



Does news content matter?

*The contribution of the news media in the making of the issues of the Vlaams Blok*¹

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In her book *A Virtuous Circle* (2000), Pippa Norris decidedly chooses the side of the media optimists. Based on impressive empirical evidence, she counters mainstream video-malaise theories, and substantiates convincingly that newspaper readers and TV-news viewers are *not* more civically disengaged. On the contrary, news consumers show *more* of the attitudinal and behavioural characteristics highly valued in a democracy. A whole range of indicators of political knowledge, trust and mobilization is positively associated with the use of news media. Norris's study could be criticized in two ways. First, there is more to be watched on television and to be read in newspapers than news alone. Most people watch television not for the news programmes but for entertainment, movies, soaps, etc. Even if most news as such could be a positive factor enhancing political interest and trust, all the other much more frequently viewed and read media outlets might be detrimental for democratic attitudes. In the end, the media record might not be so favourable.

Secondly, and this is the point we want to make in our paper, the *content* of the news cannot be dismissed so easily. It is quiet possible that, in general, news programmes or newspaper coverage stir the noblest political attitudes among their consumers, but that *some* news media poison public opinion and distort the political process. Norris goes into the content of the news, but in assessing its impact on civic attitudes, she scarcely differentiates news outlets. Which newspapers and TV stations are people confronted with and what is their editorial content? And are some news programmes, or features of news programmes, measurably feeding anti-political attitudes? In this exploratory article, we will attempt to show that the specific content of the news could be important

in determining whether news is a good or a bad thing for democracy. More specifically, we will attempt to assess whether the Flemish news media, through their news coverage of certain news topics, and their overexposure of specific issues, have contributed to the making of the Flemish right-wing party, the Vlaams Blok (VB). This party could hardly be called a good thing for Belgian democracy. Maybe some media boosted electoral support for the VB by championing the issues which the VB owns?

In Belgium, anti-politics is synonymous with the VB. This right-wing political party is an offspring of the Flemish nationalist movement and was founded in 1978 when a few hardline nationalists left the moderate and slightly leftist Flemish nationalist party, the Volksunie (Peoples Union).² The VB is only active in the northern, Dutch-speaking part of the country (60% of the Belgian population), but it dominates the political discourse in the French-speaking part as well. It is the outspoken enemy, the devil in party clothes, for all other Belgian parties. VB bashing is the most popular rhetoric for winning general applause in all Flemish and French-speaking seats, government and opposition, in parliament. The VB is accused of being racist, fascist and undemocratic, of not respecting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of being non-democratically organized with authoritarian leadership. Some of the biggest Belgian demonstrations in the 1990s were against the VB and the anti-racist movement is one of the most active new social movements in Belgium. The public television channel adopted a charter that encourages its journalists to be extremely critical towards the VB and to avoid excessive media coverage of the party (*De VRT en de democratische samenleving*). The governmental anti-racist organization (*Centrum voor Gelijkheid*



van Kansen en Racismebestrijding) is even suing the party, trying to get it condemned for racism, but until now without any success. The VB is the pariah of Belgian politics and is contained in a so-called *cordon sanitaire*. Unlike in other European countries with strong right-wing parties (e.g. Austria, Italy, Denmark ...), all other Flemish parties solemnly agreed not to cooperate with the VB under any circumstance and on any political level. That turns the VB into a fundamental opposition party that is not concerned with realizing its party programme. Therefore, there are no internal disputes about the ultimate goals of the party, and the party is largely focused on winning elections, not on getting office or on realizing its policy programme (Müller & Strøm, 1999). The current Belgian Prime Minister, Guy Verhofstadt, even stated that the success of his rainbow coalition – with green, liberal and socialist parties – could easily be measured by using the VB election outcome after this parliament (1999-2003).

Undoubtedly, the PM already regrets his bold statement, since the VB has gained support election after election. Especially in the 1990s the party grew to become the third party in Flanders, surpassing the traditional government party SP.A (Flemish socialist party) with 15.3% of the Flemish votes in 1999.³ The breakthrough came with the 1991 general election, later labelled “black Sunday”: the share of right-wing votes more than tripled from 3.0% (1987) to 10.3% (1991). Since 1981, the VB has increased electoral support with every general election, and this national upsurge is paralleled by its local election results. In the majority of Flanders, Antwerp, the VB even won 33% of all votes in 2000. In Antwerp, all other parties now have to participate in a monster coalition to keep the VB out of office. As such, a national election result of 15.3% seems not too dramatic, but the Belgian party system is perhaps the most fragmented⁴ and competitive in Western Europe (Lane & Ersson, 1991; Anckar, 2000). The largest party, the VLD (Flemish liberal party), only got 22.6% of the Flemish votes in 1999 and at least four parties have to join forces to come to a workable

majority in the Flemish regional parliament.⁵ This high degree of fragmentation means that the VB, with barely a seventh of all votes, can really weigh on Belgian politics. It overshadows most policy debates. The fear of further growth for the VB sometimes paralyzes decision-making (e.g. regarding the right to vote for non-EU citizens) and parties constantly accuse one another of boosting VB support with certain political initiatives or rhetoric.

The spectacular rise of the VB in Belgium has inspired many political scientists to investigate the causes. Especially the voters’ side of the VB mystery has received much scholarly attention. Some argue that we are witnessing the birth of a new cleavage, with left-libertarian and right-authoritarian politics thriving, pushing aside the traditional socio-economic (left vs. right), religious (Catholics vs. liberal humanists) and linguistic (Flemish vs. French-speaking) cleavages (Swyngedouw, 1992; Elchardus, 1994; Billiet & Swyngedouw, 1995; Elchardus & Pelleriaux, 1998). General political attitudes of ethnocentrism, materialism or post-materialism, instrumental individualism, political powerlessness, political distrust and lack of social trust seem to generate VB votes, according to these researchers. Voter dealignment with high party turnover and low party loyalty goes hand in hand with this broad and deep attitudinal shift. Other scholars, still focusing on the demand side, point to the policy issues the VB “owns” (Maddens, 1994, 1998; Billiet & De Witte, 1995; Swyngedouw, 2001). Basically, like in other places where right-wing parties flourish, the discussion focuses on whether the VB voters actually voted *for* something (a party, a candidate, a programme, an issue, etc.) or only *against* something (the other parties, the system, the establishment, etc.) (Billiet & De Witte, 1995). Very little research has been devoted to the supply side of the VB puzzle. The VB is a professionally led party, with lots of money, an unusually clear political position, strong and verbally skilled politicians, almost without internal disputes and, above all, a smart, omnipresent and pronounced populist communications strategy, perfectly suited to push all the anti-political buttons.



Since its breakthrough in 1991, the role of the mass media in the success of the VB, has been at the heart of the animated societal and political debate (Billiet, Swyngedouw, Carton, 1993). Belgian politicians and other political actors have blamed the media for giving the floor to VB politicians and for overstressing the themes of the VB. They claim that their negative and cynical reporting is feeding anti-political feelings in the public at large. Strangely enough, no systematic research has been undertaken so far. Scholars mostly kept silent regarding the mass media and restricted themselves to safer and surer voter surveys and avoided the slippery causality associated with media studies. Especially the news media are regularly under fire and that is one of the reasons why we will confine ourselves to the news media, although it is possible that fiction and shows as well could produce a breeding ground for right-wing votes. Theoretically, the news media could contribute to the rise of the right in different ways. News media could be related to a party's success in three ways: (1) the party or its politicians get lots of (positive) coverage; (2) the issues of the party are overexposed; (3) the framing of the news (in general) favours the party. Through party attention, issue coverage and frames use, news media might influence the public at large and boost, or obstruct, party success. The first of these research tracks has been dealt with before (De Swert, 2002), so I leave it aside here. The third track is much more difficult to assess, and at the moment we lack good data to say anything sensible about the supposed negative bias of Belgian political news coverage. In this paper, therefore, we will focus on the second possibility: media attention to typical VB issues has increased over the years and this may have contributed to the success of the party. In the context of a larger agenda-setting project, we now have at our disposal a vast media dataset covering the whole 1991-2000 period. This database allows us to test our issue-making hypothesis empirically.

The basic quest of this paper is simple and straightforward: does the media contribute to the

success of the VB by stressing the typical VB issues? To tackle this question, we proceed in four parts. In the first part, we further elaborate the theories underlying the "media-makes-the-issues" hypothesis. Combining the agenda-setting theory of media and public with the issue-ownership thesis of voting behaviour, we try to make a case that media attention to issues might influence voting behaviour. Subsequently, the issues the VB can claim ownership of are determined using two empirical sources. The party manifestos of the VB and the motives to vote for the VB are scrutinized for the 1991-2000 period, searching for typical, and if possible exclusive, VB themes. Next, longitudinal content analysis of television news and newspapers is conducted, to check whether these characteristic VB issues are frequently, and increasingly, covered in the written and audiovisual press from 1991 to 2000. Finally, merging these time-series with the electoral growth of the VB will permit us to establish, with the necessary prudence, whether or not there is any relationship at all between news content, party issues and electoral success.

Agenda-setting and Issue-Ownership theory

I. The classical agenda-setting theory claims that the amount of media attention to an issue influences the perception of that issue in public opinion (see among many others Cohen, 1963; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Mere quantitative media attention to an issue, produces issue concern in public opinion. The news drives the public's issue priorities. Although this theory has been widely criticized and discussed, it remains one of the most important and most intensively investigated hypotheses about the relationship between media and politics.

Agenda-setting theory has mainly been criticized on methodological grounds, at the heart of which lies the eternal causality riddle: does the media influence the public, or the public the media, or both? And how can we determine this? Correlation is no proof of causation. Our claim



about the media and the issues of the VB is vulnerable to the same criticism. Only careful analysis and cautious conclusions can anticipate this pertinent criticism. One of the central discussions is the time-lag problem. Our claim is that the long-standing media attention to VB issues might have contributed to the electoral success of the VB. Agenda-setting theory, however, first and foremost regards *short-term* media effects. Of course, the idea that the steady and cumulative repetition of issues drives the public's issue concerns is at the heart of the classic theory and implies a somewhat longer time perspective and not an immediate public response (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Yet, most studies within the agenda-setting perspective focus rather on short-term influences with issues becoming top priorities in no time and dropping back to a normal level only shortly afterwards. Downs' (1972) issue-agenda cycle is a textbook example in that respect. For the public agenda and the media agenda are zero-sum games: an issue can only gain importance by pushing aside other issues and new issues are always fighting their way up (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). Surveys, then again, show that the public's concern isn't that capricious at all, but that the same issues can hang on for a long time among people's policy priorities. This issue stability can probably be explained by the repetitive, "normal" media attention to these main issues. Our data permit us to focus especially on these long-term effects, beyond peak agenda-setting caused by temporary media hypes. In that respect, this study could also be situated within the cultivation theory of Gerbner who investigates long-term and diffuse effects of media exposure (Gerbner, 1980). But as the agenda-setting approach is centred on specific issues, it promises to be more useful to link media outlets with voting behaviour than the far too general cultivation theory.

