

Strong devolution but no increasing issue divergence. Evolving issue priorities of the Belgian political parties (1987-2010)

Stefaan Walgrave
Brandon Zicha
Anne Hardy
Jeroen Joly
Tobias Van Assche

On January 23th, 2011, veteran political negotiator Johan Vande Lanotte who was appointed the King's special mediator 99 days earlier, resigned stating that he could not solve the conundrum of Belgium's government formation. So the *fifth* attempt to form a national government after the elections of June 13th, 2010 ended in failure. The country remained without government 223 days after the elections. In December 2010, Belgium had broken the European record of the longest government formation and on February 16th, 2011, Belgium broke the world record (till then held by Iraq) as well. The immediate reason for the stalemate is not a mystery: there exists deep political disagreement between the two major language communities. The Dutch-speaking Flemish parties do not want to form a government without an encompassing agreement on a major state reform that would shift more jurisdictions and fiscal autonomy to the regions while the French-speaking Walloon and Brussels parties are not in favor of large changes to the institutional status-quo. The crisis exemplifies the apparently further increasing tensions of the ethnic-linguistic cleavage in Belgium. Belgium has had a long history of linguistic conflict, but the political crisis in 2010 and 2011, observers agree, is the worst thus far. The sustainability of the country has even become a topic of debate among political analysts and scholars alike (Swenden and Jans 2006).

That devolution and state reform issues blocked government formation in 2010-2011 is a reflection of a long-standing linguistic conflict not just about devolution but about many issues that fall under the jurisdiction of the national government (and of the regional governments, for that matter). These recurring incongruities form the major arguments used by the Flemings to claim more competences for the regions that are supposed are more internally homogenous in their priorities and goals. Flemish parties state that it has become increasingly difficult to strike a national compromise as Flemish and Francophones, because the two groups care about different issues and when they care about the same issues they think differently about them. In this chapter, we examine the first part of this contention. We examine to what extent political actors in both regions possess or are increasingly possessing divergent issue priorities. It is a common diagnosis shared by many political actors, observers and journalists in Belgium that Flemings and Francophones have grown apart in terms of their *prioritization* of issues. For example, Flemings would care more about crime issues while Francophones prioritize bread and butter issues; Flemings would have right-wing issue priorities (e.g. immigration) while Francophones prefer left-wing issue priorities (e.g. unemployment). Both language communities, pundits and politicians

frequently claim, have developed large differences in what they consider to be important and what problems should be tackled first. This growing issue divergence, it is claimed, contributes to the increasing dysfunction of the national state as the fight for priorities dominates the national arena and prevents the national government from acting decisively to craft clear and effective policies.

This chapter does not focus on the question whether and why the Belgian federal state is dysfunctional. We also leave it to others to examine to what degree different issue prioritizations may be responsible for the present blockade. We instead focus on the common assumption underlying the prevailing diagnosis of the Belgian stasis: the alleged large and increasing differences in issue priorities of both communities. The agenda-setting approach and the available agenda evidence on Belgium allow us to tackle for the first time empirically whether Flemish and Francophone political actors put forward different issues. We deal with two questions: (1) *To what extent do Flemish and Francophone political actors (parties) hold different issue priorities;* (2) *Has the divergence in issue priorities increased over time?* In particular, it is important to ask to what degree parties have grown more divergent *across* the language communities relative to *within* these communities. It is entirely possible that the political crisis is driven not by increasing divergence in priorities between the groups so much as within these groups themselves.

If we find that there is more issue divergence across than within language groups we can substantiate the claim that both communities, or at least their key representatives, prioritize different issues. If we find the opposite to be the case, we can reject the idea that it is differences in issue priorities that drive Belgium's political problems. If we find that issue divergence increases through time we can better understand why the Belgian system became recently so burdened relative to an earlier period. But, if we find that issue divergence has not increased over time, it is hard to maintain the claim that Flemings and Francophones have grown apart issue-wise and that the institutional crisis is a consequence of that process.

To tackle these questions we rely on two types of longitudinal evidence. We examine the issue attention in the party manifestos of all main Flemish and Francophone parties from 1987 to 2010. And, we categorize all oral questions asked in the national parliament by the main parliamentary parties, again both Flemish and Francophone, from 1987 to 2010. We calculate issue overlap scores to see how large the issue divergence is between the different parties, and whether issue overlap between Flemish and Francophone parties is systematically lower than among parties in the same linguistic camp. And we check whether cross-linguistic issue overlap scores have gone down, or up, over time.

Belgian politics: two political systems in one

Belgium is a bipolar federal state (much of the discussion below is based on Deschouwer 2009). After the state reform of 1993, the country officially became a federal state – although many of the reforms were not put into force until 1995. The push for decentralization goes back much further – to the period post the First World War – but it

was only in the 1960 that the push toward devolution became politically relevant. Basically, the country consists of two large language communities: Dutch-speaking Flanders in the North (60% of the population) and French-speaking Wallonia in the South (30% of the population). In between is the capital of Brussels, officially bilingual but in fact largely French-speaking (10% of the Belgian population). Close to the German border, there is a very small German-speaking minority. Each community has its own regional government and parliament and, since 1995, its own elections (held at the same time in the three regions). The regions have many competences going from education and culture over the environment to (parts of) economic policy. There is, however, still a national (or federal) parliament and government. These national institutions still exert a lot of power and hold the competence of foreign affairs, defense, justice and police, social security, large chunks of the economic policy, energy, social policy etc. All Flemish parties, though some more than others, want some of these remaining national competences to be shifted to the regional level. All Francophone parties are very hesitant and do not want the federal level to further lose jurisdiction.

Already in the 1960s and 1970s, the former Belgian bilingual 'unitarian' political parties split along language lines into Flemish and Francophone versions of the prior 'parent' party. As a consequence, Belgium has two socialist, two Christian-democrat, two liberal, two green etc. parties. These parties are entirely separate and have their own structure, organization and program. They each compete elections in their own community and do not address the population at the other side of the language border. The media too are split up in two separate media systems with separate TV, newspapers, magazines, and, nowadays, news websites in both language communities. Hence, in essence, there are two independent political systems in Belgium that come together, or clash, at the federal level in the federal parliament and in the federal government. Linguistic tensions flare up regularly, as both regional interests have to be reconciled at the national level.

The period under study here, 1987-2010, covers an epoch in which the Belgian state was fundamentally reformed from a unitary into a federal state. There were two minor state reforms before the period we study, in 1970 and 1980, but three successive state reforms all leading to more competences for the regions took place in the time frame of our study: in 1988, 1993 and 2003. The 1993 reform, falling in our research period, probably was the most thorough of them all. It gave Belgium its federal structure and installed separate elections for the regional institutions for the first time to be organized in 1995.

Partly due to this ongoing process of devolution in which both communities gradually get their own institutions with separate elections, separate parliaments and governments, with separate parties that grow further apart over time, and with ever more separated media systems, we expect to find increasing issue divergence over time – particularly after major state reforms. Note that increasing issue divergence could both be the *consequence* as it could be the *cause* of the ongoing devolution process in Belgium. We study the issue attention of the key political actors in Belgian, the political parties. We expect to find a partisan reflection of the continuing devolution process with Flemish and Francophone parties drifting ever more apart over time.

