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## ***DOES ELECTORAL CHANGE REFLECT PARTY POSITIONING? FLANDERS 1991-1995***

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**Stephen D. Fisher<sup>\*</sup> and Marc Swyngedouw<sup>\*\*</sup>**

One way to think about party competition is to imagine that political parties take positions in a policy space. This space represents the major issue dimensions that are important to voters and on which the parties have policies. Voters then vote for the party that best represents their preferences, *i.e.* the one that is closest to them in the policy space. This is known as the spatial (or proximity) theory of voting. Since parties and voters can move over time in the policy space, voters change who they vote for. Electoral change may also be the result of voter uncertainty and lack of information over party positions. Except in cases of radical change in party positions or public opinion, voting switching is much more likely to occur between parties which are similar to each other than between parties which are strongly polarised. This is the proximity rule of electoral change.

This paper tests this hypothesis using data on electoral change in Flanders from 1991 to 1995. This was chosen both because there is a high quality panel survey covering these elections, and because it is an interesting case with a complicated party system. There are four major parties whose characters are roughly similar to equivalent parties in other western European countries, namely, the greens, socialists, Christian democrats and liberals. However there are also two Flemish nationalist parties. One is socially liberal (*Volksunie*), but the other is an anti-immigrant and anti-system extreme-right protest party (*Vlaams Blok*). How the relations between these parties can be summarised by positions in a policy space is a complex question. It is also one that requires an answer in order to test the proximity rule of electoral change.

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Various methods, including expert surveys, manifesto coding, candidate surveys, voter self-placement and voter placement of parties, are considered. Each tells a different story about the party system, and it is hard to know whether the complex issue space can be simplified. Given the lack of a definitive answer to the question of where the parties lie, a straightforward test of the proximity rule against a single standard is impossible. Instead, we look to see whether the latent spatial model which best explains the pattern of electoral change is consistent with the general impression gained from other sources.

There are two methods to estimate a spatial model from the pattern of vote switching, assuming the proximity rule is true. They are multidimensional scaling of symmetrical log odds ratios, and quasi-association modelling. Both produce one-dimensional summaries of party positions which correspond reasonably well with voter placements of parties on the left-right scale. This suggests the pattern of electoral change is sensitive to party positioning. People were more likely to switch between parties that were similar to each other than between parties at different ends of the left-right dimension. One particularly interesting feature of the findings is that the *Vlaams Blok* mimics a centrist party in the pattern of electoral change, because they mobilise support on an anti-immigrant and anti-system platform and these issues cross-cut the traditional economic and religious dimensions.

## THE PROXIMITY RULE OF ELECTORAL CHANGE

In their study of electoral volatility in Britain, Heath *et al.* address the question of whether 'fluidity' between parties has increased.<sup>1</sup> Fluidity between two parties is a measure of the extent to which people are willing to switch between them. Unsurprisingly, fluidity between the Conservative and Labour parties is always substantially lower than between any other pair of parties or between any party and abstention. So consistent is the finding across time that Heath *et al.* claim "It is tempting to conclude that we have here a law of British electoral behaviour."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A. HEATH, J. CURTICE, R. JOWELL, G. EVANS, J. FIELD and S. WITHERSPOON, *Understanding Political Change: The British Voters 1964-1987*, Oxford: Pergamon, 1991, ch.2.

<sup>2</sup> Repeating the analysis of Heath *et al.* (*ibid.*) using the voter transition matrix between the 1992 and 1997 British General Elections shows that this pattern still holds. Fluidity between Labour and the Conservatives was lower than that between Labour and the Liberal Democrats even though there were more switchers between the former pair than the latter pair between 1992 and 1997.

The empirical regularity seems to be founded on the simple intuition that electoral fluidity between more ideologically polarised parties is always lower than that between less ideologically polarised parties. In other words, people are more likely to switch to a party that is similar to their previous party than one which is very different. This idea echoes the spatial (or proximity) theory of voting.<sup>3</sup> Within the spatial theory people vote for the party with the policy platform that is closest to their own policy preferences. Electoral change within the spatial model is the result of either a movement of the electorate, a movement of the parties or a change in the relevant policy dimensions on which the movement of voters and parties is measured. Taking this idea literally, there should be no change in voting behaviour at all if these things remain constant. However, there could also be idiosyncratic movement, error and uncertainty. In which case it is reasonable to suppose that the chances of individuals switching from one party to another depend on how far those parties are apart. Specifically, voters are more likely to switch to a party that is closer to their previous party than one further away. Since the proposition fits so well with the spatial theory of voting, it will be known as the proximity rule of electoral change.

To test the proximity rule we need to know the distances between the parties, but measuring these distances is far from straightforward. Positions of parties on issue dimensions can be measured in different ways: by experts; through the opinions of party members and/or candidates; or by public perception. As the following section shows, the ordering of parties can be very different depending on the issue involved and on the method used. It is also far from clear how then to choose between the various estimates and compute the distances between parties to test the proximity rule. An alternative method is to see whether the pattern of electoral change together with the proximity rule is consistent with the party placements. Thus we need to assume the rule is true and derive the party positions from the pattern of electoral change. If the proximity rule and the observed pattern of change point to a spatial model of the parties that is consistent with the impression gained from other methods then this is good evidence that the proximity rule is true.

Using the proximity rule to derive party positions from electoral change requires the assumption that the electorate does not change its views substantially between two elections. Yet Flemish party politics was in a

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<sup>3</sup> A. DOWNS, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, New York: Harper and Row, 1957.

process of dimensional restructuring in the 1990s. Not only did two new players (*Agalev* and *Vlaams Blok*) emerge in the 1980s, but they managed to take a substantial part of the electorate by the 1990s (19.5 per cent in 1995). The predominance of the CVP was fading away and all the traditional parties, especially the *Volksunie*, were reconsidering their place in the party system. Furthermore, the possibility that there were new emerging cleavages that were stronger in 1995 than 1991 makes it difficult to find clear-cut dimensions in voting mobility tables across both elections.