II. Agenda-setting theory – the media make issues – is to be combined with the issue ownership theory to generate any voting effects. Issue ownership signifies that some parties are considered by the voters at large as best placed to deal

with a certain policy question (Petrocik, 1990; 1996; Narud & Valen, 2001). Parties are credible and reliable on certain issues, they are considered as sincere and expert on these issues, and not on other issues. Research has shown that voters simply do not notice the viewpoints of parties on issues they do not own. Some issue ownerships are only short-term: voters evaluate the performance of the incumbent party on that specific policy domain and conditionally entrust the party with the issue. Yet most of the issue ownerships seem to be very stable and long-term (Petrocik, 1996; Masket, 2000). Consequently, it is difficult for parties to claim a new issue as their own, especially when another party first took up the issue, or to get rid of an issue (Maddens, 1994). As more voters' votes are determined by issues, instead of party loyalty or deep ideological affiliations, issue ownership is a strong weapon on the electoral market (Dalton et al., 1984; Carmines, 1991). Budge & Farlie (1983) showed empirically that parties win elections when their issues are high on the public's agenda.

The problem for parties is that voters only consider a handful of issues at the same time (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). As only more important issues really affect political behaviour and voting, issue saliency is crucial. Especially the issues that people judge as important are limited in number and ephemeral. People's viewpoints on policy themes may remain relatively stable over time, but their perception of the importance of these themes is changing all the time (Page & Shapiro, 1992). This makes public agenda setting – drawing the public's attention to some issues and neglecting others – a decisive process for the political behaviour of citizens, in particular for casting their vote. On the other hand, not all voters are issue jumpers: there are smaller, specific-issue publics of voters who are permanently concerned with certain issues and who never lose sight of their issue. Some authors make a distinction between more and less sophisticated voters (Lane, 1962). More sophisticated voters are able to keep an eye on more issues at the same time, they contextualize issues in a



multi-dimensional issue space. Less sophisticated voters, on the contrary, only bother about a few issues and do not relate these issues mutually, they hold a fragmented view of politics (Maddens & Hajnal, 2001). Sophisticated voters also consider more difficult issues – more technical, temporary and less symbolic – than non-sophisticated voters (Carmines & Stimson, 1980).

Voter sophistication is associated, among other things, with education. The Belgian election surveys show that VB voters are the least schooled of all electorates (Billiet et al., 2001). That leads us to the tentative hypothesis that VB voters are probably less sophisticated and only take into account a few and relatively easy issues at the same time and that they are thereby especially sensitive to agenda-setting by the media. This hypothesis is further underpinned by Merrill & Grofman's (1997) contention that the issue saliency (and thus issue ownership) model applies best to challenging, and thus not to incumbent, parties. Since the VB is fundamentally an opposition party, the electoral results of this party are probably more determined by issue voting and agenda setting than the electoral scores of the other Flemish parties.

III. As a result of the agenda setting by the media and issue ownership of political parties, partisan election campaigns are designed to get the party's issue into the voters' heads and onto the public's agenda. Scholars invented the concept of "priming" exactly to refer to the fact that media coverage for some issues leads voters to take those issues into account in their voting decision (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Ansolabehere et al., 1991). Consequently, lots of scholarly attention has been devoted to the agenda-setting battle during campaigns (e.g. Norris, 1997; Norris et al., 1999; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 1995; Dalton et al., 1998). We believe there are grounds for taking not only election times into consideration when discussing agenda setting and party success.

In most studies on agenda setting and electoral success, the mediated issues are in fact recorded for only a shorter period from six weeks up to,

very exceptionally, one year before election day (e.g. Narud & Valen, 2001; Norris et al., 1999; Norris, 1997; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 1995; Dalton et al., 1998). Our study rests on a truly longitudinal design, covering a ten-year period, including media coverage during election *and* non-election times. The classic studies try to examine short-term media effects during the campaign, while our dataset permits us to look for long-term and accumulated effects. The distinction between day-to-day and cumulative news effects resulting from a prolonged exposure on the one hand, and campaign-specific, short-term news effects on the other hand, seems to us to be crucial. Election campaigns are unusually politicized times. Political parties, candidates and media go into overdrive and arouse the political attention of the voters. At the height of the campaign, it is almost impossible to avoid political messages. The campaigns activate and stimulate voters' political attitudes, but it is likely that those opinions on issues at least partially originated long before, that is in non-election times. Repeated and steady exposure to news content could have a diffuse influence on attitudes and opinions, like a slow socialization process (Norris et al., 1999). In fact, we could even tentatively hypothesize that the typical campaign dynamic arouses political interest, but at the same time closes people off from new issues. As they are politically activated, people make up their mind and turn to a (their) party, like the partisan reinforcement studies stated (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). But this implies that they are less open for new issues popping up during the campaign. Moreover, at election times, parties and candidates are continually monitoring the media, suspiciously in search of an unfair bias. Furthermore, parties and candidates are in charge during elections, or at least try to stay in charge, and they structure the media environment by controlling information. Consequently, the agenda-setting function of the media might even be *less* pronounced during elections than at non-election times.

Indeed, in the final weeks of the 1997 British campaign Norris et al. (1999) found no evidence at



all for short-term issue effects from the media onto the public. The British media failed completely in setting the public's agenda during the campaign. Dalton et al. (1998), confronted with similar results for the US 1992 presidential elections, speculate on the limited agenda-setting capacities of the media in election times, compared to more unrestricted agenda setting by the media in a normal political context. Masket (2000) offers us some more support for these potential longer-term effects, when he established that the perception of party's issue ownership by non-partisan voters was merely activated during the campaign. Even before the campaign, non-partisans had a clear picture of which parties owned which issues, the campaign only polarized these issue-ownership perceptions. Masket (2000: 19) states: "Campaign activity seemed to have the effect of reinforcing issue ownership in the minds of non-partisans". That points towards a kind of latent issue ownership beyond election times, for which media coverage during the campaign cannot be held responsible. Another question is, of course, whether issue attention in the media sticks to the voters for a longer time. Are voters' decisions influenced by issues that received lots of media exposure long before the elections? The issue-ownership theory seems to suggest a negative answer, since issues are by definition ephemeral, constantly moving in and out of the heads of voters. It is possible though, that the more stable issue publics, people who are attentive to an issue over a longer period independent of particular events, are partly made up by the longstanding media attention to their issues in the past.

Issue ownership by the VB: party manifestos and voter motives

I. To determine which issues the VB owns, we firstly undertook a classic party manifesto analysis inspired by the seminal work of Budge, Robertson and Hearl (1987), who also engaged in a programmatic analysis to determine the parties' issue ownerships. All sentences, and semi-sentences, in the three party programmes of the VB (1991, 1995 and 1999) were assigned to certain issues, using the same codes as for the media content analysis (see further). In Table 1 we display the results of this analysis for the VB's election programmes issued during the 1990s. Four issues come to the fore: the issue of Flemish nationalism (Flemish independence), the theme of immigrants, straightforward anti-political issues and the question of criminality and crime policy.

Overall, the four selected issues cover a large part of the VB's programmes. These are all issues the party stresses in its election manifestos. A quick scan of the other themes featured in the 1999 VB programme shows that only a very broad category such as EU politics received a comparable portion of the total manifesto (8.0%). The next largest issue covered is emancipation policy (4.3%), followed by the environment, social security and international relations (each 3.1%). Classic political themes like unemployment generally only receive a negligible amount of attention in the VB's programme (in this particular case 1.2%). The four issues listed go to the heart of VB issue profiling during the 1990s. They are *the* chief issues of the VB's political identity. At the moment,

Table 1: Issues in the VB's party manifestos 1991-1999 (in %)⁶

	1991 (N = 126)	1995 (N = 1425)	1999 (N = 270)	Average 1991-1999
Flemish nationalism	13.0	6.4	12.4	10.6
Immigration	15.6	5.3	8.0	9.6
Anti-politics	3.3	4.1	4.9	4.1
Crime/crime policy	10.5	11.0	16.1	12.5
TOTAL	42.4	26.8	41.4	36.8



we do not have similar analyses for the other Flemish parties' manifestos. That is why we cannot determine for certain whether the four issues listed are the *exclusive* property of the VB. But it is quite clear that they are at least co-owned by the VB.

In general, comparing the different elections, the VB determinedly positioned itself on these themes during the 1991 elections, then loosened its claim on them slightly in 1995, to repossess them firmly during 1999's general elections. These four issues, with the exception of criminality, all cover rather marginal policy domains. Yet they got a staggering 41.4% of the VB's manifesto attention in 1999.

Taking a closer look at the different issues, we discover interesting mutual differences. Anti-immigration may well be the most distinctive issue of all the new right-wing parties in Western Europe (for an overview see: Billiet & De Witte, 1995), but in Flanders the topic has gradually lost its pivotal role in the VB's programme to become one of the least stressed issues of the four in 1999. Maybe the VB's ownership of this theme is so firm and secure that the party can permit itself to emphasize it just a little less? Anti-politics made the opposite movement: it has gradually become somewhat more central in the VB's manifestos over the years. But anti-politics is not stressed all that much in the manifestos. That is not surprising, since after all anti-politics is more a political diagnosis than it is a therapy and we expect election programmes to be chiefly devoted to therapy (policy proposals). Moreover, anti-politics is probably more a question of rhetoric and of framing than of issues, and our coding was only issue-based. That is why we anticipate much more anti-politics issues in the voters answers. The crime issue has won considerable ground over the years. By 1999, crime had taken over the central role that the immigrant issue played before. It is *the* VB theme now. Flemish nationalism followed a somewhat odd course with a little dip in 1995 but a firm record in 1991 and 1999. In short, immigration is down and crime (and anti-politics) is up. Overall, we mark a slight tendency to issue differentiation: the four issues received a bit more equally spread attention in

1999 than in 1995. The VB ceased to be a single-issue party almost exclusively centred on the immigration theme.

