voting in West-European democracies is as far as we know non-existent. We therefore seek to examine – using Belgian exit poll data - whether Muslim voters prefer Muslim candidates in a flexible proportional electoral system, and to what extent both the belonging and the behavioural dimension of religiosity is associated with voting for co-religious candidates.

3. Hypotheses

As earlier depicted, Islam is a visible and politically much debated

source of identity playing an important role in shaping people’s political behaviour in Western Europe. Moreover, anti-Muslim sentiments have been prominent in Europe and are on the rise because of several terrorist attacks (e.g. Charlie Hebdo). Due to the polarized societal debates about religion in West-Europe, religious minority groups have stronger identity feelings, and this is also true for Muslims (Just et al., 2014; Cesari, 2014). Dancygier (2014) even states that the salience of Muslims’ religious identities has risen above that of other identities. Mobilization by minority groups is therefore to be expected to function as a cost-reducing strategy (Miller et al., 1981; Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Verba and Nie, 1972). In general, this means that we expect Muslims more likely - than the majority group - to cast a preference vote for a candidate of their own religious group rather than for the party.

Although André et al. (2012) establish that the least empowered citizens in terms of education and economic status – in casu Muslims - are also least likely to cast a preference vote, the group consciousness and stronger social identity of this group can compensate for the lack of political resources among members of ‘deprived’ groups (Miller et al., 1981; Verba and Nie, 1972). Moreover, voting for someone with the same characteristics is easier for visible minorities. We therefore set up our first hypothesis – focussing on demand side - stating that Muslims will be more prone to cast preference votes than non-Muslims. We will further explore to what extent their type of vote is distinguishable.

H1. Muslims will be more prone to cast preference votes than non-Muslims.

When explaining which candidates are electorally popular, data on the level of candidates are useful. Electoral studies have shown the impact of several elements among them gender, ballot list position, familiarity and incumbency in explaining candidates’ success (van Erkel and Thijssen, 2016; Put and Maddens, 2015). Available research mentions that the diversity of candidates on party lists in urban contexts increased in urban cities with a large ethno-religious electorate (Geese and Schacht, 2019; Togeby, 2008). Maybe the party selectorate increasingly field minority candidates on their lists because they expect some electoral gain, and to attract the votes of minority groups. Moreover, even some voters of the ethnic majority group may vote for these minority candidates in order to show their support (Heath et al., 2015; Zibouh, 2013; Teney et al., 2010). Consequently, we assume that the Muslim background of candidates will have a positive effect on the number of preference votes they receive.

H2. The Muslim background of a candidate will have a positive effect on (the number of) preference votes he/she receives.

However, even if Muslim minorities vote more preferential (demand side) and Muslim candidates generate more preferential votes (supply side), this does not prove (but merely suggest) the presence of a Muslim vote. More rigorous analysis is needed to explore to what extent religious belonging and behaviour explain preferential voting behaviour of Muslim minority groups while accounting for the supply side. For instance, minority candidates are almost never first positioned candidates, but ranked lower and therefore lacking political experience. All these features do impact the number of preference votes a candidate receives. When controlling for these factors, a more accurate analysis can be performed.

Based on the social identity theory, we expect voters to feel more solidarity and affection with candidates from their in-group than out-group and therefore be more inclined to vote for someone like them. Moreover, Muslims share a stronger religious identity and feeling of belonging strengthened by the barriers they face. We therefore expect them to support candidates of their own religious group more compared to non-Muslims (Teney et al., 2010; Miller et al., 1981). As far as we know, one systematic analysis focuses on the effect of candidates’ religion on candidate choice. Heath et al. (2015) provided evidence of co-religious voting in a large state where Muslims feel extremely discriminated. Moreover, Muslim voters in Uttar Pradesh (India) were

more prone to cast a vote for Muslim candidates than Hindus did for Hindu candidates. The latter group voters did not discriminate against Muslim candidates. We therefore hypothesize the following:

H3. Muslim/non-Muslim voters will cast a preference vote for candidates belonging to their respective Muslim/non-Muslim group.