There are some other reasons why we expect to find great, and growing, issue divergence in the Belgian federation. Socio-economic differences, firstly, are expected to translate in different socio-economic problems and thus to differences in the perceived urgency of dealing with certain problems. The Flemish region is more affluent than Wallonia and Brussels in almost any respect. Flanders has much lower levels of unemployment, lower poverty rates, better schools etc. We expect this to affect the priority of these problems and to lead to a decreasing issue overlap between Flemish and Francophone parties. The signals they get from their respective societies about the severity and urgency of problems differ, and so we expect them to differentially emphasize these problems.

Second, the mere fact that there are different political arenas can lead to a centripetal competition. Indeed, political competitors tend to closely observe each other's issue priorities closely and emulate each other's priorities (Vliegthart, Walgrave, and Meppelink 2011 (forthcoming)). Hence, as both party systems are fully separated this unavoidably leads to internal dynamics that could diminish the overlap between both systems. For example, once a party at one side of the language border starts successfully talking about an issue, chances are high that other competing parties in the same arena start emulating this party's strategy and incorporate this new issue into their discourse leading to a high degree of issue overlap between competing parties. The parties in the other, separate arena, have less stimuli to mimick the behavior of the innovator as this is not threatening their market share. As a consequence, the new issue gets widely adopted in the first and is neglected altogether in the second party system. This is what may have happened with the breakthrough of the anti-immigrant party *Vlaams Blok* (later *Vlaams Belang*) in the 1990s: the other Flemish parties, under pressure because of *Vlaams Belang's* successive victories, started devoting more attention to the immigration issue too. In French-speaking Belgium, though, no party adopted the (anti)immigration discourse as there was no successful first adopter.

Issue divergence among party elites: consequences and origins

Why is some degree of issue overlap important and issue divergence a problem? Issue overlap is important because political attention inevitably is in short supply. According to the original claim of the agenda-setting approach to politics, each political system has to solve the difficult problem of determining which issues deserve political attention. The problems in society that may have a political answer are infinite, but the time, energy, motivation and money of political actors is scarce. That is why Baumgartner & Jones argue that the decision to devote attention to a given issue and not to take into account other issues is the single most important policy process determining all other subsequent policy-making and decision-making steps (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). Hence, when different elites address different issues, when they decide to focus on one issue rather than on another, this may have great consequences for the kind of decisions that are reached and for whether decisions are reached in the first place. When priorities differ, actors are talking next to each other. Some amount of issue overlap simply is a precondition for decision-

making. The political conflict shifts from the question what solutions may fix what problems to the question what problems should be addressed in the first place. So, limited issue overlap hampers decision making and may lead to blockade and stasis.

The general idea that some amount of issue overlap between elites is necessary for a political system to be able to reach decisions and function properly, applies even more to strongly divided, consociational democracies than to majoritarian democracies. Lijphart (1999), in his classic contribution, claims that divided societies resort to consociational mechanisms to overcome their dividedness. These arrangements involve all kinds of institutional mechanisms by which power is spread over different actors and minorities are granted veto power. The Belgian federal state is a prime example of such accommodating structures that protect the minority, in this case the French-speakers, against the will of the majority, the Flemish. As a consequence, at the federal level, it is impossible for the Flemish to impose their agenda on the French-speaking parties as these Francophone parties, that constitutionally always have half of the ministers in the national government for example, can at all times block any political decision at the national level. The whole Belgian system is permeated with such checks and balances making it impossible for any majority to simply overrule any minority and impose their issues. Hence, due to its constitutional design, Flemish and Francophone parties have to agree on the issues they propose for decision at the national level otherwise making policy simply impossible.

Consociationalism, though, not only implies structural and constitutional brakes on majority will, it also involves a certain negotiation style and political culture among elites that seek consensus and are prepared to accommodate to overcome rift and conflict. In consociational systems, elite consensus is said to be a crucial asset (Lijphart 1975). It partly is the consociational behavior of the elites, and not only the consociational structures, that keeps these strongly divided countries together. We believe that addressing the same issues, and thus a certain level of issue overlap, may be one of the corner stones of the elite consensus in divided states. That elites are prepared, and publicly announce that they are, to talk about the issues the 'other side' thinks to be important is the first step to accommodation and compromise. The complete opposite of the centrum-seeking accommodating behavior of typical consociational elites is the neglect of the issues the other side deems important and the exclusive focus on the issues only the 'own side' cares about. In that sense, we argue that a certain amount of issue overlap in Belgium would be proof of the fact that consociationalism is still alive, to some extent. If Belgian elites would be increasingly talking about different issues this would, on the contrary, be proof of the fact that the common ground is crumbling and that elites would even have stopped caring about the same issues.

Therefore, gauging the amount of issue overlap between opposing political elites is a relevant undertaking in divided countries such as Belgium. Some degree of issue overlap is especially important for strongly divided countries like Belgium as it may be the glue that keeps the country together showing that elites across the divide still have a consensus about what issues they should deal with collectively. Issue overlap determines the extent to which extent collective decision-making is still, if at all, possible. We suggest that if we would find

very limited, and over time decreasing, overlap between the issue priorities of Flemish and Francophone elites that this would threaten the core of the Belgian state and challenge the consociational consensus.

We define ‘political elites’ in this chapter as being the political *parties* on both sides of the language border – we examine party manifestos and parties’ behavior in Belgian Parliament. This is warranted in this case by the fact that Belgium is widely considered to be a strong case of a *partitocracy*, an extreme case of party government: more than in most other countries, it are the political parties who decide in Belgium about policies and keep the entire state apparatus in a firm grasp (Deschouwer, de Winter, and della Porta 1996). If the parties would not address the same issues, then the main institutions of government will most certainly be internally divided. However, parties are not only relevant in the case of *partitocratic* Belgium. In fact, the key argument made in Filippov et al’s (Filippov, Ordeshook, and Shvetsova 2004) seminal book about federalism is that in any federal system political parties are the key actors leading to sustainment of the federal compromise or not. Each federal arrangement has redistributive effects meaning that there always are incentives to renegotiate the constitutional equilibrium. Some parties representing regional interests will unavoidably have votes and power to gain when they challenge the status quo and ask for more autonomy and less solidarity with other regions. That is why, the stability of federations, Filippov c.s. claim, critically depends on mechanisms and stimuli that keep these omnipresent centrifugal tendencies among political parties in check. In short: it is parties’ behavior that decides whether a federal system survives or collapses. Obviously, this party argument makes our examination of Belgian parties’ issue priorities a relevant undertaking.

Note, that we do not claim that when parties on both sides of the language border would effectively address the same issues, with large amounts of issue overlap as a consequence, that the Belgian federation would be out of the danger zone and that its continued existence guaranteed. Addressing the same issues is one thing, adhering to the same *solutions* for solving the problems an entirely different. There is a fundamental difference between the prioritization of attention and the preferred solution – although they are closely related according to the selective emphasis (Budge and Farlie 1983) and the issue ownership (Petrocik 1989) theories of political parties. As Sigelman and Buell (2004) argue, even if parties talk about the same issues, they can still opt for different solutions, remain very vague about their preferred solution, or even mainly attack an opponents’ point of view while talking about a common issue. Yet, we do claim that some agreement about what the issues are that merit political action serves a performing political system.