II. The problem with party manifesto analyses is that they do not tell us much about how the party really profiles itself. It is possible that parties have a balanced programme, touching many different policy themes and issues equally, but that they only focus on a few specific issues in their political activities in general (e.g. in parliament) or in their electoral communication in particular. Norris et al. (1999), for example, showed that for some parties there was a huge issue gap between the party manifestos and the party's electoral communication (press statements, party electoral broadcasts) during the campaign for the 1997 general elections in Britain.⁷ That is why it is important to take into consideration the voter's *perception* of a party's issues.

In most issue saliency studies, the public is asked the classic question of what they consider to be the most important political themes. Since this paper deals in particular with the votes for the VB and not with media-effects on the population as a whole, we use the motives, answers to open questions, that the VB voters put forward to argue their vote. It is a somewhat different approach to measure the same thing: what are the important issues that drive VB voters? The advantage of open questions is that respondents only utter really salient motives. So they usually give just one answer. Recollection effects due to the browsing of possible motives, typical for closed questions, are not in play. We are quite confident that we tapped an important dimension of VB voting with these open questions.⁸

Thanks to the regular ISPO-PIOP election surveys of 1991, 1995 and 1999 we were able to track the open question's issues of the VB voters. In Table 2 we brought together the most important voting motives of the VB electorate. Apart from these four issues, VB voters hardly refer to any issues at all. Not only issue motives but also more general motives like the personality of the candi-



dates, and the ideology or the image of the party were mentioned (not listed in the table). The table not only shows the percentage of the VB electorate that referred to a certain issue, but it contains the percentage of the party's electorate that mentions these same issues second most. That helps us to determine which issues are typical for the VB, and which issues are its *exclusive* property.

Historically, the VB originated out of an internal dispute within the Flemish nationalist party, the VU. The founders of the VB wanted to go further, and promoted straightforward Flemish separatism. Yet, in the eyes of the voters the VB is not the owner of Flemish nationalism. Although a significant portion of its voters are driven by nationalism, the VU largely outweighs the VB. Over the years, the VU's hold on the nationalist theme seems to wither and the VB gains nationalist ground.

Immigration is overwhelmingly a core theme. It has always been a powerful asset for the party. Over the years the immigrant issue has lost some saliency for the VB electorate but it remains the most mentioned issue among VB voters. The only possible competitor is the green party Agalev, but that is a pro-immigrant party. In short: the VB has an exclusive claim on the immigrant issue; it is a textbook example of issue ownership.

Measuring anti-politics is somewhat problematic. We assume that especially in 1991 this issue was considerably overrated.¹⁰ As expected, anti-politics issues are much more important among voters than in the programmes. In the eyes of the voters, the anti-politics theme¹¹ has always been

important for the VB; in absolute terms there isn't much of an evolution from 1991 to 1999. But in relative terms anti-politics has come slightly more to the fore during the 1990s. Internally, the saliency's decrease of the immigrant issue for the VB electorate caused anti-politics to come close to the immigrant issue in 1999. Externally, the possible competitor for the anti-politics theme (Agalev – Flemish green party) partly lost its grip on it. Agalev's surprisingly high score (15.6%) in 1999 on the anti-politics issue was most likely due to the so-called dioxin crisis that broke out only two weeks before the 1999 elections. This food poisoning scandal was on Agalev's exclusive domain: the environment, an issue Agalev had owned since its establishment. The matter overshadowed the elections entirely.¹² Probably a lot of Agalev voters motivated their vote with a general reference to this affair and were coded as anti-politically motivated voters (because they referred to a political "affair"). In sum: we expect this high Agalev score on anti-politics to be only temporary and idiosyncratic. All in all, we could state that at the end of the decade the VB was the one and only owner of anti-politics.¹³

Strangely enough the 1991 VB voters did not mention the crime issue at all in the open question on why they voted for the VB. Billiet (1993) speculates that in 1991 the crime theme was still part of the overarching immigrant issue. VB voters simply equated immigrants with crime and did not bother to mention crime as a separate issue motive.¹⁴ For our agenda-setting quest, this matur-

Table 2: Issue motives of the VB (VB) electorate 1991-1999 (in % of all mentioned motives to vote for the VB) compared to the same issue's motives for the party electorate mentioning these issues second most⁹

	1991		1995		1999		Average VB 1991-1995
	VB	other	VB	other	VB	other	
Flemish nationalism	4.0	30.9 (VU)	5.4	5.32 (VU)	7.4	14.9 (VU)	16.8
Immigration	50.2	5.9 (Aga)	33.0	1.8 (Aga)	26.8	1.3 (Aga)	36.7
Anti-politics	32.2	21.6 (Aga)	20.9	9.9 (Aga)	22.4	15.6 (Aga)	29.6
Crime	0.0	0.0	4.8	0.2 (SP)	10.8	0.6 (VLD)	5.2
TOTAL	86.4	–	68.5	–	76.4	–	77.1



ing of the crime issue into a separate and explicit motive is an interesting test case. Billiet even wonders whether the absence of crime among the issue motives in 1991 is related to the low media attention to crime in the runup to the 1991 election, or with the fact that crime was at that time not (yet) considered as a specific party's property. During the 1990s the crime issue steadily attracted more VB voters and, more importantly, no serious challengers turned up. All other parties seemed to leave this ever more important theme in the hands of the VB.¹⁵

Comparing 1991 with 1999, we can conclude that the VB's issue ownerships have sharpened *and* diversified in the eyes of the voters. The party succeeded in branching out and turning into more than a single-issue, anti-immigrant party. It has now considerable claims on the crime, anti-politics and even the nationalist issue. At the same time the party managed to chase the other parties away from its issues and to convert these policy questions into almost exclusive hunting grounds.

It is very important to keep in mind that VB voters are especially issue voters. A comparison with the other party's electorate's motives in 1999 shows that the VB held by far the most issue ownerships of all parties, with the immigrant issue as the uncontested champion (Swyngedouw et al., 2001). While in the electorate at large only 17.1% of the voting motives referred to issues, this fraction escalated to 48.8% among the VB voters (figures not reported in table). Maddens & Hajnal (2001) too, found that the VB, together with the green party Agalev, was the Flemish party with the most outspoken issue profile that profited greatly from issue saliency and, furthermore, that the party even managed to strengthen this asset between 1991 and 1995. As a conclusion we could state that the VB is a typical issue party. That makes agenda setting by the mass media all the more important in explaining its success.

III. If we compare our two measures of issue ownership, party programmes and the electorate's motivations, the similarities are striking. Not only

do exactly the same four issues come to the fore, but also their chronological development is quite analogous. The chronological pattern of issue differentiation, for example, with more equally emphasized issues over the years, is discernable in both datasets (though this tendency is only very small in the manifestos).

Flemish nationalism was the original VB theme and it is probably the motive for its early adopting voters in the 1980s. It continues to attract some voters and still gets a considerable share of the programme space. In 1999, Flemish nationalism experienced a modest revival, in manifesto and among voters.

There is a steady decline of the immigrant issue. Gradually the VB emphasized the immigrant topic less ... and the voters followed their party (or vice versa). It seems reasonable to suppose that the right-wing party has such an absolute claim on this topic, that it can allow itself not to repeat it over and over again. After a dramatic electoral victory in 1991, essentially building on the immigrant issue and providing the party with its second layer of voters, there was probably less electoral gain to be booked on this issue, and the party took care of just consolidating its anti-immigrant voters.

Anti-politics is another stronghold. But the evolution of voters and programmes doesn't go entirely hand in hand. As we pointed out earlier, this issue was not very well tapped among voters in 1991. It is possible that this methodological noise is hiding a more outspoken parallelism between programmes and voters. From 1995 to 1999 this issue gained importance, perhaps delivering a third layer of voters.

The crime issue is the latest growth area, depositing a fourth sediment of voters. Over the years it gained importance at the same pace in programme and among voters. In fact, the parallelism of these evolutions is almost perfect. Most likely, the crime issue can be held responsible for a considerable part of the growth of the VB in the 1990s. But it might also be possible that existing VB voters simply changed their first-order motivation for their vote, from, for example, the immi-



grant issue to the crime issue and that as such, crime as a “new” issue did not carry any new voters with it. At all events, crime deserves our undivided attention in the media analysis.

Recapitulating, we can conclude our issue-ownership quest by stating that (1) the VB is a typical issue party attracting more voters on the basis of its issues than the other parties; that (2) the programmes and the voters of the VB show a remarkably stable and consistent issue pattern; and (3) that, in the 1990s, in particular immigrant, crime and anti-politics issues seem to have been important for the success of the VB, while Flemish nationalist issues stagnated. What about the media and these issues then?

Agenda setting of VB issues on television and in newspapers

Our media dataset consists of three main Flemish newspapers – tabloids and broadsheets with different partisan leanings (*De Standaard*, *De Morgen* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*) – and of the two main television channels, one public broadcaster (*VRT*) and the other commercial (*VTM*). For the newspapers we encoded all front-page stories, with exception of the newspapers that appeared on Tuesdays and on Thursdays, from January 1, 1991 till December 31, 2000.¹⁶ In total this amounted to 5425 newspapers¹⁷ containing 34,855 different news stories. The encoding of the newspaper articles through physical browsing (no indexes were available) took about 1800 hours of encoding and was carried out by trained and strictly supervised encoders. We sometimes had to make tough decisions, but every article was encoded for one issue only. For the purposes of possible international comparison and for time-series analysis with other data already encoded using this thesaurus¹⁸, we opted for the internationally widely employed and hierarchical EUROVOC thesaurus¹⁹ designed for encoding all EU documents and originally containing 6075 different “descriptors”. We adapted EUROVOC to our needs and limited the different codes to a total of 143.²⁰ This permits us to under-

take much more refined analysis than is usually the case in agenda-setting research. The sheer size of the database guarantees that for almost all categories, sensible analyses can be undertaken.