H3a. The effect of Muslims voting for Muslim candidates will be stronger than the effect of non-Muslims voting for non-Muslim candidates.

While [Heath et al. \(2015\)](#) focused on the religious belonging dimension, we also test the effect of the religious behaviour dimension, more specific mosque attendance. Earlier research showed that mosque attendance is positively associated with non-electoral participation among Muslims e.g. protesting, donating money, contacting a politician and boycotting products ([Oskooii and Dana, 2018](#); [Dana et al., 2011](#); [Jalalzai, 2009](#); [Ayers and Hofstetter, 2008](#); [Jamal, 2005](#)).

In addition, several studies declare a positive association between regular mosque attendances and turning out to vote in established democracies, dispelling the myth that mosques are sites of civic alienation ([Moutselos, 2019](#); [Oskooii and Dana, 2018](#)). Lastly, the religious belonging dimension may be more salient for Muslims who attend religious and social services regularly making them more likely to vote based on it. Earlier research claimed that citizens who participate more in religious activities have the tendency to exclude religious out-groups ([Verkuyten, 2014](#); [Kotler-Berkowitz, 2001](#)). We therefore expect Muslims who spend more time in a mosque, to be more likely to support Muslim candidates.

H4. Muslim voters who attend mosques services and activities almost weekly or more will be more prone to vote for Muslim candidates than Muslims who attend mosques services and activities less.

4. The Antwerp case

Antwerp is one of the largest cities in Belgium – slightly more than a half million inhabitants - and also the most populous city proper in the entire country. The city has a very diverse population, with more than 174 nationalities residing in Antwerp, ranking second as the most multinational city in the world after Amsterdam. Data from 2018 ([Stad, 2018](#)) show that Antwerp is a majority-minority city: different ethnic minority groups¹ (50,1%) make up the majority of the local population (see [Appendix 1](#)). 1 out of 5 Antwerp inhabitants are estimated being Muslim; however *‘the exact number of people of Muslim culture or Islamic faith living in Belgium today is difficult to determine, as there is no official registration of the population’s ethnic and religious ties’* ([Fadil, 2014](#): 83). Nevertheless, it is clear that they are a non-negligible electoral minority group.

These ethno-religious minorities are generally characterized by a low social status: low levels of educational qualification, limited labour market participation and high degrees of poverty compared to the majority population. A study of the [Open Society Foundation \(2011\)](#) revealed that although minorities feel themselves belonging to the city of Antwerp, the experienced discrimination is seen as a barrier to full and equal participation for minority communities. Additionally, Antwerp is traditionally the stronghold of Vlaams Belang, one of the more successful far-right parties in Europe ([Thijssen and de Lange, 2005](#)). Moreover, the right nationalist party N-VA (also the largest party in Belgium) dominates the local council after decades of control by the Social Democratic party. In addition, the mayor of Antwerp is also the chairman of N-VA. Hence, because Antwerp has become the bulwark of right-wing parties it is a very interesting context to study preferential

¹ In this study, ethnic minorities are defined as Antwerp citizens whom at least one of the parents has a non-Belgian birth nationality (Stad in cijfers, 2018).

voting of Muslims.

Furthermore, the Belgian flexible-list PR multi-party system with a long list of candidates with various backgrounds allows voters to cast multiple preferential votes and therefore offers them an extremely broad freedom of choice ([van Erkel, 2019](#); [Andr e et al., 2012](#)). The presence of long lists – up to 55 candidates in the local elections of Antwerp – offers interesting analytical possibilities. It enables us to take into account a broad range of candidate characteristics that can function as a voting cue. In a low information context, candidate traits seem likely to play their most decisive role ([Banducci et al., 2008](#); [Cutler, 2002](#)). Political psychology theories point out that people evaluate candidates based on socio-demographic traits when information is lacking. Better informed voters will gather more information, and will adjust their evaluations beyond these traits contrary to less informed voters. Last but not least, the compulsory voting system in Belgium obliges citizens to vote; also ethno-religious minorities who may otherwise abstain from voting.