It is also likely that there are other factors influencing the pattern of electoral change apart from policy positions. Parties may appear polarised if they constitute distinct governing alternatives. For instance, in Britain it could now be said that Labour are the centre party, but electoral fluidity between Labour and the Conservatives remains low because they are governing alternatives. Also, the rate of vote switching away from a party is much lower for older and traditional parties whose voters more often have a strong party identification. Furthermore, special issues can distort the pattern of mobility so that the usual dimensionality of the party system is not easily visible. In Belgium the 1991 election campaign was dominated by the immigration issue, while in 1995 it was the social security system. However, whilst these factors may have some effect on electoral change they are not likely to dominate it. Patterns of electoral change tend to be relatively stable and are therefore most likely to reflect the major policy positions and ideological differences affecting electoral competition.

## MAPPING PARTY POSITIONS IN FLANDERS

The party system in Flanders is complex because it reflects a number of different cleavages and issues. Two traditional cleavages separate the three largest and oldest parties in Flanders. Religion polarises the Christian, *Christelijke Volkspartij* (CVP), with the socialist, *Socialistische Partij* (SP), and the Liberals.<sup>4</sup> The Liberals changed the name of their party from the *Partij voor Vrijheid en Vooruitgang* (PVV) in 1991 to the *Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten* (VLD) in 1995.<sup>5</sup> Divisions on the basis of economic interests see the CVP between the SP on the left and the PVV/VLD on the right. In the 1960s and 1970s the linguistic-cultural divide in Belgium became more politicised and this is reflected in the rise of the

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<sup>4</sup> Liberal in the continental sense, i.e. *laissez-faire* economic policy and libertarian views on cultural and ethical issues.

<sup>5</sup> The title VLD is sometimes used here to refer to both the PVV in 1991 and the VLD in 1995 for ease of reference.

*Volksunie* (VU) in Flanders.<sup>6</sup> Two further parties emerged at the end of the 1970s, the extreme far right, racist and anti-immigrant *Vlaams Blok* (VB) and the green party, *Agalev*, giving expression to exclusive-universalist and materialist-postmaterialist dimensions respectively.<sup>7</sup>

Although experts commonly accept that there are at least four dimensions at play in Flemish politics, in the eyes of the voter party competition may still be basically one-dimensional. This could be either because attitudes on different issues underpinning the different dimensions are moderately to highly correlated, or because some issues are very much more important than others. For some the left-right dimension is defined to be the best one-dimensional summary of a variety of different political issues, and may vary from state to state and over time.<sup>8</sup> For others, left-right is a more permanent structural feature of party competition, but it can mean different things in different places. Castels and Mair used a postal survey of experts to identify the positions of parties on a left-right scale.<sup>9</sup> The results put the parties in the order {Socialist, Christian, VU, Liberal, VB} but omit the green party. With the exception of the *Vlaams Blok* the ordering appears to be based on economic policy. The Liberals are on the right because they are economically *laisser-faire* and the CVP are centrist on economic issues. The socialists (and the greens) are both on the left. Other expert evaluations of left-right position broadly agree with this ordering. A couple of expert studies have distinguished more explicitly between different dimensions. For instance, Laver and Hunt use a tax-spend scale on which the parties were found to be ordered {SP, AG, CVP, VU, VB, PVV} and a social policy permissiveness scale for which the order was {SP, PVV, AG, VU, CVP, VB}.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, these surveys may give an outdated picture of party competition, since even the most recent were conducted before the critical election of 1991 in which the greens and the *Vlaams Blok* saw substantial gains in their share of the vote.

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<sup>6</sup> J. BILLIET, "Verzuiling en politiek: theoretische beschouwingen over België na 1945", *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, vol. 13, n° 1, 1982.

<sup>7</sup> M. SWYNGEDOUW, "Les Nouveaux Clivages dans la politique Belgo-Flamande", *Revue française de science politique*, vol. 45, 1995, pp. 775-790.

<sup>8</sup> M. J. GABEL and J. D. HUBER, "Putting Parties in Their Place: Inferring Party Left-Right Ideological Positions from Party Manifestos Data", *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 44, 2000, pp. 94-103.

<sup>9</sup> F. CASTELS and P. MAIR, "Left-Right Political Scales: Some Expert Judgements", *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 12, 1984, pp. 83-88.

<sup>10</sup> M. LAVER and W. B. HUNT, *Policy and Party Competition*, New York: Routledge, 1992.

Expert judgement has to a large extent been superseded by the content analysis of manifesto data because it can yield a measure of party position at discrete points in time. The philosophy behind the Manifesto Research Group (MRG) is that parties compete with each other by emphasising the issues that are important to them and this is reflected in the manifesto content. By measuring the amount of material on an issue you find the party position on that issue – emphasis is position. Budge *et al.* go on to summarise a set of issues, including economic policy, education, social policy, foreign policy, human rights, traditional morality, law and order and others into a summary left-right position.<sup>11</sup> The left-right position of the Flemish parties for 1991 and 1995 are presented in Table 1. Although one of the advantages of manifesto data is comparable measurements over time, data for the VLD and Agalev are missing for 1995. Unfortunately, the MRG left-right scores give an unusual, and probably false, impression of party competition. In particular, the Liberals (PVV) are positioned quite far to the left when they are generally thought of as right wing. Although they paid great attention to reforming the political system in the 1990s, they were very much *laissez-faire* on economic policies. Their leader, Guy Verhofstadt, was dubbed ‘baby Thatcher’ by the press. Also, there have been serious criticisms of the ‘emphasis is position’ approach and the construction of the left-right scale.<sup>12</sup> So these estimates of party position are not ideal.