For television news, we undertook a comparable effort. The main news programmes in prime time (7:00 p.m.) of the two main national television channels *VRT* and *VTM* were encoded using the same thesaurus. Unfortunately we only have television data from 1993 onwards. We encoded the news shows on the basis of written summaries produced by a commercial firm (*Auxipresse*). In total 5018 news broadcasts were covered by the same encoders.²¹ This took around 2000 hours of encoding. This time, not only the main news items but *all* televised news items were scrutinized, resulting in a huge television database of 59,362 news items.

Taking newspaper reporting and television news together, we have at our disposal a media-content dataset that contains 94,218 news items spread over a ten year period (1991-2000). Television news items are weighted using the amount of seconds devoted to the item. Newspaper stories are weighted according to the size of the article.²² In contrast to the voting motives where crime itself and criminal policy (judiciary) were not encoded as separate issues, our media data permit us to break up the large crime issue and to separate “real” crime issues from crime policy issues. We will only use this purified crime category.²³ In the cluttered Table 3 all media data are brought together.

Concerning the issue of Flemish nationalism, media attention gradually decreased in the 1990s. All media show a consistent pattern of diminishing coverage. Graph 1 is quite clear about that. The almost perfect parallelism, with a net decrease, between the two television channels is striking. Among the usually more partisan newspapers, with the traditionally more highbrow and Catholic broadsheet *De Standaard* as outspoken supporter of Flemish nationalism, there is much more internal diversity. On the whole, though, the attention is declining. As the Belgian state was further sold



Table 3: VB issues in the Flemish media 1991-2000 (in % of total number of news items covered by that specific medium)

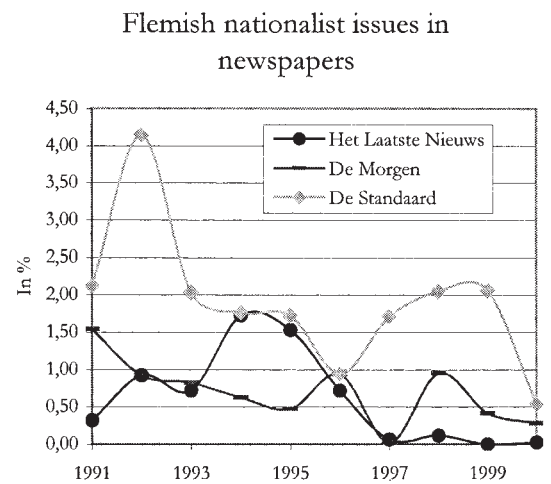
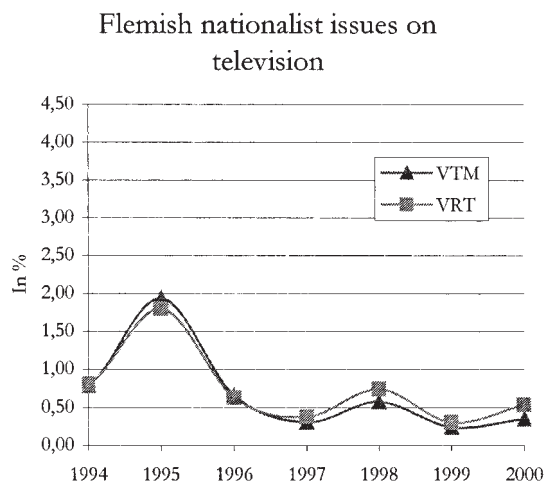
	1991 (N = 4104)	1992 (N = 4350)	1993 (N = 10601)	1994 (N = 10286)	1995 (N = 8894)	1996 (N = 10911)	1997 (N = 11834)	1998 (N = 9483)	1999 (N = 10545)	2000 (N = 13209)
Flemish nationalism										
<i>VTM</i> (N = 27,365)	–	–	0.76	0.79	1.94	0.66	0.30	0.57	0.24	0.35
<i>VRT</i> (N = 31,966)	–	–	0.82	0.81	1.80	0.63	0.38	0.74	0.30	0.53
TOTAL TELEVISION	–	–	0.79	0.80	1.87	0.65	0.34	0.66	0.27	0.44
<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i> (N = 9068)	0.32	0.93	0.72	1.73	1.53	0.72	0.07	0.12	0.0	0.03
<i>De Morgen</i> (N = 12,397)	1.54	0.92	0.83	0.63	0.48	0.94	0.02	0.95	0.42	0.28
<i>De Standaard</i> (N = 13,244)	2.13	4.15	2.04	1.76	1.72	0.94	1.71	2.05	2.06	0.54
TOTAL NEWSPAPERS	1.33	2.00	1.20	1.37	1.24	0.87	0.60	1.04	0.83	0.28
TOTAL ALL MEDIA			1.03	1.14	1.49	0.78	0.50	0.89	0.60	0.35
Immigrant										
<i>VTM</i> (N = 27,365)	–	–	1.51	1.05	1.04	0.57	1.03	3.02	3.41	3.18
<i>VRT</i> (N = 31,966)	–	–	1.14	0.99	1.12	0.77	1.14	3.40	4.07	4.37
TOTAL TELEVISION	–	–	1.33	1.02	1.08	0.67	1.09	3.21	3.74	3.78
<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i> (N = 9068)	2.31	1.05	0.82	1.55	0.63	0.82	0.74	2.29	3.41	1.44
<i>De Morgen</i> (N = 12,397)	2.87	2.57	2.84	1.99	1.63	0.54	0.98	4.20	3.32	4.16
<i>De Standaard</i> (N = 13,244)	0.70	1.68	0.56	1.50	0.47	0.98	0.55	2.37	3.79	3.41
TOTAL NEWSPAPERS	1.96	1.77	1.41	1.68	0.91	0.78	0.76	2.95	3.51	3.00
TOTAL ALL MEDIA			1.37	1.42	0.98	0.74	0.89	3.06	3.60	3.31
Anti-politics										
<i>VTM</i> (N = 27,365)	–	–	1.33	3.15	5.08	4.90	5.76	4.64	1.06	1.56
<i>VRT</i> (N = 31,966)	–	–	1.65	3.66	4.39	5.56	5.39	3.82	0.98	1.01
TOTAL TELEVISION	–	–	1.49	3.41	4.74	5.23	5.58	4.23	1.02	1.29
<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i> (N = 9068)	2.57	1.53	3.36	5.64	14.50	9.58	5.49	6.94	2.78	2.70
<i>De Morgen</i> (N = 12,397)	0.82	1.04	2.79	6.16	6.56	8.54	8.89	7.67	1.29	1.19
<i>De Standaard</i> (N = 13,244)	0.29	0.38	1.90	5.55	5.70	6.32	6.91	4.30	2.10	0.40
TOTAL NEWSPAPERS	1.23	0.98	2.68	5.78	8.92	8.15	7.10	6.30	2.06	1.43
TOTAL ALL MEDIA			2.21	4.83	7.25	6.98	6.49	5.47	1.64	1.37
Criminality										
<i>VTM</i> (N = 27,365)	–	–	6.75	8.34	5.94	14.79	17.04	13.48	11.09	10.52
<i>VRT</i> (N = 31,966)	–	–	3.70	4.34	2.97	9.80	9.99	7.44	5.57	5.11
TOTAL TELEVISION	–	–	5.23	6.34	4.46	12.30	13.52	10.46	8.33	7.82
<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i> (N = 9068)	15.33	25.85	23.99	21.45	10.99	27.90	27.72	22.73	26.64	20.83
<i>De Morgen</i> (N = 12,397)	3.96	4.72	5.65	3.02	1.45	9.83	9.97	6.79	4.58	3.26
<i>De Standaard</i> (N = 13,244)	0.92	1.35	0.74	1.37	1.02	2.51	4.78	3.28	2.03	1.37
TOTAL NEWSPAPERS	6.74	10.64	10.13	8.61	4.49	13.41	14.16	10.93	11.08	8.49
TOTAL ALL MEDIA			8.17	7.70	4.47	12.97	13.90	10.74	9.98	8.22



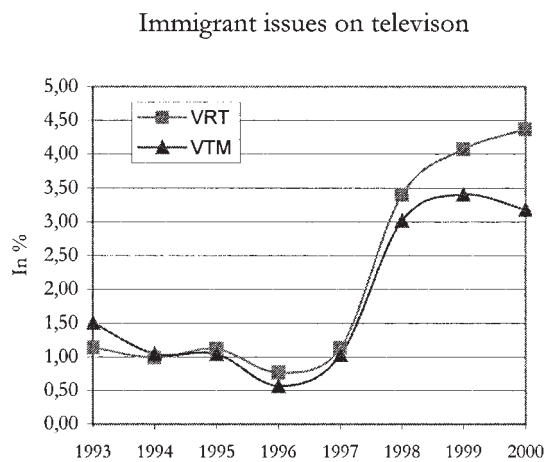
out to the two main regions throughout the 1990s, with another important constitutional reform in 1993 (and negotiations in 1992), the nationalist/language wars slowly wither and almost disappear from the media agenda at the end of the 1990s. In addition, apart from in *De Standaard* this issue never attracted considerable coverage (maximum 2%). It is obviously impossible to attribute growth

of the VB in the 1990s to an overexposure of this original VB theme in the media. That is why we will ignore this issue in the subsequent analysis.

The issue-ownership analysis showed that the immigrant theme became a bit less important for the VB voters and in the VB programme. But the media content analysis reveals that coverage of immigrant themes was definitely expanding in our



Graph 1: Media coverage of Flemish nationalist issues (in %).



Graph 2: Media coverage of immigrant issues (in %).