These particular elements (e.g. a sizeable Muslim electorate, the presence of radical right parties, a high rate of diversity in party lists and the flexible-list proportional system) make this a most likely case to find a Muslim vote.

5. Data

We work with data at the level of voters, candidates and more important with a combination of both data to explore whether religious belonging and the religious behaviour of Muslims affect voting for Muslim candidates. When defining which candidates are electorally popular, data on the level of candidates are useful. However these data do not unravel the decision-making process of voters. On the other hand, research based solely on the level of voters without accounting for other differences between candidates is also incomplete. Therefore we model voter and candidate characteristics together by looking at dyadic relationships (see [van Erkel, 2019](#)). Both data on voters and on candidates were gathered.

5.1. Demand side

Firstly we collected exit poll data at the 2018 local elections within an inter-university consortium, which provided us representative and more reliable data compared to standard post-electoral surveys. We randomly sampled polling stations where a systematic design was adopted: every fifth voter was asked to participate when leaving the polling station. To make sure we gathered enough respondents belonging to ethno-religious minority groups, we oversampled in 6 out of 14 polling stations by deploying more interviewers in order to get more Muslim respondents. The intensively trained pollsters were equipped with tablets to accurately register preference votes using a mock ballot form. Lastly, we invested in diversity among pollsters to encounter possible language barriers and obtain a higher response rate among minority groups. A total of 34 pollsters were stationed in 14 Antwerp polling stations.

Together with a face-to-face survey (consisting of questions on socio-demographic traits, voting behaviour, political efficacy and interest) a mock ballot was presented as a tool to record the multiple preferential voting behaviour in a reliable way. The mock ballot perfectly resembled the design of lists and candidates as seen on their computer screen in the polling booth. We asked voters about their nationality as well as both their parents’ nationality. We coded 0 for respondents with a West-European background, all others were coded 1. The religious belonging² (or lack of) is coded 1 if respondents are Muslim, those belonging to all other religions and denominations were coded as non-Muslims = 0. To measure religious behaviour we questioned

² Would you consider yourself as belonging to any specific religion or philosophical denomination? If yes, which one?.

respondents whether they participate in religious and social activities at worship places on a scale of 0 (never) to 6 (once a week or more).³

We ended up with a response rate of 51% in Antwerp city resulting in 972 respondents. Our sample contains 49% female and 51% male voters. Approximately 70% of the Antwerp voters casted one or more preferential votes, with the majority of respondents voting for 1 or 2 candidates (86%). 29% define themselves as Muslims when asked about their religious identification, whereas 71% are non-Muslims. The share of Muslims in Antwerp is estimated at 20% in 2016, however since we oversampled in voting districts with more inhabitants with a Muslim background, it is understandable that our proportion of Muslims is higher. We furthermore asked about their religious practice by questioning the frequency of attending worship places. 46% of the Muslims stated that they attend religious services and activities a couple times a month to every week or more compared to 15% of the non-Muslims.

5.2. Supply side

Data on candidate characteristics were gathered using official documents: official electoral lists were used containing the candidate's political party and ballot list position. In Antwerp, 12 political parties – with a total of 485 candidates - submitted candidate lists for the 2018 local elections. To retrieve information about incumbency, the formal website of the city council was used next to the website tracking all political mandates in Belgium (<http://www.cumuleo.be>). Gender and ethnic minority background has been defined by name recognition and background checks thereof via personal websites of candidates, news articles, their political party and their social media (Dancygier, 2014; Erzeel and Caluwaerts, 2015).