Data and methods

To assess the level of issue overlap between the two main Belgian language communities and to tap potential changes in issue overlap through time, we draw on extensive data regarding party manifestos and parliamentary questioning over more than two decades (1987-2010). These data yield a representative picture of the issues Flemish and Francophone political parties cared about in the period under study.

All Belgian party manifestos drafted for general elections in 1987, 1991, 1995, 1999, 2003, and 2007 were coded for issue, sentence per sentence following the basic methodology devised by the Comparative Manifesto Project (Budge et al. 2001) and later adapted by Zicha and Guinaudeau (2009). Belgium's party system was already strongly fragmented in the 1980s with six Flemish (CVP (CD&V), SP (Sp.a), VLD, VU (N-VA), VB and Agalev (Groen!)) and four Francophone (PSC (CDH), PS, PRL (MR), and Ecolo) parties. Both party systems are parallel with christian-democrats (CD&V and CDH), social-democrats (Sp.a and PS), liberals (VLD and MR), and greens (Groen! and Ecolo) on both sides of the language border. Additionally, in Flanders, there is a strong Flemish-nationalist party (N-VA) and a right-wing populist party (VB). In total, for the ten parties and the six elections, we issue-coded 190,480 (quasi)sentences.

Regarding the parliamentary activities, we focus on oral questions and interpellations of these same parties in the 1987-2010 time frame. Both activities target government, and require oral answers in Parliament from a cabinet minister. Questions and interpellations may criticize governmental policy or non-policy, but can also contain simple questions for information. Government MPs are also engaged in these activities in Belgium but opposition MPs are far more active when it comes to oral questions and interpellations (Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2010 (forthcoming)). Questions and interpellations can be considered as representative for the symbolic parliamentary agenda: they often do not entail tangible consequences, but their aim is foremost to communicate with the public. Drawing upon official parliamentary records and using the parliamentary thesaurus, we produce a dataset containing 48,469 parliamentary actions for the whole period, on a weekly basis.

In each case we examine the complete agenda – or at least, as complete an agenda as we can reasonably consider. We coded each dataset using the codebook of the Comparative Agendas Project which is based on Baumgartner and Jones' (1993) original US codebook containing 250 specific codes. We rely on rather thin content analysis – we consider only issue saliency, and do not get into the actual content, framing, direction or tone of the issue attention on the different agendas – but we code issues in great detail. These detailed codes are then aggregated into 22 major issue codes.

To calculate issue overlap, we use the measure developed by Sigelman and Buell (2004) and illustrated in equation 1. The overlap score lies between 0 and 100, and indicates the percentage agreement in the attention profiles of the two parties agenda's being compared. The maximum score (100) means that the two parties have a hundred per cent identical distribution of attention; the minimum score refers to the complete absence of any overlap. The score is calculated by summing the absolute differences in the percentage of attention dedicated to each policy topic across all policy topics. In our coding scheme there are 22 topics. Dividing this sum by two calibrates the measure to be between 0 and 100, while subtracting the result from 100 translates this measure of difference to one of similarity or percentage of overlap.

Equation 1: Buell and Sigelman's (2008) Issue Overlap Score

$$100 - \frac{\left(\sum_{i=1}^{22} |P_1 - P_2| \right)}{2} = \text{Issue Overlap}$$

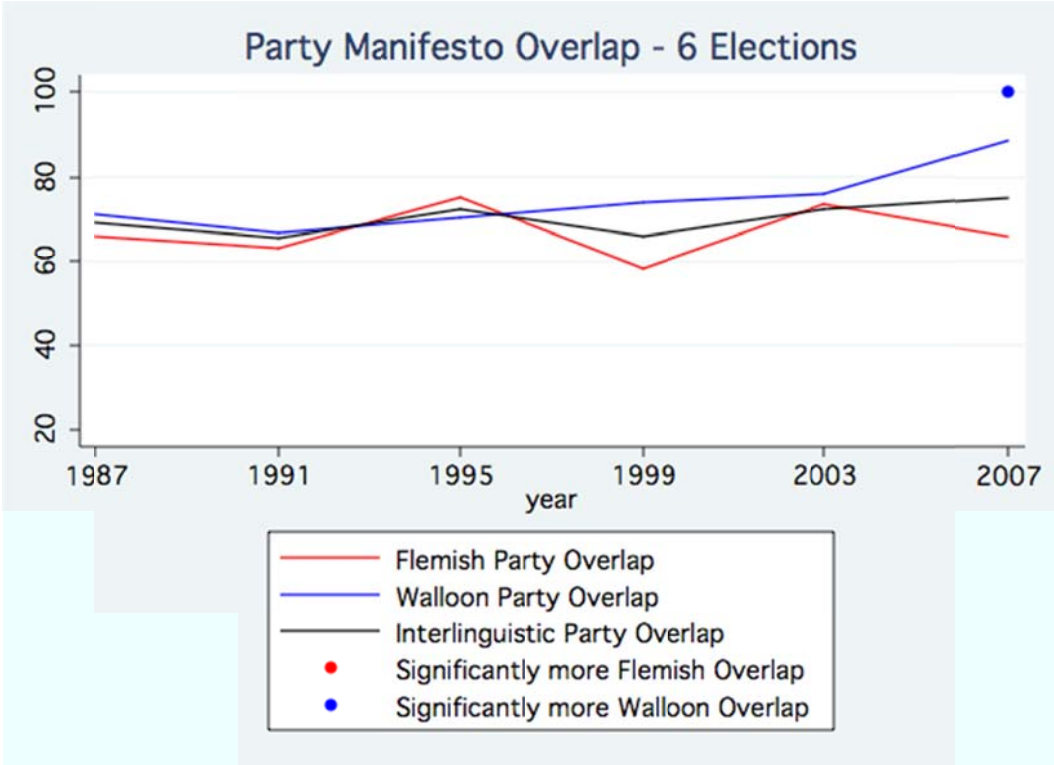
Issue overlap across parties over time

We examine the amount of issue overlap – issue convergence or divergence – among parties across the language border in Belgium. Are the Flemish and the Francophone political systems two different systems in terms of issue priorities? To be able to assess the amount of overlap, or the absence thereof, *between* both communities' issue priorities, we need a benchmark. Therefore, we consider the issue overlap *within* the actors of a given region as the relevant comparison. When there would be less issue overlap between actors across communities than within communities, we can state that there are divergent issue priorities in the two main Belgian regions.

Overlap can be calculated on different aggregation levels: years, months and weeks. Indeed, different parties may devote attention to the same issues in parliament when we take a longer, average period (months or years) into account, or they may, even in the same week, devote attention to the same issues. These different aggregation levels are relevant. We argue that true issue overlap and strong issue convergence not only imply that two actors devote roughly an equal amount of attention to the same issue over time but that they do so *at roughly the same time* (see also: Risse and Van de Steeg 2003). Indeed, when Flemish parties strongly focus on, say, the unemployment issue in month A and the Francophone parties mainly address the environmental issue in that same month and when they both do exactly the opposite in month B, the issue overlap on an higher aggregate level may still be high. Yet, it is clear that both actors, in a given month, give diverging signals about what is important and what is not. So, we value the correlation at a lower aggregation level as a better measure of politically relevant issue overlap than at a higher level of aggregation. Do actors on both sides of the language border bother about the same issue contemporaneously?