**Table 1. Left-Right positions from the Manifesto Research Group**

1991		1995	
SP	-11.22	SP	-15.63
PVV	-10.64	VLD (estimated as PVV,91)	-10.64
Agalev	-3.92	CVP	-3.17
VU	-3.86	VB	-3.00
VB	-2.92	Agalev (estimate)	-2.89
CVP	6.63	VU	-1.89

Source: MRG data from Budge *et al.*

<sup>11</sup> I. BUDGE, H.-D. KLINGEMANN, A. VOLKENS, J. BARA and E. TANENBAUM, *Mapping Policy Preferences: Estimates for Parties, Electors, and Governments 1945-1998*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> M. LAVER and J. GARRY, “Estimating Policy Positions from Political Texts”, *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 44, 2000, pp. 619-634; GABEL and HUBER, *op. cit.*

A third method of identifying party positions is to ask politicians. Positions of parliamentary candidates in 1991 on various policies were measured by Maddens using a questionnaire mailed to candidates during the campaign.<sup>13</sup> His results are reproduced in Table 2 below and they show quite clearly that although the order of the parties varies substantially across issues, no two issues have the same sets of parties on either side of the midpoint. They all give different impressions of the structure of party competition.

Table 2 also shows the mean positions of the voters for each party on the different issues, as recorded in the ISPO election survey.<sup>14</sup> The correspondence between voters and candidates is far from perfect, although it is usually the case that the voters' attitudes are in the same direction, but not as strong as those of the candidates. This pattern is familiar in Britain.<sup>15</sup> On some issues, such as the environment, candidates from most parties are more to one side than the voters. But even here the order of the parties is the same for both voters and candidates and the relative difference between the greens and others is similar. The congruence between voters and parties depends on the importance of the issue. For example, abortion, federalisation and especially the arms trade (which was never a campaign issue despite being the immediate cause of government collapse in 1991) are all less salient than economic policy. So the relationship between party and voter positions is weaker. This may be either because the party fails to take a lead or because the voters are not interested. The general rule of congruence between the candidate and voter issue positions, and the ability to explain exceptions in terms of salience all adds confidence in the candidate survey measures and the relevance of party positions to voting behaviour. Nonetheless, the problem with these measures is that party policy is not simply the average of candidates or voters positions. Rather, it is determined by the party as an organisation, usually with strong influence from the leadership.

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<sup>13</sup> B. MADDENS, "Directional Theory of Issue Voting: The Case of the 1991 Parliamentary Elections in Flanders", *Electoral Studies*, vol. 15, n° 1, 1996, pp. 53-70.

<sup>14</sup> A. CARTON, M. SWYNGEDOUW, J. BILLIET and R. BERTEEN, *Source Book of the Voters' Study in Connection with the 1991 General Election. Flanders-Belgium*, Leuven: Sociologisch Onderzoeksinstituut/ISPO, 1993.

<sup>15</sup> P. NORRIS, "Labour Party Factionalism and Extremism", pp. 173-190 in A. HEATH, R. JOWELL and J. CURTICE with B. TAYLOR (eds), *Labour's Last Chance? The 1992 Election and Beyond*, Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1994.



**Table 2. Mean positions of candidates and voters in 1991 on six issue-scales(0-10), by party**

	Candidates						Voters					
	AG	SP	VU	CVP	PVV	VB	AG	SP	VU	CVP	PVV	VB
Economy (gov/ free trade)	1.1	2.5	3.8	3.1	6.1	3.9	3.8	3.3	4.5	4.2	5.1	4.3
Immigrants (same/less rights)	0.3	3.5	6.9	5.9	6.6	8.8	4.1	5.8	5.9	5.8	6.6	7.9
Environment /employment	2.1	5.2	4.5	4.5	5.9	4.6	3.8	6.2	5.3	6.0	5.9	6.0
Pro choice/Pro life	1.2	0.7	4.9	7.9	1.3	8.7	3.2	2.8	4.2	5.1	3.8	3.4
Arms (no export/no reg.)	0.1	1.1	0.5	3.2	5.4	4.9	2.0	2.7	2.4	2.9	3.7	3.5
Federalise social security (yes/no)	7.7	6.3	1.0	4.9	5.1	0.0	5.9	6.5	3.8	5.8	5.8	4.9

Source: Maddens (1996, Table 2). For candidates N=104 from 174, for voters N=2691.

A fourth method is to ask voters to place the parties on the different issue scales. Table 3 shows the mean voter placement of the parties in 1991 on five issues. The first three of these are exactly the same scales as in Table 2 above. The patterns are very similar to those of the voters, and especially the candidates, of each party. On the economy, the Liberals are to the right, with the SP and *Agalev* to the left. The voters recognise that the *Vlaams Blok* is distinctly anti-immigrant rights. The difference between the perception of the CVP as relatively pro-immigrant and the average CVP candidate position is probably related to the strong public anti-discrimination stance of the 1989 Royal Commissioner on immigration who was a prominent ex-CVP politician. On the environment the greens are perceived to be even more radical than their candidates. Finally, although the question as to whether Flanders or Belgium should have control is not restricted to the social security question, as it is in Table 2, the correlation between the two is extremely strong. Equivalent figures for 1995 show that the average placement of the parties did not change appreciably on all these issues, with the exception of a one point move by the CVP towards further economic regulation.