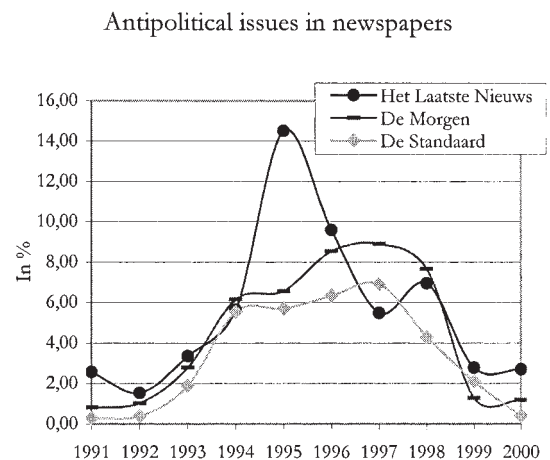
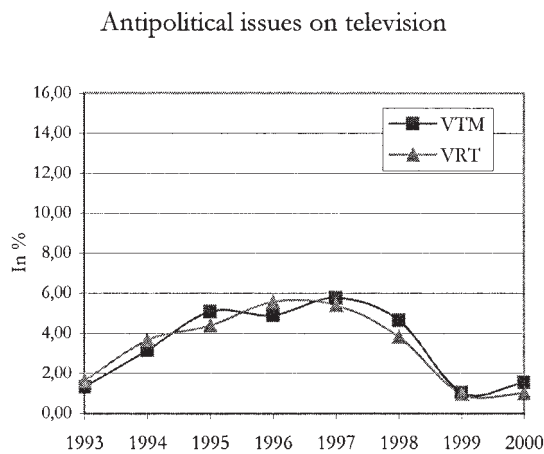


ten-year period. Graph 2 gives unambiguous visual proof of that.

Once more, the two broadcasters are following an identical tack: only at the end of the period did the public broadcaster *VRT* keep raising its coverage for immigrant issues, while *VTM* seems to get bored with the issue. The newspapers' picture is again less clear, but on the whole the immigrant theme is gaining attention. It is the leftist (formerly socialist) broadsheet *De Morgen* that emphasizes immigrant topics most, but this paper defends a clear pro-immigrant stance. The rise of the immigrant theme from 1996 onwards is caused by the successive asylum crises that affected Belgium. In particular at the end of the decade the government could no longer cope with sudden influxes of thousands of homeless asylum seekers, and it had to reform the asylum procedure to put new candidates off. At the same time a massive regularization procedure for illegal immigrants was initiated and new shelters for asylum seekers were opened all over the country. Overall, immigrant issues succeeded in getting more media exposure than the Flemish nationalist issues (maximum 4.5%), but immigration was not a central theme in the news.

Anti-politics is another candidate to explain recent right-wing success. The anti-politics issues were the most difficult to assess among voters and in party programmes. We nevertheless argued that this topic is likely one of the biggest assets of the VB in the 1990s. Do we find traces of that in the media? By and large, media attention to anti-politics outweighs both previous issues amply. *Het Laatste Nieuws* even devoted 14.5% of its front-page stories to anti-politics in 1995 (Graph 3). Maybe this liberal tabloid, the only real tabloid and the most widely read newspaper in Belgium, wanted to settle accounts with its political enemy, both socialist parties, who were at that time deeply entangled in a bribery scandal. But the other media kept their end up too and featured anti-politics issues widely (maximum 6% – 8%), both broadcasters again closely following each other's lead. Anti-politics is an extensively mediatized issue in all media. At first sight there is no clear rise or decline, only a huge overexposure in the middle of the 1990s, between the general elections of 1995 and 1999.

In 1995, the so-called Agusta-Dassault scandal was culminating. The socialist government parties had received bribes from helicopter and airplane



Graph 3: Media coverage of anti-political issues (in %).

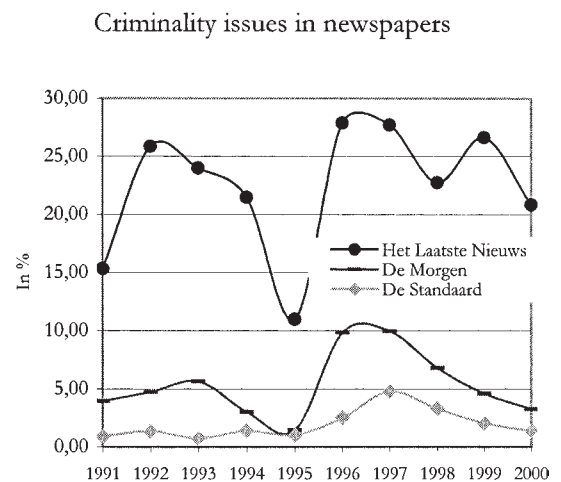
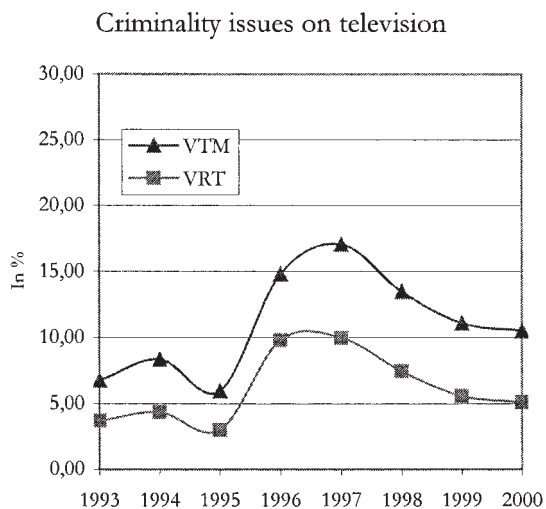


manufacturers to exert their influence to get a big order. These anti-political stories continued to fascinate the media, both newspaper and television, for several more years (1996-1997-1998), but then suddenly dwindled in the election year 1999.

We hypothesized that the VB successes in the 1990s were maybe above all due to a growing importance of the criminality issues. In Graph 4 we brought together the charts that detail the criminality issues. We omitted white-collar crime since the VB is particularly worried about petty crime, burglary, sex crimes, violence, etc. The first thing that comes to mind when we look at the charts is the massive coverage of the crime topic. Again, the popular *Het Laatste Nieuws* proves unbeatable with almost consistent scores above 20% for front-page crime news. But also the other newspapers are in good shape on this topic. If we take television coverage into account, crime is without any doubt the VB's issue most covered in the Flemish media. In fact, it is even one of the most covered topics in general, only surpassed by international news (10.3% vs. 9.1%) on television and by international news (11.6% vs. 8.3%) and international

security (war, conflicts ...) (9.3% vs. 8.3%) in newspapers. Crime is big news!

For the first and only time, commercial and public television really diverge. The commercial *VTM* surpasses the *VRT* easily, and at the end of the period under study it broadcasts twice as much crime items as its public competitor. Nevertheless the evolution over the years runs remarkably parallel, with ups and downs at the same time, but *VTM* is gradually growing away from *VRT*. Especially 1996 and 1997 were criminal years: this was the heyday of the Dutroux affair, a criminal drama with horrifying child abuse and murder. A never before seen media frenzy broke loose that led to the White March, the largest public demonstration that Belgium ever witnessed (Walgrave & Manssens, 2000). After this exceptional period, criminality coverage only declined very slowly. Another notable year is the election year 1995: crime was down in all media without any exception. Taken as a whole, media attention to crime grew during the 1990s. With the exception of *De Morgen*, all media spent more time and space on criminality in the last years than in the first year of



Graph 4: Media coverage of criminality and crime policy issues (in %).



the period under study. Taking newspapers together, the average crime percentage went up by 65% from 1991 (5.0%) to 2000 (8.3%). On television the increase was 49% from only 1993 (5.2%) to 2000 (8.3%). Crime is becoming ever bigger news! The sheer amount of crime news and the upward evolution of it, give us good reason to suspect the crime issue above all of boosting VB support.

To conclude, it is obvious that the Flemish media took up most VB issues to an increasing degree during the 1990s. Apart from Flemish nationalism, immigrant issues as well as anti-politics and crime-related issues were getting ever more attention, though the growth was not always linear. In particular anti-politics and crime are the most valid suspects. They were covered to a very large extent, their exposure was rising *and* their ups and downs were consistent across the five media. After all, possible media effects are probably stronger when all media champion or neglect the same issues at the same time, creating a common and ubiquitous news agenda.

Merging issue ownership, agenda setting and votes: are the media to blame for the success of the VB?

Let us now embark upon the trickiest part of our study. It may well be that three out of four VB themes got more media attention during the 1990s, but can we substantiate that this media coverage contributed to the VB success? Except for linking longitudinal panel survey data that tap in detail media consumption on the one hand, and longitudinal and detailed data on media content on the other hand, evidencing any media effect is extremely difficult. But even in this ideal scholarly world, it is almost unfeasible to disentangle correlation and causation without a truly experimental design. People watch or read the media they like, and the media they like are in turn the media that affect them, but what was first: their choice or the medium's effect? And what about spurious relationships, caused by a third actor in the play? It is quite possible, for example, that *real*

crime and immigration problems in Flemish society grew, resulting in more media coverage of these issues *and* in electoral victories for VB at the same time. In that case it is not the media but the "real world" that is to blame for the VB victories. In a later version of this paper, we will try to control for these real-world factors.

Another possibility to explore causality is a refined time-series analysis based on a "before and after" measurement. The logic of this kind of investigation is that if there were *first* media attention and only *afterwards* VB success, the chances that the first is related to the latter are mounting (but it is still not indisputable proof). In the following pages, we will only undertake a preliminary analysis. It will permit us to establish whether there is a plausible correlation between VB growth and media attention to its issues, but at the moment our analysis is still too explorative to assess any causation. We are planning a more refined analysis that could give us more conclusive proof.

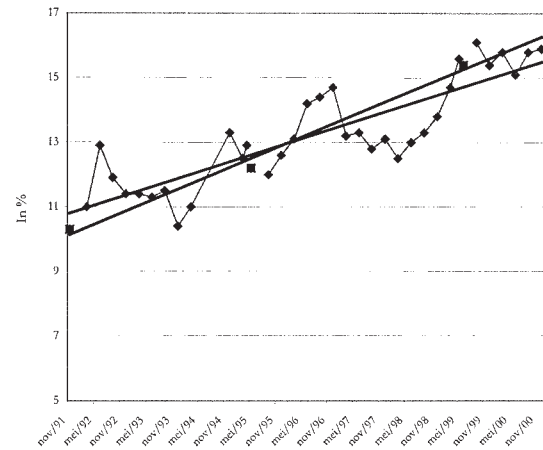
A fundamental problem with any of our analyses is that the link between the dependent variable, (intended) votes for the VB, and the *intervening* variables, the different VB issues, isn't clear-cut. Should we just add these four typical VB issues to a large undifferentiated pile of issues, without sorting them out? We argued that the VB owns all these issues to a certain extent, but it is hard to determine the relative weight of these issues in a VB vote. In a sense, we only tapped issue ownership, not the issue's relative saliency within a VB voter. What does it mean for the VB that Flemish nationalist issues are sliding down the media agenda and that crime is climbing its way up? Are these two trends compensating each other or is one of these issues more important than the other? Can we cumulate issue attention to all the issues, supposing that an issue could take over from another? Should we give a differentiated weight to the issues, changing over time? We simply do not know. But we should be cautious while using cumulative figures, containing all issues at the same time.