In order to identify Muslim candidates, we developed a three-step approach due to the lack of official statistics taking ethnicity or religious belonging into consideration. First, we used an onomastic procedure – using name recognition - to define Muslim minorities (Heath et al., 2015). However a name alone does not necessarily indicates religious belonging, especially since Antwerp Muslims are mainly but not exclusively of Maghrebian or Turkish descent. Identification can also be based on the self-definition of candidates as being of Muslim culture (Zibouh, 2013). Therefore, background checks of the belonging dimension of candidates were made via websites of candidates, news articles, their political party and their social media. If candidates referred to themselves as Muslims, we confirmed their Muslim belonging. Lastly, where possible we used peer assessment of fellow political candidates: we asked candidates of several political parties if we identified their colleagues rightfully as belonging to Muslim faith or not. We acknowledge that defining the religious belonging of candidates has its limitations, however when religious diversity and Islam is so politicized as during the Antwerp local elections of 2018 information about political candidates can be collected by researchers via various (but time consuming) ways.

Our supply side file contains 485 candidates: half of our candidates are women due to the gender quota, 30% has an ethnic minority background, 98 candidates or 20% are Muslim mostly presented by leftist parties (the radical left, the Greens and the social democrats)⁴ and smaller new migrant parties such as D-SA and Be. One⁵ (see Appendix 2).

³ Except for family or social gatherings like weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services or other activities in a church, mosque, synagogue, ...?

⁴ Percentage of Muslim candidates within traditional parties at the 2018 elections in Antwerp city: 26% of the radical left party, 24% of the Green party, 20% of the Social Democrats, 19% of the Christen Democrats, 10% of the Liberal party, 6% of the nationalist party, 0% of the radical right party.

⁵ Percentage of Muslim candidates within new (migrant) local parties at the 2018 elections in Antwerp city: 82% of D-SA, 80% of Be.one, 11% of Burgerlijst, 7% of Paars, 0% of BDW.

24% of the Muslim candidates had already some political experience in local councils, compared to 76% of the non-Muslims.

5.3. Combined data

Obviously, both approaches (supply and demand) have distinct limitations. Therefore, in order to really test whether religious belonging and behaviour play a role in the decision-making process of Muslim voters, we need to combine both approaches. Combining supply and demand data allows us to test whether religiosity explains voting for Muslim candidates, while at the same time one can control for candidate characteristics, such as the political experience and the position on the ballot list. This is important because Muslim candidates often occupy lower positions on party lists, and in general have less political experience. For instance, none of the political parties in the Antwerp elections had a Muslim candidate positioned first while being the first candidate generates preference votes. An analysis that combines both approaches to some extent is less vulnerable for those measurement issues and enables to tease out the effect of religious voting from other logics such as voting for the first candidate on the list or political experienced candidates. We will therefore integrate supply data in a demand analysis (van Erkel, 2019).

Both datasets are combined by linking every voter to all political candidates within his/her preferred party. So each voter is in a way split up in as much dyadic pairs as there are candidates on the party list. In our analysis of the Antwerp local election of 2018, focussing only on voters who casted a preferential vote, this resulted in a stacked dataset matrix of 32357 dyadic pairs (lowest level of analysis defining the lines in our data matrix) nested in 485 Antwerp candidates and 608 Antwerp voters. Our dependent variable, a specific dyad, is coded 1 when a voter casted a preferential vote for the corresponding candidate and 0 when a voter did not vote for the corresponding candidate. Our main independent variable is religious congruence. When voter and candidate characteristics are similar (both Muslim or both non-Muslim) we coded this variable 1, otherwise 0. We control for supply side features, but also ethnic congruence – a variable that indicates whether voter and candidate share an ethnic minority background or not - in our model since religion and ethnicity are intertwined. We also run interactions with religious practice; a dummy where Muslims who attend mosques 'never to one time a month' score 0 and those who attend almost weekly to more score 1. To explain our dichotomous dependent variable we use a cross-classified multilevel logistic model as our voter-candidate combinations are simultaneously nested in voters and in candidates. Table 1 gives an example of the data matrix.