**Table 3. Mean voter placement of parties in 1991 on four bipolar issue-scales (0-10)**

	<i>Agalev</i>	SP	VU	CVP	PVV	VB
Economy (gov. supervision/free trade)	3.2	3.3	4.7	4.3	6.7	4.8
Immigrants (same rights/less rights)	3.2	4.2	5.7	3.6	5.5	9.3
Environment (environment/employment)	1.1	6.7	5.6	5.9	6.7	6.2
Flanders/Belgium to decide everything	5.2	5.8	2.3	6.0	5.8	1.7
Left-Right	4.4	3.9	5.7	6.4	6.0	6.3

Source: ISPO Belgian Election Study

So on average, voter impressions of party positions are close to the positions of the candidates. However at the individual level there is a large variance in voter evaluations. The standard deviation is typically between two and three. Inspection of histograms shows that in many cases there is enormous uncertainty. Clustering of parties round the centre is more often the result of people who are unsure giving the midpoint answer than anything else. In the worst case, the distribution of the placements of the *Vlaams Blok* on the free trade/regulation scale is a uniform distribution with a spike at five. So in the eyes of the electorate the *Blok* seems to have no particular position on the direction of economic policy.<sup>16</sup> There is also a problem with voters tending to align their own party with their own beliefs, so the measurement of party position from voters may be endogenous to the voter's position. These issues are cause for concern about the reliability of voter placement of parties as objective criteria for party positions.

The final line of Table 3 gives voter placements of parties on a left-right scale. Again, the precise substantive content of left-right is subject to debate. However, it has been shown that in Catholic countries, such as Belgium, left-right tends to be a mixture of Catholic religiosity and economic issues.<sup>17</sup> The party placements in Table 3 fit this story nicely.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> M. SWYNGEDOUW, "Nieuwe Breuklijnen in de Vlaamse Politiek?", in M. SWYNGEDOUW, J. BILLIET, A. CARTON and R. BEERTEN (eds), *Kiezen is verliezen. Onderzoek naar de politieke opvattingen van Vlamingen*, Leuven: Acco, 1993.

<sup>17</sup> J. GARRY and M. MARSH, "Citizens' Conceptions of Left-Right: Religious Context

The Liberals are on the right because they are economically *laisser-faire*, but the CVP are also on the right because they are the traditional Catholic party. The greens and socialists are both on the left since they are neither Catholic nor *laisser-faire*. On average the *Vlaams Blok* is perceived as a moderately right wing party, but in this case the mean is misleading. 18 per cent placed the *Blok* on the extreme-left and 43 per cent put them on the extreme-right, the remainder were uniformly distributed on the scale. So the *Vlaams Blok* is clearly an extreme party, it just wasn't clear whether they were extreme left or right. This is perhaps because the immigration, anti-system and Flemish separatist issues, on which the *Blok* take a strong stance, do not form part of the traditional left-right ideology in Flanders.

What this section has shown is that Flemish politics is strongly multidimensional. Depending on the issue the pattern of similarity and difference between the parties varies considerably. It is also true that the estimates of the party positions depend on what method is used and each is associated with considerable problems. Whilst it is impossible to confidently conclude that a particular set of distances between parties should be used to test the proximity rule of electoral change, a broad picture of party competition has been formed. The electoral change data introduced in the following section will be used to generate a model of party competition, under the assumption that the proximity rule is true. The results of this exercise can then be judged for plausibility with respect to the material presented here.

## DATA

The data for this study are taken from the Belgian general election panel study from 1991 to 1995.<sup>19</sup> The availability of a high quality panel study is a tremendous advantage for this work because the information on vote choice is collected in the months immediately after the election. This gives substantially more confidence than vote recall data going back four years. Such recall data has been shown to suffer from a bias towards current voting behaviour. Even if all the measurement error is random there can be substantial difficulties in modelling contingency tables so minimisation of the possible sources of error is very important.

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Effects", paper presented at the ECPR Canterbury Conference, 2001.

<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, the question was not repeated for the 1995 survey.

<sup>19</sup> R. BERTEEN, J. BILLIET, A. CARTON and M. SWYNGEDOUW, *1995 General Election Study, Flanders-Belgium, Codebook and Questionnaire*, Leuven: ISPO-K.U., 1997.

The response rate to the 1991 wave in Flanders was 64 per cent and resulted in 2,691 interviews. Of these 2,578 were selected for the panel study in 1995, and 1,760 were successfully interviewed. This represents a response rate of 68 per cent, but it should be noted that 123 (5 per cent) of the 1991 respondents were found to have either moved or died between the 1991 and 1995 surveys, and there may be others who were not identified as such. Departures from the sampling population should not be considered as non-response and a potential source of bias. Here the sampling frame is all those who voted for a top six party in both the 1991 and 1995 elections for the Belgian Chamber of Representatives. Thus, new electors in 1995 and those who left the electorate between 1991 and 1995 are not included. Voters for small parties that are not represented in parliament, non-voters and those who spoilt their ballot papers are also excluded.<sup>20</sup> If such electors were included, the resulting transition matrix would be so large and sparse that statistical problems for model fitting would arise. Since the aim is to study competition between the major parties rather than to account for all facets of electoral change, there is little to be lost and much to be gained by avoiding these problems.