We start with the party manifestos for which the temporal aggregation is less of an issue as we can only compare the four-yearly issue priorities of the parties. Do parties address the same issues in their manifestos for the same elections? Figure 1 has the answer. It contains three issue overlap scores: (1) the average issue overlap scores of all Flemish parties amongst each other, (2) the average issue overlap scores of all French-speaking parties amongst each other, (3) the average issue overlap scores of all Flemish parties and Francophone parties with all parties on the other side of the language border.

Figure 1: Issue Overlap between Manifestos over Time



The figure shows that the issue overlap between party manifestos in Belgium scores on average around seventy per cent. So, parties in Belgium tend to address a fair amount of similar issues during the campaign. It is not the case that they talk next to each other all the time, as a part of the issue ownership literature suggests (Budge and Farlie 1983). Although parties propose, or are expected to propose, deliberately different programs, they all more or less deal with the same issues.

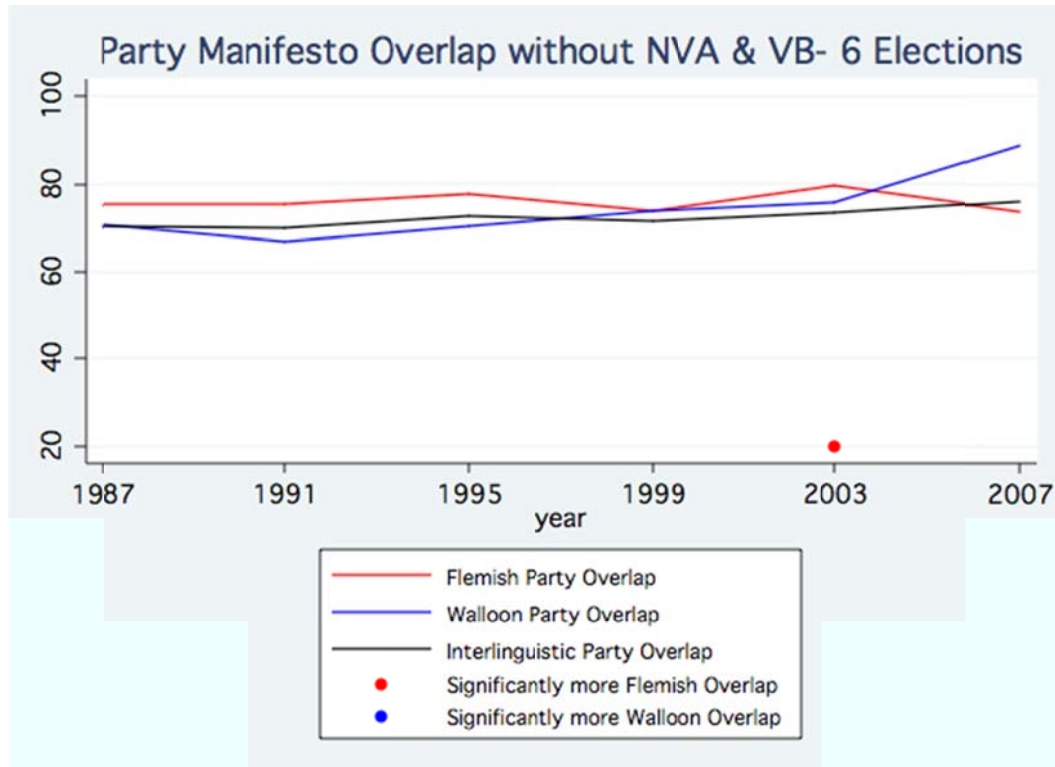
There is no notable difference in issue overlap across as compared to within language communities with the exception of the 2007 manifestos where the Walloon parties tend to overlap with each on average, statistically significantly more than they do with Flemish parties, on average¹. On the whole, this suggests that, on average, Flemish parties are not addressing more different issues than Francophone parties do, and vice versa. So, although the electoral arenas are clearly separate, parties north and south of the language border do not have significantly divergent issue priorities. The issue overlap between the parties on the Flemish side seems to be slightly smaller than among the parties on the French side: intra-Flemish overlap scores are most of the time smaller than intra-Francophone scores. This makes sense as the Flemish party system is more fragmented with some niche (N-VA) or even pariah parties (VB) that might display systematically less issue overlap with the other parties. The French-speaking party system, with less parties, seems a bit more integrated with somewhat higher degrees of issue overlap.

Indeed, if we remove these two Flemish parties for which no prominent equivalent exists among the French-speaking parties in Figure 2, we see that Francophone parties are

¹ Tests of significance were two-sample unpaired comparison of means using the standard t-test.

no longer significantly more in agreement than they are with Flemish parties. Rather, only in 2003 do the core non-nationalist Flemish parties appear to be in greater accord with each than they are with their French-speaking compatriots.

Figure 2: Issue Overlap between Manifestos over Time without N-VA and VB



Most importantly, there is no tendency whatsoever towards increasing issue divergence over time. The ‘inter-region’ overlap line follows both ‘intra-region’ lines closely. Only one of the diachronic differences between the means in Figure 1 is significant. Even so, there simply is no trend in the data. Although Belgium has gone through a substantial process of devolution with many competences being shifted to the regions and an increasingly federal constitutional structure with separate regional institutions including own elections, we do not observe that both regional party systems drift apart through time. They are not becoming more different over time but stick choosing similar issues to prioritize in federal institutions.

A potential explanation for this finding is that even in a split party system one has parties belonging to the same ideological party family on both sides of the language border. Maybe these ‘sister’ parties assure that parties on both sides keep addressing the same issues? There is some evidence pointing in that direction. The average issue overlap between similar ideological parties is in fact rather high as we can see in Table 1, where we compare overlap among party pairs. Of the twenty-four inter-regional overlap scores, the overlap scores among the ideological similar parties (CD&V-CDH, Sp.a-PS, VLD-MR) are among the highest. These three combinations are each among the top-6 of the highest scores (the highest inter-regional overlap being between both christian-democrat parties CD&V and

CDH with 78.7). So, parties on both sides of the language border sharing the same ideology – these were formerly united parties – do refer more to similar issues than the other parties. Wrapping up, the data do not reveal a particularly strong issue divergence along linguistic lines when it comes to party manifestos. Parties differ, of course, and lay emphasis on different issues. But the linguistic differences are not the main vault line, ideological differences seem to be more important.

Table 1: Intra- and Inter-Linguistic Party by Party Comparisons of Average Issue Overlap across 6 Elections.