6. Findings

6.1. Demand side

With data on the voter level, we can explore to what extent under-represented groups – more specific Muslims – use a (certain kind of) preferential vote more often. In a first stage we use a dichotomous dependent variable: respondents that voted for a list – coded as 0 – and voters who casted one or more preferential votes – coded as 1. A comparison between Muslims (74,8%) and non-Muslims (65%) shows that Muslims make more use of preferential voting than non-Muslims ($N = 828$, $p = 0,007$, Cramer's $V = 0,094$). Therefore hypothesis 1 can be confirmed: Muslims tend to vote more for individual candidates instead of a party compared to non-Muslims.

In a second stage we use a polytomous dependent variable that goes more detailed into the specific type of preferential vote. van Erkel and Thijssen (2016) pointed out that ballot list position largely explains the success of candidates, notably candidates first positioned on the list (the so-called list pullers) obtain by far the most preference votes. We therefore create a new variable 'type of preference vote' with three categories namely: vote for list puller only = 1, vote for list puller and

Table 1
Example of data matrix.

Voter	Candidate	Preference vote (yes = 1, no = 0)	Number of preference votes	Muslim voter (yes = 1, no = 0)	Muslim candidate (yes = 1, no = 0)	Religion Congruence (yes = 1, no = 0)	Ethnic minority voter (yes = 1, no = 0)	Ethnic minority candidate (yes = 1, no = 0)	EthnicCongruence (yes = 1, no = 0)	First candidate (yes = 1, no = 0)
1	1	1	2	1	0	0	1	1	0	1
1	2	0	2	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
1	3	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
1	4	0	2	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
...								
2	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
2	2	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
2	3	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
...										

other candidates = 2, vote for other candidates only = 3. We control for gender, education, age and interest in local politics (commune interest). Because minority group members might be inclined to vote exclusively for candidates such as them – minority candidates – and because generally these minority candidates are not list pullers we expect minority groups to vote disproportionately for other categories than the list puller only. Table 2 presents the results of the multinomial regression with reference category ‘vote for other candidates only’. The results show that non-Muslim voters vote significantly more for list pullers only, and for list puller and other candidates compared to Muslims. We can therefore confirm our expectation that when Muslims cast preference votes this is more often exclusively for other candidates only instead of the list puller only compared to non-Muslims.

This result hints strongly at the existence of a so-called Muslim vote.

6.2. Supply side

Supply side data can tell us which characteristics of candidates contribute to obtaining more preferential votes. Obviously when you want to evaluate a large number of characteristics you need a large number of candidates. Luckily, in a proportional electoral system with a large number of parties and long lists such as in Belgium (more specific the urban context of Antwerp) this condition is fulfilled. We can therefore easily evaluate whether certain characteristics –such as Muslim background– have a positive effect on the number of preferential votes they received.

We will therefore verify if the Muslim background is indeed a salient identity marker in the sense that they generate more preferential votes controlling for other independent variables such as gender, ethnic background, incumbency, political parties, ballot list position, first and last candidates. Earlier literature has found that these variables are important explanations for a candidates’ success (van Erkel and Thijsen, 2016; Put and Maddens, 2015). Ethnic minority candidates are candidates with at least one of the parents born outside West-Europe; incumbency has been defined as candidates who had a political mandate within the previous local (district) councils. Since the threshold of participating during local elections is rather low, we also add a variable defining the traditional parties who generally have a campaign budget and are more familiar to voters compared to the smaller and new local parties. Our dependent variable is the total number of preferential votes a candidate received at the local elections of 2018. Because of the highly skewed DV, a logarithmic transformation is performed.

Table 3 shows the results of the linear regression. When focussing only on socio-demographic characteristics (Model 1), none of them have a significant effect. When controlling for ballot list position, incumbency and traditional party in Model 2, we see a significant effect for the Muslim variable indicating that, ceteris paribus, Muslim candidates receive more preferential votes than non-Muslim candidates. Even when we control for parties in Model 3, this effect stays intact. This finding could suggest that Muslims indeed vote for Muslim candidates. However

Table 2
Demand side: Multinomial regression with ‘type preferential vote’ as dependent variable, reference category ‘only other candidates’ (N = 972).