Non-response affects the panel at two points. In the 1991 survey, *Agalev*, CVP and PVV voters were over-represented whilst the SP was under-represented. This problem has been tackled by generating a weight that adjusts the sample to the population margins according to age, vote and gender, whilst preserving the pattern of association in the joint distribution of age, vote and gender observed in the sample. In 1995, the panel attrition implied that resulting respondents were no longer a representative sample of the original respondents. Most notably those who voted for the *Vlaams Blok* in 1991 were under-represented. For this reason, all those respondents who voted for a top six party at both elections were weighted so that the 1991 distribution of the vote matched that for the sample of top six party voters in 1991 who were selected for the panel and did not die or move out of the population between 1991 and 1995. Since the 1991 weight provided by ISPO and a re-weight of the final panel have been applied, a reasonable attempt has been made to account for non-response bias at both surveys in the panel.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Voting is compulsory in Belgium, so turnout is generally above 90%.

<sup>21</sup> In fact, the analyses here have been run without any adjustment for non-response and the results are similar.

## TESTING THE PROXIMITY RULE OF ELECTORAL CHANGE

The data are best presented as row percentages, as in Table 4 below, since these tell us about how the probability of voting for a particular party in 1995 depended on the party voted for in 1991. A large proportion of the voters for each party in 1991 remained loyal to that party in 1995. In fact 72.9 per cent of the sample studied here did so. However, the loyalty rates for each party were not all the same. They range from 44.5 per cent for *Agalev* to 87.9 per cent for the CVP. Typically, we find that the loyalty rate roughly increases with the party size, but more noticeably, the loyalty rates for the younger parties (*Agalev* and the *Vlaams Blok* who were founded in the 1980s) are much lower than those for the traditional parties.

The parties have been presented in the order {AG, SP, VU, CVP, VLD, VB} since this is a plausible summary, particularly of the economic and immigration issues. However, this is intended merely as a working hypothesis for illustration purposes. Nonetheless, with this ordering one can see that there is a tendency for voters to be less likely to switch to parties that are further away from their party of origin than they are to switch to a party that is closer (the proximity rule). For instance, the first row shows that those who voted *Agalev* in 1991 were less likely to switch to a party the further it is to the right. For other cases we need to distinguish between moving to the left and moving to the right because those who voted for the SP, *Volksunie* or CVP in 1991 were more likely move to vote for any party to the right than any party to the left in 1995. The opposite is true of PVV voters in 1991.

**Table 4. Voter transition matrix for 1991 to 1995 (row percentages)**

	1995	<i>Agalev</i>	SP	VU	CVP	VLD	VB	Total	(N)
1991									
<i>Agalev</i>		44.5	22.7	10.0	10.9	9.1	2.7	100.0	(110)
SP		3.6	80.0	0.7	7.6	4.0	4.0	100.0	(275)
VU		3.8	5.4	59.2	14.6	9.2	7.7	100.0	(130)
CVP		0.8	1.9	1.9	87.9	4.8	2.7	100.0	(373)
PVV		1.1	6.4	0.8	13.6	76.5	1.5	100.0	(264)
VB		3.2	14.3	7.1	11.7	14.3	49.4	100.0	(154)
Total		5.7	22.8	8.4	33.2	21.1	8.7	100.0	(1306)

Note: Unweighted N=1387.

For the *Volksunie* and CVP, the proximity rule holds (with respect to the given order) if we allow for the dominance of movement to the right. For the other parties there are some exceptions. First, 1991 *Vlaams Blok* voters were much more likely to vote SP in 1995 than we would expect if the proximity rule were true. This may be because many VB voters are former SP voters who are sensitive to the main issue at stake in the 1995 elections: the defence of the social security system (unemployment, pensions, health insurance, etc.). Second, surprisingly few SP or PVV voters in 1991 voted for the *Volksunie* in 1995. For the older generations of voters the *Volksunie* is still associated with the collaboration of the Flemish Movement, both before and during WWII, since the *Volksunie* has been the movement's political expression since 1956. This is particularly the view in freemasonry circles, which include both SP and Liberal supporters who like to see themselves as veterans of the wartime resistance. Coupled with this was a stark contrast between the images of the SP and the *Volksunie* in the early 1990s. After its exceptionally long participation in government (11 years by 1995), the SP came to be seen as an establishment party and developed a rather tough stance towards immigrants and illegals. The *Volksunie*, by contrast, was a post-materialist and Flemish nationalist opposition party with Bert Anciaux as its young and unconventional party leader. So the SP and *Volksunie* could be said to attract very different voters despite their similarities on policy platforms, and this view is supported by the fact that *Volksunie* voters in 1995 were younger and more educated, while SP voters were rather old and less-educated.<sup>22</sup>

There are also more fundamental reasons why the flow of votes to and from the *Volksunie* should be unusual. The party was created in the 1950s with the federalisation of Belgium as its *raison d'être*. In 1993 Belgium became a federal country and so the party had to fundamentally rethink its purpose and role. The *Volksunie* effectively split between 1991 and 1995 when several senior politicians, including its former leader, left the party for the revamped Liberal party. So it is unsurprising that between these two elections, there was a relatively high rate of switching away from the *Volksunie* particularly to the VLD. Given such a traumatic event and the multi-faceted nature of the *Volksunie*, the peculiar pattern of vote transfer involving this party is not surprising. Unfortunately, this effectively means removing the Flemish nationalist dimension from consideration. Although

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<sup>22</sup> M. SWYNGEDOUW, R. BEERTEN, J. KAMPEN, "De verandering in de samenstelling van de kiezerskorpsen 1995-1999", *ISPO-Bulletin*, 35, Leuven: ISPO-K.U., 1999.

the *Vlaams Blok* are Flemish separatists, concern for Flemish autonomy is rarely a reason for *Vlaams Blok* voting, but the main reason for choosing the *Volksunie*.<sup>23</sup>