For time-series analysis, one needs data over a longer period of time with as many measuring



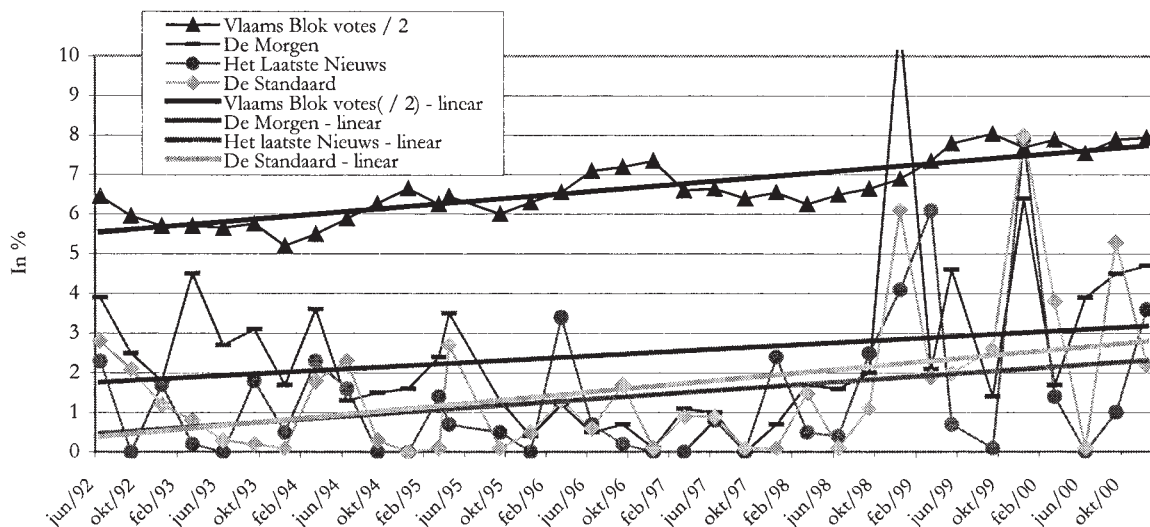
points as possible. We have a very detailed, day-by-day measure of our independent variable – media coverage – but our dependent variable – VB success – is only measured at very few points in time: the three elections in the 1990s. We could try to solve this limited time points problem by creating more measuring points for the dependent variable, using other VB election results in the same period. But these elections are fought in other contexts (European or local elections) and their chronology in 1994 and 2000, alongside general elections, doesn't provide us with a good alternative. For this reason we chose to rely on the most regular opinion poll tapping voting intentions, carried out by *INRA* and published every three months in the Belgian daily *La Libre Belgique* since the beginning of the 1990s. Of course commercial surveys aren't always that reliable – in Belgium pollsters are notorious for being unable to predict election results – but it is the only thing we have. We are only interested in the *evolutions* of voting

intentions, not in the (predicted) score of a party. In Graph 5 we depict the *INRA* voting intentions, together with the real election results of the VB



Graph 5: Voting intentions (INRA poll – three months period) and real voting for the VB in the 1990s (in %) with linear trendlines.

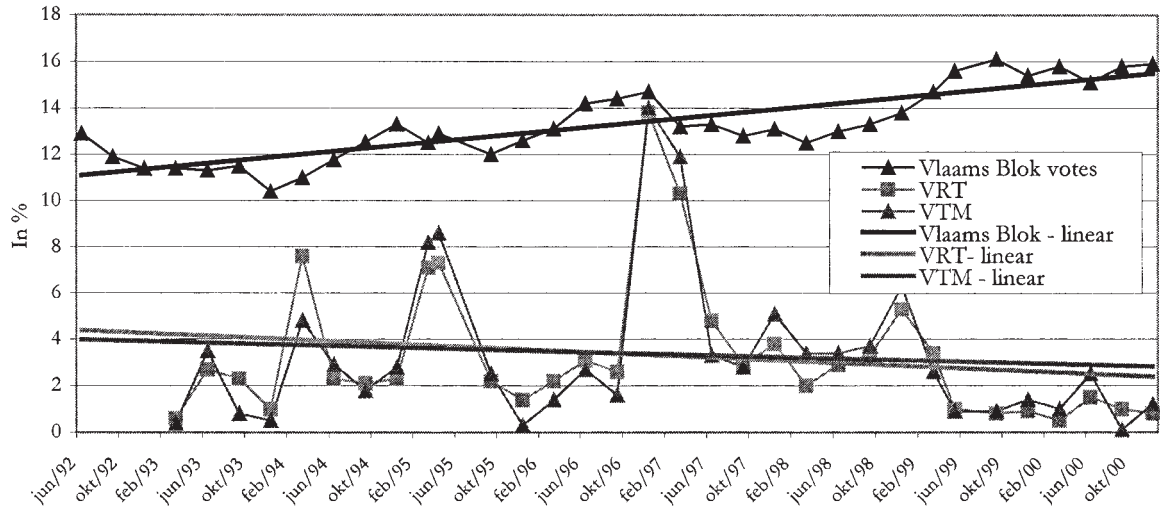
Immigrant issues in newspapers and Vlaams Blok voting intentions (in % / 2) and linear trend lines



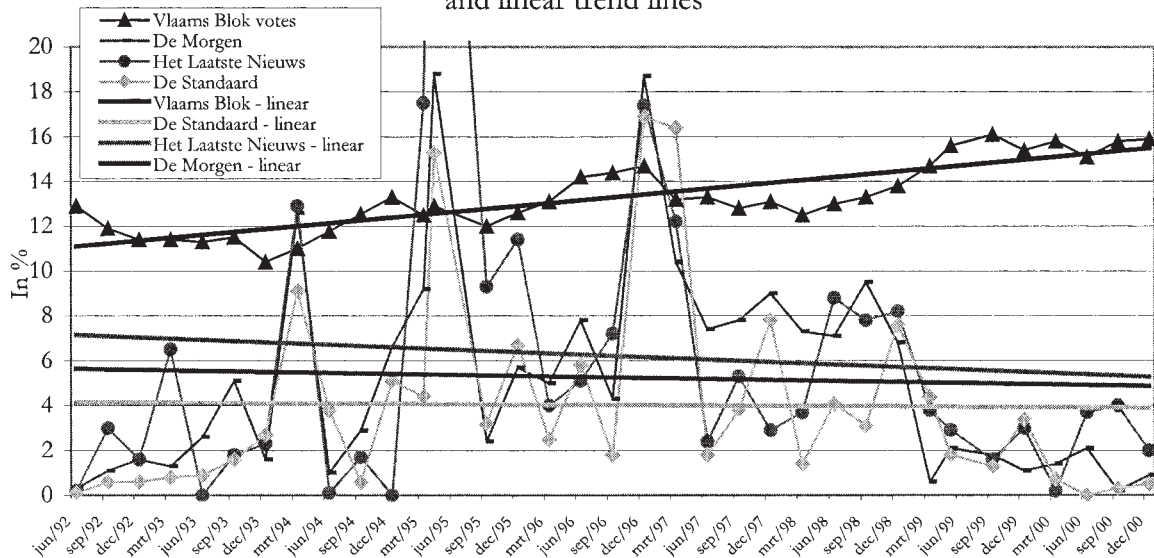
Graph 6: Media coverage of immigrant issues (in %) and VB voting intentions (in % / 2) and linear trend lines (three months periods).



Antipolitics issues on television and Vlaams Blok voting intentions (in %) and linear trend lines



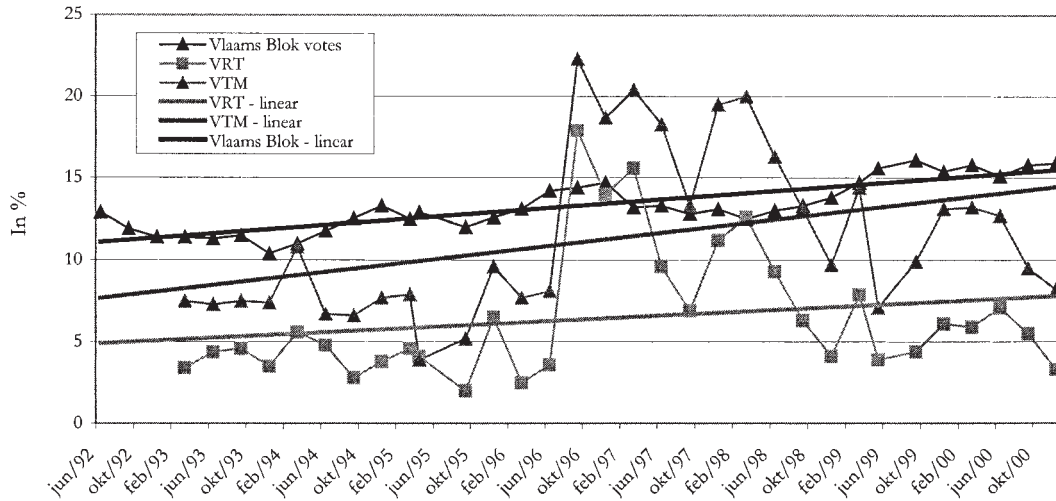
Antipolitics issues in newspapers and Vlaams Blok voting intentions (in %) and linear trend lines



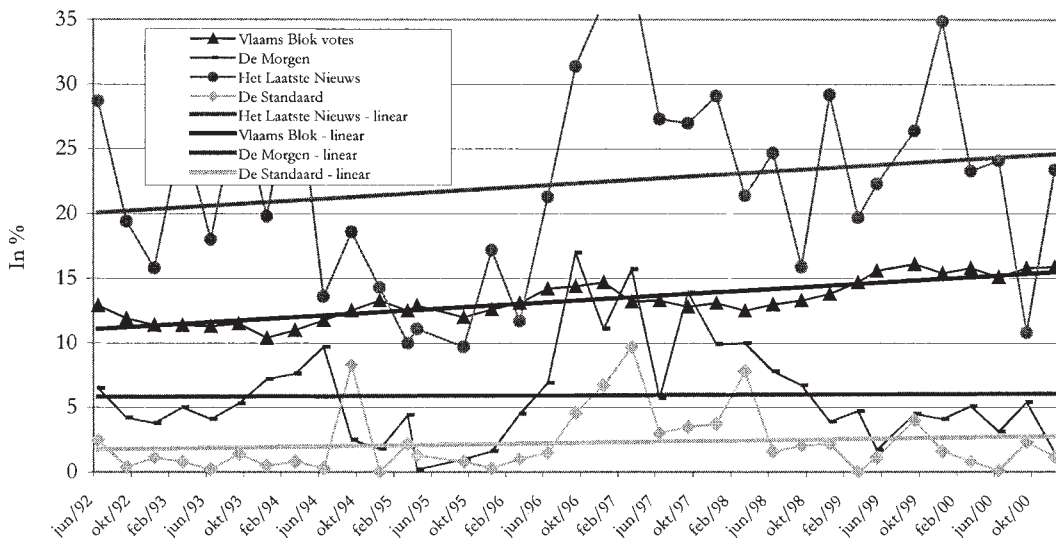
Graph 7: Media coverage of anti-politics issues (in %) and VB voting intentions (in % / 2) and linear trend lines (three months periods).