TYPE PV		B	S.E.	EXP (B)
List puller only	Constant	-0,869	0,754	
	Commune interest	0,140	0,052	1,014
	Reference category female voter			
	Male voter	-0,154	0,282	0,857
	Reference category high education			
	Low education	0,143	0,436	1,154
	Middle education	0,761	0,331	2,140
	Reference category 65+			
	Age = 18-34	-0,021	0,537	0,980
	Age = 35-44	-0,479*	0,588	0,619
	Age = 45-54	-0,252	0,595	0,778
	Age = 55-64	0,374	0,638	1,454
	Reference category ethnic minority			
	Ethnic majority	0,395	0,408	1,484
	List puller and other candidates	Reference category Muslim		
Non-Muslim		0,963*	0,454	2,619
Constant		-3,484**	1,148	
Commune interest		0,214**	0,083	1,239
Reference category female voter				
Male voter		0,388	0,390	1,474
Reference category high education				
Low education		-0,074	0,577	0,929
Middle education		-0,004	0,463	0,996
Reference category 65+				
Age = 18-34		-0,406	0,646	0,666
Age = 35-44		-0,816	0,704	0,442
Age = 45-54		-0,927	0,750	0,396
Age = 55-64		-0,438	0,783	0,645
Reference category ethnic minority				
Ethnic majority	0,437	0,588	1,548	
Reference category Muslim				
Non-Muslim	1,552*	0,793	4,719	

Significance level + p < 0.10/*p < 0,05/**p < 0,01/**p < 0,001. Reference category DV: only other candidates (Nagelkerke R² = 0,170, Cox and Snell R² = 0,147).

earlier research found evidence of symbolic voting: a group of ethno-religious majority voters who cast a ‘symbolic vote’ for a Muslim candidate to ensure diversity in elected bodies. A more fine-grained analysis is therefore needed to examine the preferential voting of Muslims by combining voter and candidate data. This allows us to test the link between candidate religion and voting behaviour systematically by

Table 3

Supply side: Linear regression with logged total number of preferential votes as dependent variable (N = 485).

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Constant	2,64***	(0,04)	1,88***	(0,04)	1,81***	(0,04)
Female candidate	0,01	(0,05)	0,02	(0,03)	0,02	(0,02)
Ethnic minority	-0,06	(0,08)	0,01	(0,04)	-0,03	(0,03)
Muslim	0,11	(0,09)	0,24***	(0,05)	0,11***	(0,03)
First candidate			0,87***	(0,09)	0,87***	(0,05)
Last candidate			0,20***	(0,10)	0,35***	(0,06)
Ballot list position			-0,01***	(0,00)	-0,01***	(0,00)
Incumbency			0,50***	(0,05)	0,31***	(0,03)
Traditional party			0,93***	(0,04)	1,46***	(0,05)
R square	0,003		0,681		0,898	
Adjusted R square	0,003		0,676		0,894	

Significance level *p < 0,05/**p < 0,01/***p < 0,001. We controlled for political parties.

considering the alternatives on offer and the moderations of political and social factors.

6.3. Combined data

Table 4 shows the results of the cross-classified multilevel logistic regressions, combining voter and candidate data to explain whether a voter casts a preferential vote for that particular candidate or not. In our first model we add the effect of religious congruence (voting for co-religious candidate = 1, otherwise 0) as main independent variable. Additionally, we control for several supply side features, namely whether a candidate is positioned first or last on the ballot list (so-called list pullers and list pushers), ballot list position and whether the candidate already had political experience in a local council. At the voter side we control for the number of preference votes casted, to account for the fact that some voters casted more preferential votes than others. Lastly we control for ethnic congruence to research whether sharing the same religion has a stronger effect than sharing a minority background.⁶