Whilst there is mixed support for the proximity rule with respect to the ordering {*Agalev*, SP, VU, CVP, VLD, VB} it is not clear whether it is good enough, whether some other ordering might be better, or whether any single ordering is sufficient. To answer these questions we estimate the best fit spatial model for the pattern of vote switching. There are two statistical techniques that can be used to infer latent spatial models assuming the proximity rule of electoral change holds. The first is based on the symmetrical log odds ratios that Heath *et al.* used to measure electoral fluidity. The proximity rule prescribes that fluidity should be correlated with the distance between parties and therefore amenable to standard statistical techniques for distance data, such as multidimensional scaling.<sup>24</sup> The second approach uses the log multiplicative model for contingency tables with ordered categories known as the quasi-RC model.<sup>25</sup> This model provides estimates of the party positions on a single dimension on the basis that people who voted for a party towards one end of the scale at one election are more likely to vote for a party towards the same end at the next election. These are applied in the following two subsections. Since the methods rely on the proximity rule working for all parties in the system, the *Volksunie* has to be excluded from further analysis.

The flow of the vote to and from the *Volksunie* is extremely odd for known reasons, especially the party split. So it is impossible to make sense of the overall pattern of mobility including the *Volksunie*.

### **Multidimensional Scaling of Electoral Fluidity**

Symmetrical log odds ratios (SLORs) have been used by Heath *et al.* as measures of electoral fluidity. Formally, the SLOR for two parties X and Y is the odds of voting for X rather than Y given a vote for X at the previous election, divided by the odds of voting for X rather than Y given a

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<sup>23</sup> M. SWYNGEDOUW, "The Subjective Cognitive and Affective Map of Extreme Right Voters: Using Open-Ended Questions in Exit Polls", *Electoral Studies*, vol. 20, 2001, pp. 217-241.

<sup>24</sup> B.S. EVERITT and S. RABE-HESKETH, *The Analysis of Proximity Data*, London: Arnold, 1997.

<sup>25</sup> L.A. GOODMAN, "Simple Models for the Analysis of Association in Cross-Classifications having Ordered Categories", *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, vol. 74, 1979, pp. 537-552.

vote for Y at the previous election. The odds of voting for X rather than Y given a vote for X at the previous election is the conditional probability of voting for X divided by the conditional probability of voting for Y, given a vote for X at the previous election. So

$$\text{SLOR}(X,Y) = \frac{P(X|X)/P(Y|X)}{P(X|Y)/P(Y|Y)} \quad (1)$$

where  $P(A|B)$  is the probability of voting A given a vote for B previously. The intuition behind the SLOR is that it increases as the exchange of votes between the parties decreases relative to the number of voters remaining constant. So, the larger the SLOR the less willing people are to switch between the parties, hence the fluidity of votes is lower. So if the frequency of vote switching is driven by the proximity rule then the SLOR provides a measure of how far apart the parties are. However, the willingness to switch between two parties should depend not only on the distance between them, but also on the proximity of other parties. When a party has many close neighbours the willingness to switch to a party a given distance away is likely to be less than it would be if there were very few close neighbours. It is not clear how to account for this possibility so it must be assumed that the influence of other parties on the SLOR between two parties is negligible.

The SLORs for the voters of the top six parties in Flanders between 1991 and 1995 are presented in Table 5 in order of magnitude. The smallest SLOR is that between *Agalev* and the SP which shows that fluidity between these two parties was greater than that between any other pair of parties. By contrast, fluidity was unsurprisingly lowest between the two parties with the highest loyalty rates, the SP and CVP. The first two SLORs suggest the SP is close to both *Agalev* and the *Vlaams Blok*. The next three seem to indicate that the CVP, VLD and *Vlaams Blok* form a group. Since both groups include the *Vlaams Blok* this suggests that the *Vlaams Blok* is in the centre of the political space, which is unsurprising given the pattern in Table 4.



**Table 5. Symmetrical log odds ratios (SLORs)**

AG: SP	3.76
SP: VB	4.24
CVP: VLD	4.63
CVP: VB	4.93
VLD: VB	5.16
SP: VLD	5.47
AG: VB	5.51
AG: VLD	5.80
AG: CVP	6.10
SP: CVP	6.20

Although it is not necessarily true that SLORs from voter transition matrices form a metric, there is good reason to believe that they will conform to the conditions in practice.<sup>26</sup> Certainly the SLORs in Table 5 satisfy the requirements. So there is the formal, as well as the intuitive justification for modelling the SLORs as distances between parties. If one assumes that these distances are derived from a latent space, multidimensional scaling (MDS) is a standard technique used to estimate the positions of the parties and the relevant number of dimensions. The one-dimensional solution is presented in Table 6 below. The method allows a linear transformation of the SLORs, but the results are similar to those with only an affine transformation, or those from a non-metric analysis. The stress statistic of 0.0404 indicates a good fit to the data.

<sup>26</sup> Any real valued function of two points, say X and Y, constitutes a metric if it satisfies the following four conditions. The first is symmetry, *i.e.*  $SLOR(X,Y)=SLOR(Y,X)$ , proof by inspection. Second, the SLOR must be non-negative everywhere. This is not necessarily true for any transition matrix but is highly likely and certainly true for the data discussed here. Third,  $SLOR(X,Y)=0$  if and only if  $X=Y$ .  $SLOR(X,X)$  can be defined to be zero for all X, but it may still that the SLOR for two different parties is zero. However, it is not true here and it is very unlikely in practice. Finally, the fourth condition is the triangle inequality:  $SLOR(X,Z)=SLOR(X,Y)+SLOR(Y,Z)$ . Roughly this can be interpreted as saying that the distance between X and Z must be less than or equal to the distance from X to Z *via* Y. Again this is another condition that is not necessarily true for any set of symmetrical log odds ratios defined on a transition matrix, but it is contingently true for the data used here.