FLEMISH PARTY ISSUE OVERLAP			WALLOON PARTY ISSUE OVERLAP			INTER-LINGUISTIC ISSUE OVERLAP		
Party pair	Mean	sd	Party pair	Mean	sd	Party pair	Mean	sd
SPA_VB	54.8	19.2	ECOLO_MR	66.6	18.5	ECOLO_VB	59.6	25.3
GROEN_VB	54.8	17.2	ECOLO_PS	72.1	15.9	CDH_VB	61	16.5
NVA_SPA	62	11.3	CDH_ECOLO	72.1	14.9	PS_VB	63.6	18.5
GROEN_NVA	62.4	11.5	CDH_MR	77.8	3.9	MR_VB	63.6	11.4
CDV_VB	63.8	16	MR_PS	78	7.1	MR_GROEN	64	9.9
VB_VLD	64.6	15.8	CDH_PS	80	4.2	CDH_GROEN	64.1	6.7
GROEN_VLD	66.6	8.2				MR_SPA	66.9	11.2
NVA_VB	67.8	11.8				MR_NVA	66.9	7.8
SPA_VLD	70.2	8.4				ECOLO_NVA	67.4	18.1
NVA_VLD	70.5	5.8				CDH_NVA	67.7	11.2
CDV_NVA	70.5	4.6				ECOLO_CDV	69.1	16.8
GROEN_SPA	71.1	7.3				PS_GROEN	70	8.1
CDV_GROEN	71.9	7.4				ECOLO_VLD	70.2	15.9
CDV_SPA	76.1	9				CDH_SPA	70.7	11.5
CDV_VLD	76.1	6.5				ECOLO_SPA	71.5	16.6
						ECOLO_GROEN	71.7	18.9
						PS_NVA	72.2	6.6
						CDH_VLD	75.3	3.9
						PS_SPA	75.5	9
						MR_VLD	75.8	2.3
						MR_CDV	76.8	3.2
						PS_CDV	78.6	4.3
						PS_VLD	78.7	4
						CDH_CDV	78.7	7.6

For parliamentary questioning, we calculate similar issue overlap scores. Figure 3 contains the overlap on a yearly level, Figure 4 on a monthly level. Again we show three issue overlap scores: Flemish parties amongst each other, French-speaking parties amongst each other, and Flemish parties and Francophone parties with all parties on the other side of the language border.

Figure 3: Issue Overlap between Parliamentary Questions over Time (years)

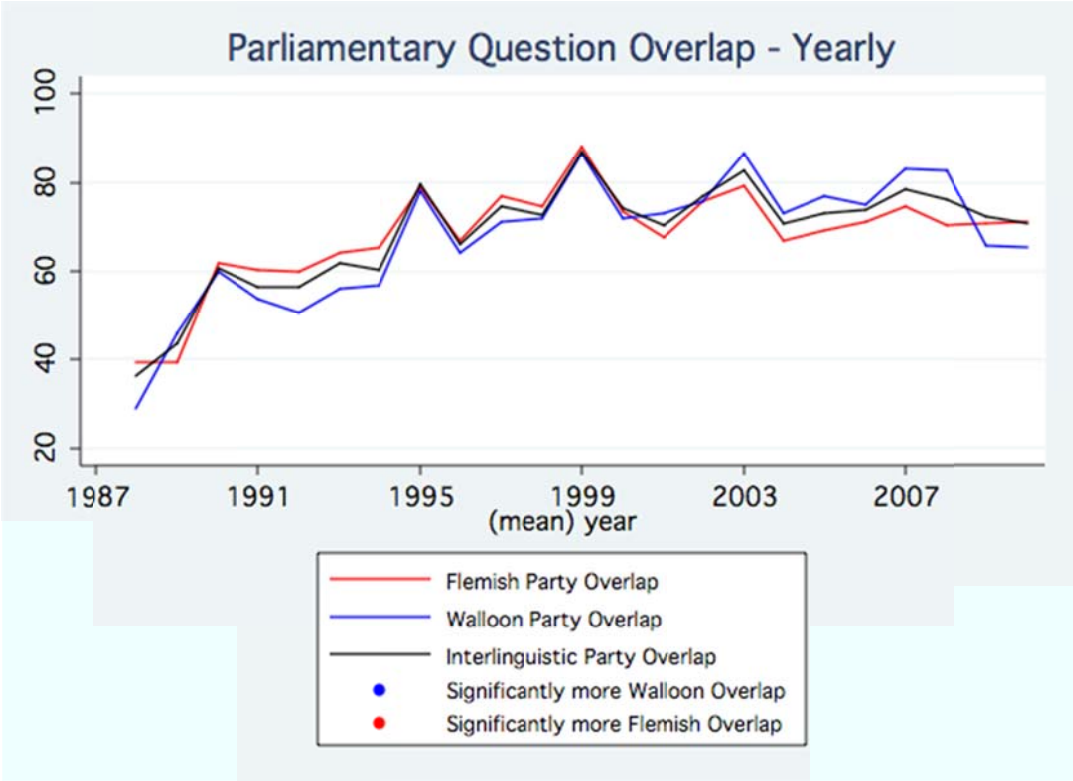
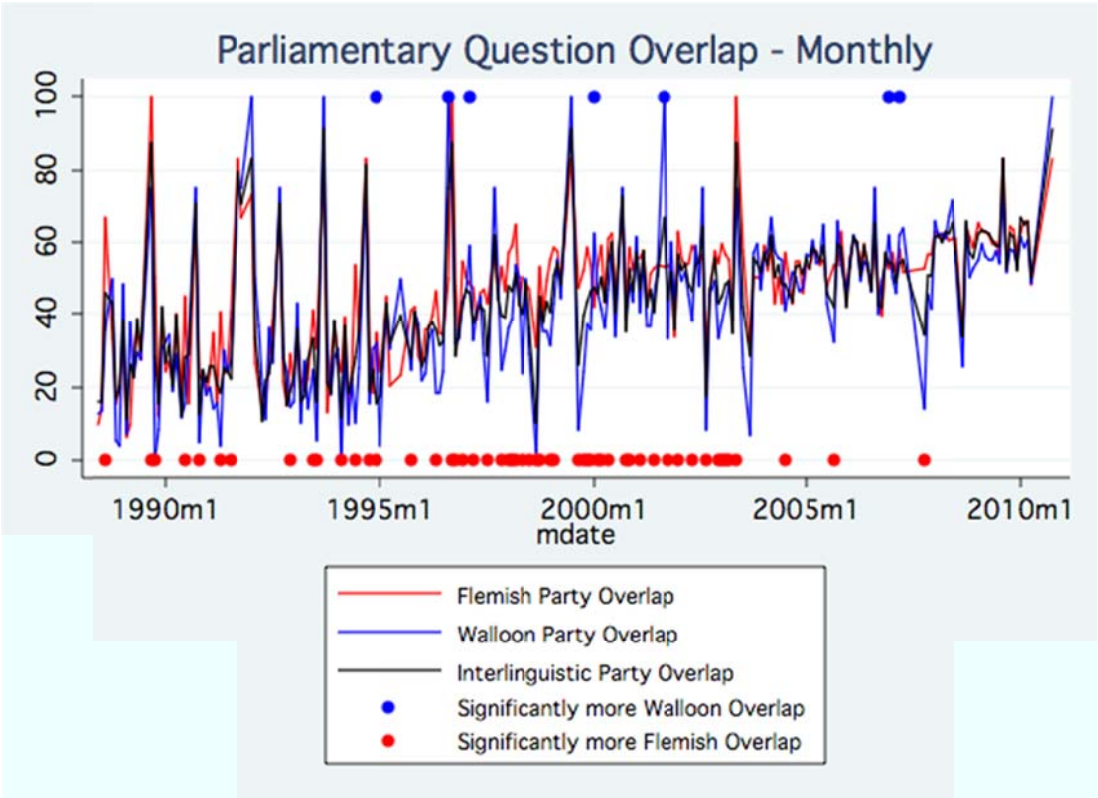


Figure 4: Issue Overlap between Parliamentary Questions over Time (months)



The data on parliamentary questioning lead to even more contradictory results than those for the party manifestos. First of all, the average overlap between the topics parties are addressing in parliament are similarly high (around 70 per cent) if we consider whole years (Figure 3). This is almost exactly the same figure as what we found for the manifestos. On a monthly basis issue overlap is lower (around 45 per cent). This means that parties do address the same issues in parliament globally but that, at a given point in time, their attention to issues is less concordant, sharing only priorities that overlap only 45% (Figure 4)².