The first model shows that there is a positive and significant main effect for religious congruence. This indicates that, as we expected, voters are more inclined to cast a preference vote for a candidate when this candidate belongs to the same religious minority/majority group, thereby confirming hypothesis 3. In short, model 1 supports the expectation that Muslim voters are more likely to cast preferential votes for Muslim candidates, and non-Muslim voters vote for non-Muslim candidates. Here we should also point to the effect of ethnicity. Unlike religious congruence, there is no significant effect for ethnic congruence. This suggests that it is not so much the fact that Muslim candidates share the same ethnicity with the candidate, but really the shared religious belonging that drives the vote of Muslims for Muslim candidates.⁷ This outcome is in line with earlier research stating that the religious identity prevails on ethnicity for Muslim minorities in secularized societies where Islam has been problematized.

If we look more detailed into this religious (belonging) congruence effect, we can test the expectation of hypothesis 3 b that this effect is

⁶ Although, we realize that teasing out the effect of religion from those of ethnicity is quite an undertaking that we do not fully grasp with only controlling for ethnic congruence in our statistical model.

⁷ This insignificant effect is not due to a potential high collinearity between religious and ethnic congruence, as we find no signs of multicollinearity (VIF < 5).

stronger for Muslim voters than non-Muslim voters. To do so, we add an interaction term between religious congruence and Muslim voters in Model 2. The significant positive interaction confirms our expectation and demonstrates that the effect of religious congruence is indeed stronger for Muslim voters than for non-Muslim voters. Actually, in the case of non-Muslims, there is no effect of religious congruence at all, as the main effect of religious congruence in model 2 is not significant. For Muslim voters we do find a positive effect of religious congruence ($-0.03 + .86 = 0.83$). To get a better insight in the magnitude of this effect, we calculated the predicted probabilities. To be precise, the chance that a Muslim voter casts a preference vote for a candidate increases with approximately 1% if the candidate is also Muslim - increasing from 0.5% to 1.40%. In sum, model 2 demonstrates that whereas Muslims are slightly more likely to vote for Muslim candidates, non-Muslims are not more likely to vote for non-Muslim candidates; controlling for other factors. So in general non-Muslims do not vote against Muslim candidates. This latter finding is in line with Heath et al. (2015) suggesting that non-Muslims do not discriminate against Muslim candidates and other research shedding light on the symbolic vote.

Lastly, a three-way interaction between religious congruence, being a Muslim voter and religious practice is added to the model, in order to examine whether Muslims who frequently attend religious and social activities at the mosque are more prone to vote for Muslim candidates. The results of model 3 (N = 16104)⁸ indicate that this is not the case, going against hypothesis 4. Whereas the main interaction between religious congruence and Muslim voters remains significant (as in model 2), the three-way interaction itself is not. This means that the effect of religious congruence is similar – namely significant and positive - for all Muslim voters, independent of their religious practice. Or to put it in other words, religious practice - measured in mosque attendance - does not make Muslims more prone to vote for co-religious candidates.⁹

7. Conclusion & discussion

This study explored to what extent Muslim voters vote more for Muslim candidates, than other voters and whether religious belonging and behaviour makes Muslims more likely to vote for co-religious candidates. The local elections in Antwerp – a diverse and urban context – is a very suitable case to evaluate such kind of voting because of a sizeable Muslim electorate, the presence of a successful far right party, a local government dominated by a rightist nationalist party and a PR flexible list system with a wide range of candidates.

Firstly, based on demand side data of an exit poll at the local elections of 2018 – we found evidence of the Muslim electorate casting more preferential votes than list votes compared to non-Muslims. Moreover, for Muslims we see a significant effect in voting for only other candidates compared to the list puller only and list puller and other candidates. Since Muslim candidates are (almost) never ranked first on the list, we can assume that Muslim voters who voted for a Muslim candidate were actively in search for them. Secondly, our supply side analysis points out that Muslim candidates obtain more preferential votes than non-Muslim candidates, when controlling for socio-demographics (gender, ethnic background) and political and social features such as ballot list position, incumbency and party affiliation.