Crime issues on television and Vlaams Blok voting intentions (in %) and linear trend lines



Crime issues in newspapers and Vlaams Blok voting intentions (in %) and linear trend lines



Graph 8: Media coverage of crime issues (in %) and VB voting intentions (in %) and linear trend lines (three months periods).



from 1991 onwards.²⁴ Both the level and the trend of polled intentions and real ballots are similar, which reassures us that the *INRA* poll is a more or less reliable dependent variable for VB success. Yet, the fact that surveys only tap intentions and not actual behaviour, and that there are always measurement errors, which is due, among other things, to the limited size of the sample, means that the potential relationship between attention to VB issues and VB votes will probably be underestimated.

We opted for an explorative and modest analysis linking media content with VB scores in the 1990s. We will only take into account the immigrant, crime and anti-politics issues. For these issues: (1) we use linear trend lines to visualize whether VB growth parallels its issue's increases; (2) we calculate simple bivariate correlations between media attention to issues and VB scores. These crude and long-term analyses are consistent with the idea that some agenda-setting processes could be slow and cumulative.

In Graphs 6, 7 and 8 we put the VB vote intentions in the same chart as the media attention to its issues in the three months preceding the poll. Linear trendlines were added to check any visible similarities. Some of these linear trendlines deviate to a large extent from the original data, but they give us a straightforward indication of the overall evolution over the years.

A rapid glance at these graphs suffices to show that our evidence is mixed. Concerning immigrant issues, all five media show rising trends, compat-

ible with the VB growth in the 1990s. Moreover, all media increased their immigration coverage at roughly the same rate as the VB growth. Based on the voters' motives and the manifestos, we hypothesized that the immigration issue perhaps became less important for the further growth of the VB, but these parallels are too obvious to ignore. The opposite is true of anti-politics issues. While all media decreased their coverage of these themes over the years, the VB still grew steadily. On the basis of this simple analysis, we are led to believe that anti-politics news most likely cannot be held responsible for VB success, even though it was one of our prime suspects. The crime issues give mixed results: the more popular media (*VTM*, *VRT* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*) definitely increased their crime coverage, but focus on crime in the two broadsheets grew hardly at all (*De Standaard*), or even slightly decreased (*De Morgen*). Most significant is that both TV stations, present in every Flemish household, increased their crime coverage considerably, and at more or less the same pace as the VB gains. Our simple trend line analysis provisionally leads us to get anti-politics off the hook, but our suspicions of immigrant and crime issues are substantiated.

To explore this further, we calculated simple bivariate correlation coefficients between issue attention in the three months before the polls and VB voting intentions. Using the *INRA* polls from March 1993 till December 2000 we created 32 observation points. The correlation matrix is to be seen in Table 4.

Table 4: Simple bivariate correlations between media attention to immigrant, anti-politics and crime issues (in the three months preceding the poll) and VB voting intentions (N = 32)

	Het Laatste Nieuws	De Morgen	De Standaard	All newspapers	VTM	VRT	All TV channels	All media
Immigration	0.285	0.188	0.467	0.349	0.373	0.511	0.453	0.421
Anti-politics	-0.083	-0.120	-0.038	-0.088	-0.072	-0.127	-0.099	-0.141
Crime	0.198	-0.067	0.104	0.127	0.230	0.147	0.196	0.154
All issues	0.126	-0.068	0.160	0.087	0.232	0.226	0.232	0.127



Most coefficients are modest, but we did not expect to find high correlations. It is obvious that voting behaviour is codetermined by factors other than merely media attention to a party's issues. In any case, the moderate coefficients in the table confirm our trend line conclusions. Unmistakably, the coverage of immigrant issues is most strongly, and consistently positively, related with VB success. When the media report more on immigrants and asylum seekers, more voters express a preference for the VB in the subsequent poll. Over all media, this association seems very solid, only the correlation with the *De Morgen* coverage is somewhat weaker. Again, there is no correlation between anti-politics issues and VB scores. On the contrary, all coefficients for all media suggest a (weak) negative correlation: after attention to anti-politics issues has risen, the VB stagnates, or even declines. This second piece of evidence further exonerates anti-politics. Crime attention is, on the other hand, in a consistent and positive way (except for *De Morgen*), associated with VB voting. For the commercial television station *VTM*, this association is actually quite high, and the same applies to a lesser extent to the most popular Flemish newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws*.

More in general, the coefficients of the TV channels and of the tabloid newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* are notably higher than those of the broadsheets (except for *De Standaard* and the immigration issues). Popular TV coverage and tabloid news probably contribute more to the VB's success than broadsheet coverage. In a nutshell,

our data suggest that immigration (in all media) and crime coverage (in the popular media) are the best clues to link mediatized issues to VB success.

To rely on short three-month periods is inconsistent with our claim that agenda setting and issue voting are long-term and cumulative processes caused by emphasizing the same topic over and over again, year after year. The media agenda is constantly shifting, with issues climbing up the agenda and falling down only shortly afterwards. That is why we recalculated all correlations between issue exposure and voting intentions, but this time we always took a full one-year period before the poll into account. The results are found in TABLE 5.

As expected, most coefficients are somewhat more elevated. This underpins our long-term claim: there is a stronger link between VB preference and long-term media coverage of its issues than with short-term peak attention to these issues. Overall, the year coefficients are consistent with the three-month coefficients. The immigrant theme jumps out with very high correlation coefficients. And again, TV reporting is more closely related to VB votes than newspaper coverage.

Although we cannot prove causality, most of these figures suggest at least a correlation between issue coverage of immigration and crime and VB success. We would like to introduce some additional, though also circumstantial, evidence that supports our claim and that will need more in-depth consideration in further research. This evidence can partially substantiate the media-voting

Table 5: Simple bivariate correlations between media attention to immigrant, anti-politics and crime issues (in one year preceding the poll) and VB voting intentions (N = 32)

	Het Laatste Nieuws	De Morgen	De Standaard	All newspapers	VTM	VRT	All TV channels	All media
Immigration	0.704	0.358	0.771	0.645	0.635	0.767	0.719	0.694
Anti-politics	-0.146	-0.226	-0.079	-0.166	-0.125	-0.183	-0.155	-0.168
Crime	0.149	-0.121	0.021	0.052	0.267	0.139	0.216	0.142
All issues	0.152	-0.134	0.205	0.073	0.296	0.287	0.294	0.196



link at the individual level, which was missing so far in our macro analysis. Our analysis showed that especially the most popular and tabloid media, in particular the commercial TV station *VTM* and the newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws*, devoted lots of time and space to crime, one of the VB issues. These differences are not surprising. They are in line with many researches into public versus commercial stations and their respective audiences (for an overview see: Holtz-Bacha & Norris, 2001). In 1998, Elchardus & Hooghe (Elchardus et al., 1998; Hooghe, 2002) gathered Flemish survey data on TV viewing and newspaper readership. They also gauged voting behaviour.²⁵ Are respondents watching and reading these popular media especially prone to vote for the VB? They are! Of the VB voters 48.9% chose *VTM* as their favourite TV station against only 22.0% of the *VRT* viewers.²⁶ And 54.4% of the VB electorate reads *Het Laatste Nieuws*, in sharp contrast with the 4.2% *De Standaard* and the 0.0%(!) *De Morgen* readership. Further multivariate analysis should put these rough figures into perspective, but these preliminary findings are consistent with our claim that VB voters select the media in which the VB's issues are overexposed. These data strengthen our claim that the Flemish media probably played a part in the rise of the VB in the 1990s.

Conclusion

Ruthless critics still could easily object that we have suggested a lot, but proved nothing. They are right. We are quite confident that we substantiated an association between right-wing success and media coverage of its themes, but we do not have any proof at all for causation from mediatized issues towards VB success. We have no sound and conclusive evidence that the extensive and rising media attention to the VB themes of immigration and crime has contributed to its distressing growth. We simply lack the necessary data. We could be dealing with a spurious relationship. The preceding public's issue concerns for crime and anti-politics, for example, could cause media attention to

these issues *and* produce VB success at the same time. And we should more carefully exclude the possibility that there was first VB success and only afterwards a boom of media attention to its topics, as for example with the *Lega Nord* and the media in Italy (Biorcio, 2002). The fact that in particular the most popular, and commercial media, which rely heavily on large-scale audiences for their advertising revenues, stressed these issues most, indicates that the Flemish public at large likes these kinds of news stories and cares about immigration and crime. Most probably, we are confronted with the reverse of Pippa Norris's (2000) already classic virtuous circle, namely a vicious circle. People voting for the VB choose the media most in line with their attitudes (and fears), and these media in their turn strengthen these attitudes and issue priorities.