Second, and most surprisingly, there is no tendency towards increasing cross regional issue divergence over time. During the 23 years of observation encompassing a number of substantial state reforms, we do not observe a drifting apart of the parties in parliament. On the contrary, both Figure 2 and Figure 3 do suggest the exact opposite: there is a clear tendency towards *more* issue overlap through time. Both the monthly and yearly data show that there was a visible increase to a higher degree of average issue overlap from 1995 onwards. In the 2000s the trend stabilizes but the overall picture points towards more rather than less integration of the Belgian party system. Table 2 presents analyses of these series using both difference of means tests of the period before and after the implementation of the 1995 reforms, and a Chow test (conducted with Wald F tests of an AR(1) model and dummies to capture the pre and post-1995 averages). Results suggest that there was a statistically significant structural break towards *greater* issue overlap among and between the parties in each language group.

Table 2: Analysis of Monthly and Yearly Series of Parliamentary Questions for Structural Breaks between the Pre- and Post-1995 Reform Period

	Months	Years
Avg. Overlap in Questions by Walloon Parties		
Difference of Means t-test	-6.92***	-6.69***
Wald F test	14.98***	6.8**
Avg. Overlap in Questions by Flemish Parties		
Difference of Means t-test	-9.41***	-5.12***
Wald F test	22.96***	4.31**
Avg. Overlap in Questions Inter-linguistically		
Difference of Means t-test	-8.6***	-6.9***
Wald F test	18.87***	10.24**
N =	232	22

Note: * sig<.05, ** sig<.01, ***sig<.001

Third, there are no structural differences between Flemish and Francophone parties, or at least these differences are not larger than among Flemish and among Francophone parties at the yearly level, as indicated by the lack of any indicators of significance at the

² We also calculated weekly issue overlap scores and these, not surprisingly, are even lower: average issue overlap scores are well below forty per cent meaning that during the same Question Time sessions parties do tend to put forward different rather than similar issues.

bottom and top of Figure 3. In Figure 4 with monthly scores, however, Flemish parties have in many months significantly higher average overlap with each other than with their Walloon compatriots (see numerous red dots at the bottom of the figure) but any trend is broken in the early 2000's. In the 2000's, the average differences in overlap among Flemish parties compared to the overlap between Flemish and Francophone parties, disappeared. So, the inter-regional overlap grew over time and the differences with the intra-regional overlap disappeared.

Again, more detailed evidence taking pairs of parties into account suggests that ideological siblings across the language border tend, more than other pairs of parties, to address similar issues in parliament. At the yearly aggregation level shown in Table 3, the highest degree of overlap is, again, between both liberal parties: MR and VLD have a 78.6 per cent overlap in their questioning. Also both socialist (73.0) and both christian-democrat (72.1) parties have relatively high overlap scores.

Table 3: Intra- and Inter-Linguistic Party by Party Comparisons of Average Overlap in Parliamentary Questions

FLEMISH PARTY ISSUE OVERLAP			WALLOON PARTY ISSUE OVERLAP			INTER-LINGUISTIC ISSUE OVERLAP		
Party pair	mean	sd	Party pair	mean	sd	Party pari	Mean	sd
GROEN_VB	56.4	16.8	CDH_ECOLO	61.7	17.8	PS_GROEN	57.1	11.8
GROEN_NVA	60.6	10.8	ECOLO_MR	66.8	14.5	CDH_GROEN	58.2	13.6
GROEN_VLD	60.6	11.8	ECOLO_PS	66.9	15.2	MR_GROEN	60.7	11.9
CDV_GROEN	61.6	11.6	CDH_PS	68.1	20	ECOLO_NVA	64	13.9
GROEN_SPA	63.8	11.2	CDH_MR	70.2	14.6	ECOLO_VB	64	18.2
CDV_VB	66.8	21.2	MR_PS	71.8	13.7	CDH_VB	65.5	19.6
VB_VLD	67.9	18				ECOLO_CDV	66.1	15.5
SPA_VB	68.7	21.5				ECOLO_GROEN	66.2	15.1
NVA_VB	70.4	19.3				ECOLO_VLD	66.7	13.1
NVA_SPA	71.7	12.4				PS_VB	67.9	22.5
NVA_VLD	72	10.5				CDH_NVA	69.1	13.1
CDV_NVA	72.6	12.6				ECOLO_SPA	69.1	12.2
SPA_VLD	75.8	11.7				CDH_SPA	70	19.3
CDV_VLD	76.1	12.7				MR_VB	70.6	18.6
CDV_SPA	76.2	11.8				PS_NVA	70.8	11.8
						CDH_VLD	71	14.4
						PS_VLD	71.8	13.9
						MR_SPA	72	14.2
						CDH_CDV	72.1	17.8
						MR_CDV	72.2	17.6
						PS_CDV	73.1	15.8
						PS_SPA	73.1	14.2
						MR_NVA	74	8.9
						MR_VLD	78.6	8.4

Concluding, has the issue overlap between Flemish and Francophone political actors decreased over time? Have we witnessed a gradual disintegration of the Belgian political system as both language communities have become preoccupied with different issues? The

evidence presented in this section does not support that claim, on the contrary. Party manifestos of Flemish and Francophone parties have not drifted apart in terms of the issues they address. In parliamentary questioning, in contrast, the parliamentary parties on both side of the language border have come considerably closer over time discussing more than before the same issues.

Discussion

Contrary to the conventional wisdom in Belgian politics, we found no diminishing inter-regional overlap in priorities among political actors in Belgium. Flemish and Francophone parties do not drift apart and do not systematically address dissimilar issues. How come? Why would both party systems keep addressing the same issues when they got increasingly separated over time? We see a number of potential explanations. They are suggestive only as we cannot test them empirically.

First, the fact that parties and MPs institutionally still belong to the same system limits their possibility to drift apart. National MPs' questions and manifestos for the national elections, naturally, are limited in issue scope precisely because they are institutionally embedded in a national system. For example, it makes no sense to start asking questions in the Belgian national parliament about education as this is a competence of the regions and there is no national minister of education to be addressed. The same applies to party manifestos: why propose policy measures that are not relevant for the elections at stake? In a recent paper, Chaques and Palau develop a similar argument when they examined the level of issue divergence of different Spanish regions. They conclude that changes in jurisdiction affected the issues that got legislative attention by the autonomous regions and by the Spanish state (Chaques and Palau 2010). So, the division of competences over the national and regional level limits the spread of issues that can be raised in the national parliament and leads to continuing issue overlap. To test this idea, we would need similar issue attention data from both regional parliaments. In other words: institutional constraints do prevent parties from addressing dissimilar issues.

Second, if politics is about solving real problems then there is no a priori reason to expect that these problems would be very different in two adjacent regions in the heart of Europe. Policy agenda scholars argue that agendas and issue attention is driven by the intrusion of new, or old and updated, information. Studies showed that shifts in government composition, from a left-wing to a right-wing government for example, do not necessarily translate in policy changes. As the to be solved problems stay the same, so does governments' attention to issues. Other policy studies showed that, even in very different political systems like Denmark and the United States, the same issues catch political actors' attention around the same time (Green-Pedersen and Wilkerson 2006). This suggests that, even across different countries, governments are forced to devote attention to the same issues as problems and challenges are somehow universal and tend to arise more or less at the same time in different nations. Flemish and Francophone actors in Belgium may not drift

apart considering their issue priorities because the real-world problems these actors have to deal with each in their own region are similar.