Thirdly, the analyses combining demand and supply data support the claim of religious congruence, namely that the belonging dimension makes voters more prone to vote for co-religious candidates. Moreover, we learned that co-religious voting was significantly more present in the group of Muslims than in the group of non-Muslims. Interestingly, non-Muslims do not significantly vote more for non-Muslim candidates.

⁸ Only those who filled in their religious practice are included.

⁹ Since attendance of mosques is a gendered religious practice (Cesari, 2014), we performed the same analyses on only the male voters (not shown here). The results were non-significant.

Table 4

Combined data: Cross-classified multilevel logistic regression with DV 'casted a preferential vote' (yes = 1, 0 = no) (N = 32357).

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Constant	-4,50***	(0,25)	-4,22***	(0,28)	-4,37***	(0,42)
Religion congruence	0,37**	(0,12)	-0,03	(0,21)	0,03	(0,33)
Ethnic congruence	0,22	(0,11)	0,25*	(0,11)	0,13	(0,16)
Number of preferential votes casted	0,16***	(0,01)	0,16***	(0,01)	0,15***	(0,01)
Ballot list position	-0,04***	(0,00)	-0,04***	(0,00)	-0,04***	(0,01)
Incumbency	1,37***	(0,19)	1,30***	(0,19)	1,07***	(0,24)
List pusher	2,42***	(0,40)	2,28***	(0,40)	1,73**	(0,52)
List puller	3,91***	(0,33)	4,03***	(0,33)	4,20***	(0,38)
Muslim voter			-0,50*	(0,24)	-0,37	(0,36)
Muslim voter x Religion congruence			0,86*	(0,38)	1,08*	(0,48)
Religious practice					-0,59	(0,19)
Muslim voter x Religious practice					0,65	(0,83)
Religion congruence x Religious practice					0,56	(0,80)
Religious practice x Muslim voter x Religion congruence					-0,63	(0,87)
AIC	5782,25		5780,76		2645,88	
BIC	5949,95		5965,22		2845,74	
N	32357		32357		16104	

Significance level *p < 0,05/**p < 0,01/***p < 0,001. We controlled for political parties. VIF model <5.

These findings correspond with the study of Heath et al. (2015) in the intensively religious divided context of India.

More research could further clarify the intentions behind the Muslim vote: is it based on an instrumental logic, or a symbolic logic or both? Heath et al. (2015) found that Muslims do behave in a Downsian way, and claim that the symbolic logic does not explain the Indian Muslim vote. Our Belgian study argues that the symbolic logic – religious belonging – does explain the preferential voting for Muslim candidates, possibly due to the proportional electoral system where partisan ideology does not outflank individual candidate preferences. Heath et al. (2015) further established that the disadvantaged position of Muslims in India drives the Muslim vote. In this respect, research refers to the 'reactive religious identity' where Muslim citizens feel disadvantaged due to their Muslim identity, and thus more likely to politically mobilize on this excluded religious identity. The question remains whether proportional representation impacts this reactive religious identity voting. Will Muslims trust elected bodies more when descriptive representation is reached? In other words, does descriptive representation leads to the substantive representation of Muslims' interests and needs?

Finally regarding the behaviour dimension, we do not find evidence of a positive relationship between mosque attendance and voting for Muslim candidates although we hypothesized this could be the case based on electoral studies in the US and studies on non-electoral participation. However, we realize that our finding generates many additional questions. More qualitative research is needed to explore why the intensity of religious practice – in casu mosque attendance – does not lead to votes for Muslim candidates. How do Muslim voters who partake regularly in religious activities evaluate Muslim candidates compared to those who do not participate regularly? Our study was limited to the effects of belonging and behaviour dimension. We did not further explore the believing dimension because in Islam correct behaviour is emphasized (orthopraxis) while within Christianity beliefs and rituals (orthodoxy) are common. However, we encourage further research that puts this assumption to the test.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102164>.

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