We can assume that it is not only in Belgium that news coverage of immigration and crime has been mounting during the last decade. Nevertheless, strong right-wing parties do not prevail in all the countries in which this probably is the case. In the UK, notorious for its relentless and crime-focused gutter journalism, the right wing never got a foot on the ground. In this particular case, that has surely got to do with the closed electoral system. But our point is that media attention to supposedly right-wing themes *as such* does not bring about electoral successes for these parties automatically. It is the interaction between a party's communications, the institutional constraints, the public's concerns and the media issue coverage that determines those parties' success. Only systematic comparative research can shed light on this causal entanglement. In the near future, we hope to have at our disposal a comparable media content analysis for the French-speaking part of Belgium, where the right wing is as good as absent and, in electoral terms, a dwarf in comparison with the full-grown VB. Probably, French-speaking media have covered crime and anti-politics issues to a similar and rising extent as Flemish news, substantiating the claim that media should be interacting with someone or something to produce any effect.



Finally, returning to the outset of this contribution: does news content matter? We think we have at least made the hypothesis that the content of the Flemish news media has contributed to the VB success a bit more plausible. The extensive and rising coverage of the immigration and crime

topic, especially in the most popular and widely read and viewed media, is positively associated with the electoral growth of the VB in the 1990s. Our provisional conclusion has to be: news content matters.

Notes

1. Revised version of a paper presented at the ECPR joint workshop sessions, Torino, 22-27 March 2002.
2. The VB belongs to the so-called “new” right-wing party family. These parties do not refer to the fascist tradition as clearly as the “old” right-wing parties do and they do not attack the fundamentals of the polity. New right-wing is somewhat more moderate and focuses on immigrant and law-and-order themes in a populist and anti-political discourse (Ignazi, 1992).
3. In this paper we use the national election results for one of the two national chambers, i.e. the lower house (de Kamer). We will only consider the results for the Flemish part of Belgium, since the two main regions, their party systems and political and electoral arenas are almost completely separated. In the French-speaking part of Belgium, there is a right-wing party as well, the *Front National* (National Front), but it has had less success and lost votes (from 2.3% in 1995 to 1.5% in 1999) and one of their two seats at the last elections of June 1999.
4. The number of “effective parties”, using the Lijphart (1994) measure, is now 9.05.
5. At the national level, even six different parties have joined the government.
6. For the time being, we were only able to base our judgement of the VB 1999 programme on a summary of the VB programme. In a later version of this paper, that will be remedied.
7. The scattered evidence on the VB campaigns shows, that the VB indeed limits its electoral communication to just a few issues (Govaert, 1992).
8. Other analyses of VB voters based on closed (and scaled) questions, refer to exactly the same four issues as we recorded in the open questions (for the 1991 elections see: Billiet & De Witte, 1995; for the 1999 elections see: Billiet & De Witte, 2001). In 1999 exactly the attitudes linked to these four same issues, proved in a logistic regression to be the best attitudinal net predictors for a VB vote, checking for all other traditional socio-demographic and attitudinal variables (Billiet & De Witte, 2001). So, these issue motives are not artefacts of our open question method, but proved, after multivariate checking, to be crucial factors in explaining VB voting.
9. The figures in TABLE 1 are secondary data, drawn from other sources: for 1991 from Billiet et al., 1993 and Billiet, 1993; for 1995 from Swyngedouw et al., 1997; for 1999 from Swyngedouw et al., 2001. For reasons of comparability over the years, some cells contain aggregated data based on more detailed initial figures. Comparison over the years has to be undertaken cautiously. In 1991 and in 1995-1999 somewhat different coding schemes were used, especially concerning our (regrouped) anti-politics issue. In addition, the 1991 issue concerns were recorded in a survey carried out months after the election; the 1995-1999 issue motives were recorded in an exit poll immediately after the voters cast their ballot. This also probably overrated the anti-politics issues in 1991. The column percentages in the table do not add up to 100% because respondents could give more than one voting motive, although most of them limited themselves to only one reason. VU stand for Volksunie, the Flemish nationalist party. Aga stands for Agalev, the Flemish green party. SP stands for the Flemish socialist party. VLD stand for the Flemish liberal party. The VB electorate was most prone to decline collaboration at the survey. Swyngedouw & Beerten (1996) assume that especially anti-political voters refused participation.
10. The 1991 issue concerns were recorded in a survey carried out months after the election; the 1995-1999 issue motives were recorded in an exit poll immediately after the voters cast their ballot. The 1991 data could easily be biased by the media’s interpretation of the election results in between the election and the survey, by the voter’s own changing perception of the election results and by their later reinterpretation of the motives (Swyngedouw & Beerten, 1996). After



the elections of 1991 the media in particular put the anti-immigrant and, above all, the anti-political dimension of the dramatic election results into perspective. This most likely caused a considerable overstatement by the voters of especially the anti-politics issues in 1991 (Billiet & De Witte, 1995).

11. Under the heading anti-politics we brought together motives that mentioned political scandals (bribery, sleaze, etc.), that referred to revenge on the political elites, to political powerlessness and to political disappointment. The problem is that the 1991 and the 1995-1999 coding categories of these issues were not exactly the same. This again most likely overrates the anti-politics issue in 1991. We are not very confident that our anti-politics measure is valid. Moreover, it is difficult to get a grasp of the issue of anti-politics because it is a somewhat ambiguous issue. It is above all a (rhetorical) dimension of other issues, a way to wrap up other issues, a framework in which other issues are packaged.

12. Several opinion polls carried out just before the election make this clear. Out of the blue, public health became the top priority of the voters (97.8%), and environment followed at the fourth place (93.6%) (*De Financieel-Economische Tijd*, June 12, 1999). With 42.0% of the people saying that the care for the environment and public health would be determining in casting their ballot (*Het Laatste Nieuws*, June 11, 1999), this issue was extremely dominant just before the elections.

13. Of course this statement only applies to voters who effectively cast a party ballot. The voters who voted blank or invalidated their ballot are by far the most anti-politically motivated: 87.9% of those voters mention anti-political motives (Swyngedouw et al. 2001). It is in particular among these (non)voters that there are still considerable gains to be booked by the VB.

14. Billiet & De Witte's (1995) research on the 1991 elections based on closed (and scaled) questions, points out that opinions on crime and crime policy did effectively distinguish the VB electorate from the other parties' electorate. So, even in 1991 crime was already important for VB voters.

15. Other research using multivariate checks and scaled attitudes confirms that the criminality issue won importance from 1991 to 1999 in explaining a VB vote (Billiet & De Witte, 2001).

16. To limit the tedious and expensive encoding task, we originally planned to encode only half of the newspaper copies, alternating the days of the week. Previous research on Belgian newspapers showed that Saturday's newspapers contain more political news (Cuyt & De Swert, 1999), and we chose to include all Saturday's papers. Since the project for which the data were recorded aims at explaining the political agenda, also the Monday's papers seemed indispensable: in Belgium Sunday's TV-news shows regularly set the political agenda for the following week. Moreover, Monday's papers contain two days of news (Rucht & Neidhardt, 1998). We were left with two possibilities: Wednesday's and Friday's newspapers or Tuesday's and Thursday's newspapers. A preliminary test proved that Wednesday's and Friday's newspapers contain more political news than Tuesday's and Thursday's newspapers and therefore we omitted the latter in our encoding.

17 Unfortunately, we could not lay hands on all the selected newspaper copies. In the different libraries we visited, some newspaper copies were consistently missing. These missing newspapers are not randomly spread throughout the whole period. For *De Standaard* the missing values are concentrated in December 1991 and July-August 1994. For *De Morgen* we have an incomplete database in December 1998. In total we lack 10.5% of the newspaper copies.

18. These media data were collected for an agenda-setting research project funded by the *Federale Diensten voor Wetenschappelijke, Technische en Culturele Aangelegenheden* (DWTC) in Belgium (2001-2003). The research aims at unravelling the agenda-setting process in Belgium by combining the media agenda, with the public's agenda (population surveys), the political agenda (parliament), the policy agenda (government decisions, legislation, budget), the civil society's agenda (street protest) and real world indicators (official statistics). The participants in the project are: Stefaan Walgrave, coordinator (UA), Lieven de Winter, André Frogner, Frédéric Varone and Benoît Rihoux (UCL), Patrick Stouthuysen (VUB) and Marc Swyngedouw (KUL).

19. For more information on this thesaurus see: <http://europa.eu.int/celex/eurovoc/>

20. As we always also carefully logged a verbal description of the article's content, we are able to refine our analysis even further and to recode the data if necessary. For this paper, for example, we regrouped data initially spread over different categories, especially concerning the anti-politics issues.

21. As with the newspapers, some news programmes were missing: 14.1% of the news programmes were not covered. For some periods data are completely lacking: October-November-December 1995 and May 1998.



22. The weighting or non-weighting of the newspaper items gave almost no difference. But still we opted for using the following weight factors: very long articles: 10; medium articles: 7; very short articles: 1. The tiny weight factor for the small articles is justified, because it really concerns *very* small articles on the front page, sometimes not more than just a few lines referring to an inside story.

23. Under the heading “Flemish nationalism” we coded stories about the ongoing state reform, language battles (even physical), discussions on the so-called “*faciliteiten*” around Brussels, the “Voeren” issue, de *IJzerbedevaart*, nationalist demonstrations or stories on the Flemish nationalist movement. Under the immigrants issue, we captured all coverage of migration, integration of immigrants, seasonal migration, illegal immigrants, immigrants and crime, asylum seekers, asylum centres, regularization of illegal immigrants. The anti-politics issue was by far the most difficult to code consistently. We chose to consider bribery, corruption, political scandals, the discussion on the cumulating of political mandates, the wages of political personnel, the defecting of politicians, forced resignation of politicians after political mistakes. The crime topic refers to news about criminality itself: arson, vandalism, fraud, theft, car jacking, assault, robbery, burglary, escape from prison, football hooliganism, street riots, paedophilia, rape, sexual assault and the judicial lawsuits on these topics.

24. Before 1991, *INRA* systematically underestimated the VB results. After the surprising breakthrough of the VB at the 1991 general elections, the pollsters seemed to have managed to anticipate the underreporting of VB voters (voting for the VB is still a taboo) and to correct that systematic response bias.

25. We would like to thank Marc Hooghe for kindly putting these figures at our disposal.

26. And while watching *VTM* these VB voters do not ignore the *VTM* news programmes: 87.4% of them watches the news often or very often.

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