Third and closely connected, although the real world problems in both regions may differ in severity, there *is* more unemployment in Francophone Belgium and while traffic and congestion problems *are* more present in Flanders, this may not translate in different issue priorities of the respective populations. Indeed, there is some evidence that both publics, the Francophone in the south and the Flemish in the north, consider the same issues to be important. A recent survey among Flemish and Francophone voters revealed that their issue priorities do not diverge much (Partirep voter survey, elections 2009, <http://www.partirep.eu>). Indeed, when asked explicitly about eleven issues to what extent these would be important factors in voting, both publics emphasize the same issues: in both regions respondents said they mainly cared about the financial crisis, social security, and unemployment. These three issues covered two third of the first priorities in each part of the country. Hence, while problems may be different, the different populations still consider the same problems to be important on both sides of the language border which pushes parties to keep mainly addressing these same issues.

Finally, we presented some evidence suggesting that the fact that party systems on both sides of the cultural border contain similar and ideologically related parties puts a brake on the potential issue divergence. The party systems may be separated with parties only competing in their region but it still is largely similar. Both party systems contain socialist, christian-democrat, liberal and green parties. In Flanders, these traditional parties are complemented by substantial Flemish-nationalist and right-wing populist parties. The former sibling parties do not systematically collaborate nor do they have a privileged relationship but due to similar ideologies they put forward similar issues, address comparable topics in their manifestos, and cover the same issues in parliament.

Conclusion

The research question the paper started with was double: (1) To what extent do Flemish and Francophone political parties hold different issue priorities; (2) Has the divergence in issue priorities increased over time? The answer we provided is pretty straightforward. Flemish and Francophone parties do hold to some extent different issue priorities but these differences are not bigger than the differences among Flemish and among Francophone parties. The overall picture is one of considerable issue overlap. Regarding the evolution over time, issue overlap has not decreased. In their manifestos, parties have not drifted apart issue-wise; in their parliamentary questioning parties even increasingly addressed the same issues both across as within the language communities. So, we see no signs of a disintegrating party system, at least not when considered from an issue priority perspective. Our findings directly challenge the idea that the present blockade and the stalemate in the Belgian system is due to diverging issue priorities. We see no signs of a diminishing issue integration of the Belgian system during the last two decades and, hence,

the present crisis in Belgium is not due to increasing priority differences on both sides of the language border.

This conclusion does not imply that the conflict between the two language communities in Belgium is imaginary or purely symbolic nor that there are no real political differences between both regions. It only implies that political elites in Belgium still have a common ground as they tended, and tend, to prioritize similar issues. The basic precondition for elite consensus and accommodation is thus present. Our quest drawing on the agenda-setting approach has proven to be useful. It allows us to exclude one potential explanation for the Belgian crisis. Our agenda-setting approach focusing on issues and on the attention for issues sheds new light on the crucial conflict dimension and structuring feature of a country like Belgium. Drawing on agenda-setting, we could demonstrate empirically that some of the most common claims about the Belgian system - that Flemings and Francophones, due to economic and cultural differences, have different issue priorities - does not hold the track. The Belgian federation may be blocked and bogged down but, as far as we can tell, it is not diverging issue priorities that causes the deadlock.

If not a matter of agenda-setting, then what is the issue in Belgium? We leave it to others to tackle this question empirically but we suspect that the *solutions* proposed by political actors of both sides of the language border to solve the largely common problems may be increasingly divergent and contradictory. It requires another study and another design to test this preference-based and positional hypothesis regarding the Belgian stalemate.

One could even go a step further and even reverse the argument by claiming that exactly *because* both communities care about the same issues they cannot make compromise and accommodate. In fact, we can assume that is more difficult for parties to give in on issues they have prioritized. When on both sides of the border parties have publicly and explicitly adopted contradictory positions, for example in their party manifestos and their parliamentary discourse, it is more difficult to compromise afterwards. This is what seems to have happened after the 2010 elections: parties north and south both stressed before the elections that a major state reform (Flemish), or blocking a state reform (Francophones), was a priority. They addressed the same issue, state reform, but adopted diametrically opposite positions. Hence, we suggest that issue overlap could both be a precondition for accommodation and compromise – this is what we took as point of departure here – as well as a hindrance for accommodation and compromise.

We believe our results exemplify the agenda-setting power of institutions. We argued that at least a part of the explanation for the continuing high issue overlap between both regional elites in Belgium is due to the fact that the federal institutions force parties to talk about the same issues. The constitutional competences and jurisdiction of the federal state are a compelling force keeping elites in line. Issue priorities voiced by political actors are not only a matter of information at these actors' disposal nor of their preferences but also a matter of institutions that force them to address the proper issues within the proper institutional frame work. Laying bare this agenda-setting impact (constraint) of institutions requires systematic comparative research across different institutions.

Finally, do our findings have any relevance beyond the Belgian case? They might. In fact, Belgium is not a unique case but can be considered as an example of a linguistically divided nation going through subsequent devolution phases. Many federal and confederal countries witness similar conflicts regarding centralization and decentralization. We think a similar analysis as the one that has been conducted in this chapter may be useful to understand centrifugal of centripetal tendencies in these other countries too.

(To add/change in the next version:

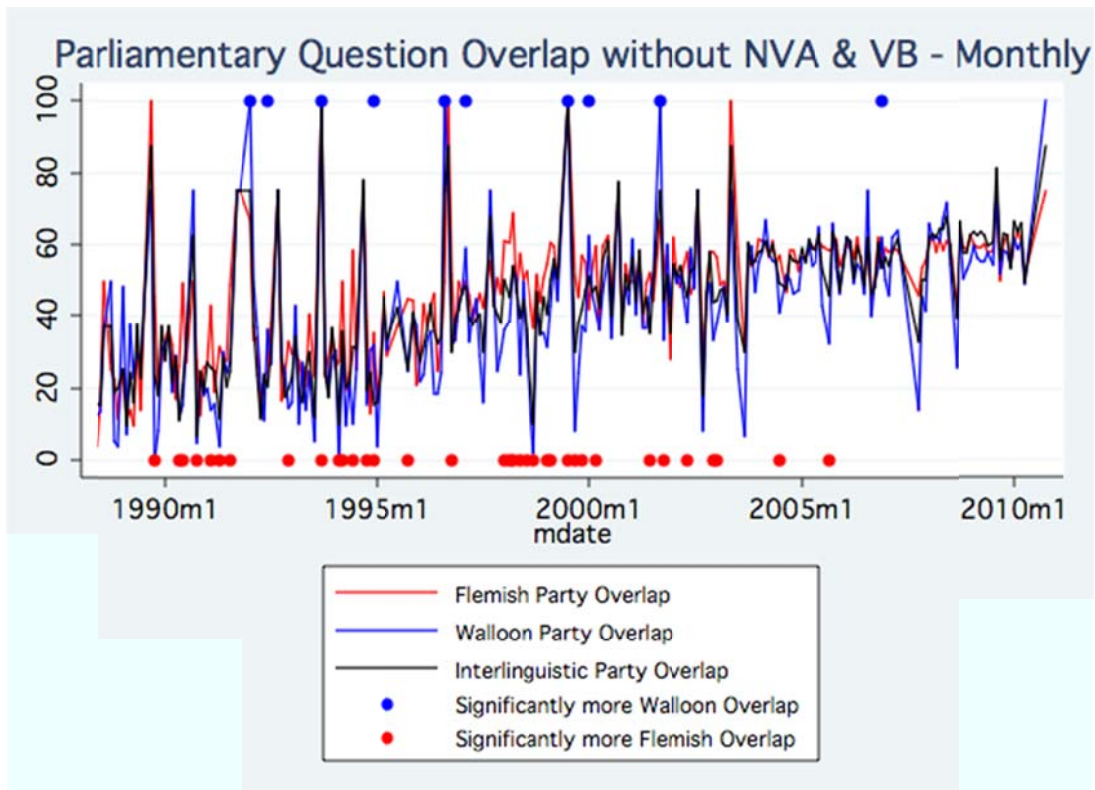
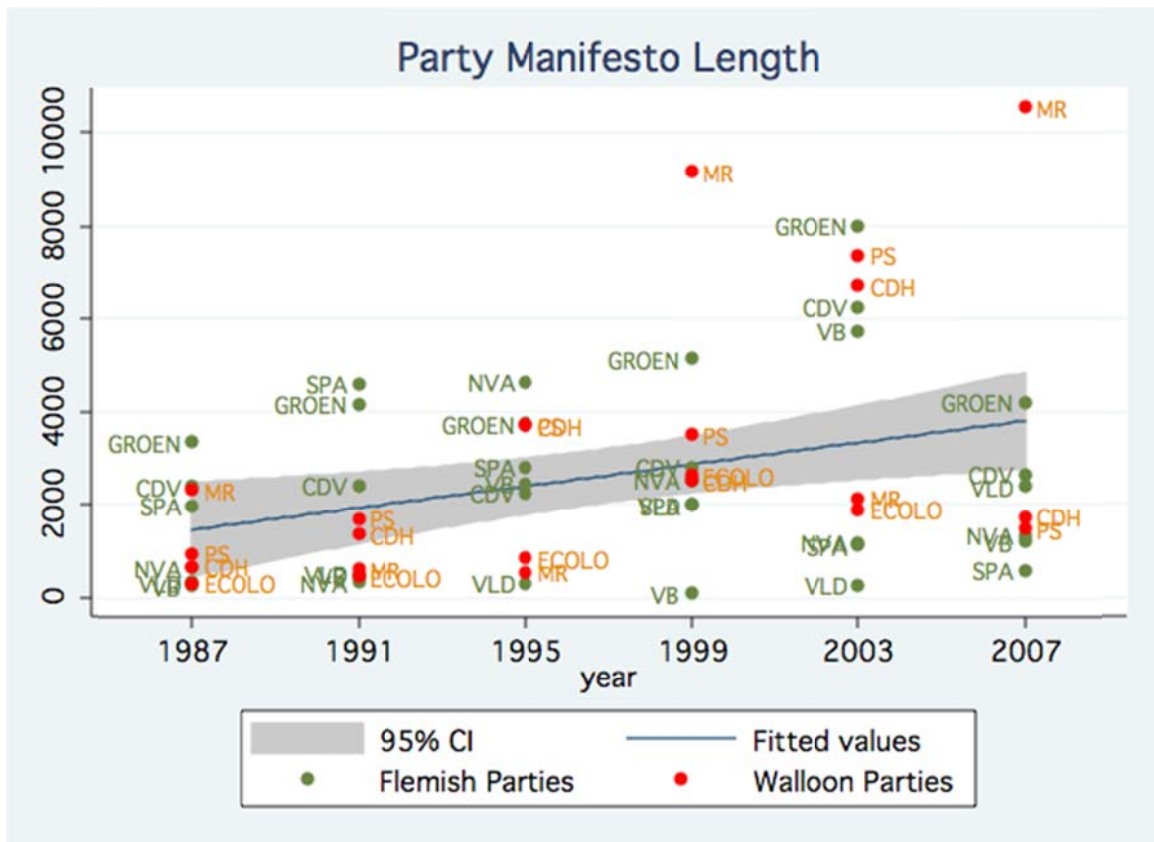
- Focus on specific issues and see whether there are stronger differences in priorities regarding some issues compared to others. E.g. do the Flemings care more about immigration, mobility, state reform than the Francophones?
- Greater attention to the effect of the 2003 (and 1995) constitutional reforms statistically. Are these structural breaks?
- Is convergence the consequence of decreasing diversity (because topics have been moved to the regions)?
- Convergence can also be the consequence of the regions focusing more and more on the state reform issue itself?
- Systematically change 'Walloon' into 'Francophone' in the tables and graphs.
- Significance in the tables: also test whether inter-regional is sometimes higher than within-region scores. May compensate what we see now.
- Test with 4digit codes.
- Put figures and tables in same font.)

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ERRATA: Things that went unused but that we do in fact have (if you want to work these in):
 Plot of Average Number of Quasi-Sentences per Manifesto by Year



Overlap in Monthly Questioning.

FLEMISH PARTY ISSUE OVERLAP			WALLOON PARTY ISSUE OVERLAP			INTER-LINGUISTIC ISSUE OVERLAP		
Party Pair	Mean	sd	Party Pair	Mean	sd	Party Pair	Mean	sd
GROEN_VB	41.4	21.9	ECOLO_PS	39.8	26.9	ECOLO_NVA	38.6	22.9
GROEN_VLD	43.1	20.9	ECOLO_MR	39.8	21.7	PS_GROEN	38.8	22.9
GROEN_SPA	43.5	21.5	CDH_ECOLO	42.1	25	MR_GROEN	39.7	20.6
CDV_GROEN	43.5	19	MR_PS	43.7	24.1	PS_NVA	40.9	24.3
NVA_SPA	44.4	25.5	CDH_PS	44.3	27.8	ECOLO_VLD	41.6	22.8
GROEN_NVA	44.4	25.6	CDH_MR	44.3	23.7	ECOLO_VB	41.8	23.5
NVA_VLD	44.7	20.9				CDH_GROEN	41.9	23.3
NVA_VB	46.1	23.8				ECOLO_SPA	42.3	24.4
CDV_NVA	47.2	22.5				MR_NVA	42.6	21.2
SPA_VB	48.5	24.8				CDH_NVA	43.5	25.4
VB_VLD	48.6	22.5				ECOLO_GROEN	44	27.5
SPA_VLD	49.4	23				ECOLO_CDV	44.1	23.1
CDV_SPA	52.1	22.5				PS_VLD	44.5	24.8
CDV_VB	52.4	25.4				PS_VB	45.2	23.8
CDV_VLD	53.1	22.3				PS_SPA	45.5	27.8
						CDH_VLD	46.5	24.6
						MR_SPA	46.6	22.6
						PS_CDV	47.1	25.7
						CDH_VB	47.1	25.7
						CDH_SPA	47.3	27.8
						MR_VB	47.9	21.4
						CDH_CDV	49.2	26.2
						MR_CDV	49.4	21.4
						MR_VLD	49.8	21