The MDS analysis, therefore, suggests that the party positions can be summarised along a single dimension with the greens as the most extreme to one end and the CVP the furthest to the other end. By and large the ordering of the parties is consistent with the left-right dimension as primarily economic left-right, but also comprising a religious-secular element. *Agalev* and the SP are together on the left whilst the VLD and CVP are on the right. The position of the *Vlaams Blok* in the centre of the scale is unsurprising for reasons given above and especially considering the observations from Tables 4 and 5. This is not to say that the Blok are genuinely in the centre, but they appear to be so because they have no real position on the dimension.

**Table 6. Multidimensional scaling scores**

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Agalev	-0.77
SP	-0.56
Vlaams Blok	-0.04
VLD	0.52
CVP	0.85

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As noted above, the dominant feature of the voter transition matrix is that the majority of voters in 1995 were loyal to the party they voted for in 1991. This loyalty rate varied substantially between parties and this has a very strong effect on the symmetrical log odds ratios. Indeed, the low loyalty rate of *Vlaams Blok* voters helped to contribute to the low SLORs involving that party and thus its position in the centre. One problem is that high loyalty rates for the older traditional parties possibly have more to do with high party identification as a result of political socialisation, than issue positions. Similarly, the relative youth of the *Vlaams Blok* and *Agalev* mean that they benefit less from a stable long-term support base. This is likely to be an important part of the reason why the *Vlaams Blok* appears as a centrist party in the pattern of electoral change. In the following section we present a quasi-RC model of electoral change which takes account of differential loyalty by modelling only those who switched votes.

### **The Quasi-RC Model**

A set of 'association models' for contingency tables with ordered categories have been developed by Goodman<sup>27</sup> based on the idea that the pattern of association can be described by assigning scores to the row and

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<sup>27</sup> *Op. cit.*

column categories of the table. The log multiplicative row and column association model (the RC model) is defined by the equation,

$$\log (F_{ij}) = \lambda + \lambda_{A(i)} + \lambda_{B(j)} + \phi \mu_i \nu_j. \quad (2)$$

Here,  $F_{ij}$  is the cell count for row  $i$  and column  $j$ ,  $\lambda$  represents a constant, the  $\lambda_{A(i)}$  are parameters that account for the differences in the marginal distribution of the row variable and likewise the  $\lambda_{B(j)}$  account for differences in the marginal distribution of the column variable. The final term of equation (2) describes the pattern of association in the odds ratios.  $\phi$  is the coefficient of association, which is a measure of the strength of association. The  $\mu_i$ ,  $i=1, \dots, I$  are the row scores and the  $\nu_j$ ,  $j=1, \dots, J$  are the column scores. From equation (2) it is easy to show that,

$$\log \{\theta_{ij(i'j')}\} = \log \{F_{ij}F_{i'j'}/(F_{ij'}F_{i'j})\} = \phi(\mu_i - \mu_{i'})(\nu_j - \nu_{j'}). \quad (3)$$

So the log odds ratio for any two origin parties and any two destination parties is proportional to the product of the difference in the scores for the two origin parties and the difference of the scores for the two destination parties. Thus the chances of voting for party X rather than party Y in 1995 for someone that voted for party Z in 1991, increase relative to 1991 W voters, with the gap between parties X and Y on the destination scores, and the gap between parties Z and W in the origin scores.<sup>28</sup> Note that the pattern of association is not modelled as a function of the distances between the origin and destination parties, but as a function of the distances between origin parties and between destination parties. The justification for the RC model is by analogy with correlation. Suppose that observations from a bivariate normal distribution are in fact measured using two categorical variables instead of two continuous variables. When standardised scores are used for the row and column categories in the RC model the association parameter  $\phi$  corresponds to  $\rho/(1-\rho^2)$  where  $\rho$  is the correlation coefficient.<sup>29</sup> In the RC model, those who voted for a party with a high score in 1991 (row score) were most likely to vote for a party with a high score in 1995 (column score). So if the scores can be interpreted using a left-right

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<sup>28</sup> This assumes that the gaps between the scores are positive which is appropriate given that we normally talk about the size of gaps as if they were scalars. Strictly speaking, the differences in row and column scores in equation (3) within the RC model are vectors. The idea expressed here still holds however.

<sup>29</sup> L.A. GOODMAN, "Association Models and the Bivariate Normal for Contingency Tables with Ordered Categories", *Biometrika*, vol. 68, 1981, pp. 347-355.

dimension, for example, then we say that left wing voters are more likely to vote for a left wing party again than for a right wing party and *vice versa*. To this extent the RC model seems to accord with the proximity rule.

The quasi-independence model has been described as a 'mover-stayer' model since it divides voters into those who sometimes switch parties, 'movers', and those who always vote for the same party, 'stayers'.<sup>30</sup>

For the movers the probability of voting for a party is independent of the party voted for in the previous election. The quasi-RC model is an extension of the quasi-independence model in which the movers do not switch parties at random. Instead the probability of voting for a particular party for the movers follows an RC model. By allowing some of the voters on the main diagonal to be 'stayers' or 'loyalists', the quasi-RC model allows us to account for the very high level of consistency in voting behaviour. This is valuable because the large differences in loyalty levels between parties are probably the result of factors such as party identification. When the aim is to identify the spatial positions of parties, such additional influences on electoral change are nuisance effects. The quasi-association models 'control' for these influences and base the inference of party positions solely on the voters that actually switched parties.

Table 7 shows the scores for the quasi-RC model with equal row and column scores. The model has a good fit to the data since the likelihood ratio test has a p-value of 0.136. It is also a statistically significant improvement on the more parsimonious quasi-independence model, which does not provide a good fit to the data. Substantively, equal scores imply that the party positions remained constant between 1991 and 1995. The scores for each party are written in ascending order for ease of interpretation. The quasi-RC model should give the best one-dimensional summary of the distribution of parties as based on the pattern of switching by the 'movers'.

The picture from this table is similar to that in Table 6. The socialists and the greens are on one side of the scale, and the CVP and VLD are on the other, with the *Vlaams Blok* in the centre. The key differences are that the SP is now the furthest left, and the CVP and VLD are now

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<sup>30</sup> M. SWYNGEDOUW, "A Pilot Study of Portuguese Electoral Shifts: 1976-1982", *Quality and Quantity*, vol. 21, 1987, pp. 153-175.

practically in the same position. Although it is not surprising that the two methods produce different results, it is difficult to explain why they differ in the way they do. Since the multidimensional scaling analysis relies heavily on the cells in the main diagonal and the quasi-RC model ignores them, one would expect the MDS solution to place parties with low voter loyalty close to the centre. In fact it is the quasi-RC model that places Agalev closest to the centre. Likewise, the CVP has a higher loyalty rate than the VLD, but the CVP is still placed slightly further to the right by the multidimensional scaling solution.

**Table 7. Scores for the quasi-RC model with equal row and column scores**

SP	-1.78
Agalev	-0.30
Vlaams Blok	0.24
CVP	0.92
VLD	0.93

Notes: The association parameter is 0.49 and fit statistics are, d.f.=7,  $L^2=11.06$ ,  $p=0.1361$ . The scores are standardised to sum to zero with variance 1. N=1143

Since the quasi-RC model does not in fact place the parties with the lower loyalty rates further to the extremes than the multidimensional scaling analysis, there is little reason to prefer the quasi-RC model. The rationale for the quasi-RC model is more tenuous because it is based on the idea of correlation between the origin and destination (row and column) scores for the parties, with no consideration of the distance from the origin to the destination party. The symmetrical log odds ratio measures the willingness of people to switch between pairs of parties, which is an intuitive indicator of the distance between the two parties if one believes the proximity rule of electoral change. Also, multidimensional scaling is much easier to understand and more attractive on the grounds of transparency.

Nonetheless, both approaches are valuable, especially since applying two techniques creates a high degree of confidence in the conclusions. Given the very substantial differences between two methods it is comforting that there is a high degree of similarity in their results. Both find a one-dimensional model to be adequate and both support the broad conclusion that the dominant theme of party competition is the left-right one. They clearly distinguish the left bloc from the right bloc even though the order within blocs differs. Also, the *Vlaams Blok* is in the centre in both

analyses. We have to interpret the *Vlaams Blok* not as a real centrist party, but as one that mobilises on issues which are unrelated to the left-right dimension. It would be ideal to see this represented in the results of our analyses, but there is insufficient information in the pattern of electoral change alone to distinguish between real centrist parties and those that stand alone on a different issue.

## CONCLUSION

This paper makes three main points. First, that is it difficult to estimate, let alone summarise party positions. Expert surveys, manifesto coding, candidate studies and voter placement of parties each have their problems and they often disagree with each other. Nonetheless some broad conclusions are possible. The competition between parties varies enormously depending on the issue and dimension at stake. Placement of parties on left-right seems to reflect at least a combination of Catholic religiosity and economic policy, and possibly also post-materialism. The greens and the socialists are clearly on the left, whilst the Christian CVP and the Liberals are on the right.

Second, with the exception of the *Volksunie*, electoral change between 1991 and 1995 in Flanders does seem to be sensitive to the party positions on the left-right dimension. Both the multidimensional scaling of fluidity measures, and the quasi-RC model suggest that a one-dimensional model is adequate to explain the pattern of electoral change. Furthermore, both polarised the left bloc (greens and socialists) with the right bloc (CVP and Liberals). To this extent the proximity rule appears to hold with respect to the left-right dimension. Unfortunately, the *Volksunie*, and therefore the nationalist element of Flemish politics, had to be excluded from the analysis because the pattern of vote switching involving this party is peculiar, not least because the party effectively split between the two elections under consideration.

Third, the 'extreme-right' *Vlaams Blok* appear to be in the centre of the left-right dimension and this is also reflected in the pattern of vote switching. There is a remarkable consistency between the rate at which people switched from other major parties to the *Vlaams Blok* and between the rates at which *Vlaams Blok* voters switched to the other parties. But how can we reconcile this with the racist, separatist and anti-system character of the *Vlaams Blok*? Actually the results here are consistent with research which shows that racism, the political attitude which best predicts *Vlaams*

*Blok* voting, is only very weakly correlated with other mainstream policy preferences.<sup>31</sup> Also, the *Vlaams Blok* is an anti-system party and has the monopoly on the protest vote expressing dissatisfaction with the political system as a whole.<sup>32</sup> In trying to mobilise support against the system, it is actually an advantage to advertise a fairly neutral position on the main dimension of party competition. This way they have the potential to attract voters from all the other parties, as we observe. Thus, the *Vlaams Blok* appears in the centre because it stands alone in opposition to a common position by other parties on issues which cross-cut the dominant policy dimension.

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<sup>31</sup> J. BILLIET and H. DE WITTE, "Attitudinal Dispositions to Vote for a 'new' Extreme Right-wing Party: The case of '*Vlaams Blok*'", *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 27, 1995, pp. 181-202.

<sup>32</sup> M. SWYNGEDOUW and G. IVALDI, "The Extreme-right Utopia in Belgium and France", *ISPO-Bulletin*, 31, Leuven: ISPO-K.U., 1999.