

Territorial Reforms, Decentralisation and Party Positions in Belgium

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to explain party positions on the issue of decentralisation in Belgium. Based on a quantitative analysis of the content of the party manifestos of all Belgian parties since 1977, this paper intends to test three hypotheses concerning the amount of attention parties allocate to this issue in their electoral platforms. Our findings demonstrate that territorial reforms as well as patterns of party competition do have an effect on party positions on decentralisation. In this process the specific role of the regionalist parties is outlined, since these parties can be viewed the owners of the decentralisation issue and have a significant impact on the position of the other parties in the party system.

I. Territorial reforms and party positions

1.1. Parties and territorial reforms

The main question concerning the reforms leading to more centralisation or decentralisation of the institutional structure at the national level is the one of their origin. What is the role played by political actors in this regard? Is it a reform mainly led by regionalist or federalist actors and parties or it is shared by other political parties? It is a short term process involving negotiations of some key actors or is it a long term movement rooted in the society and in the various political parties and present on the political agenda for relatively long period of time? And, more important, is the prospect of a territorial reform included in the party manifestos and therefore submitted to the implicit approval of the elector? One might think that territorial reforms are issued by a small group of elites (regional leaders, constitution specialists, independentist pressure groups, etc.) and that the political debate on this topic never became an election issue or even society-wide debate.

Our perspective is that the state reforms and the institutional reorganisation of the different levels of decision-making is an issue debated among all political parties long before its implementation and that is as been widely present in the political debates, namely the electoral debates preceding the actual reform. In this paper, we intend to study the attention given by Belgian political parties to the issue of territorial reforms in their electoral manifestos. We will therefore reverse Mazzoleni's perspective (2009) according to which environmental factors (mainly institutional ones) affect the attention given by political parties to the issue of territorial reform. We expect, on the contrary, that the attention given by (large) political parties to the decentralisation process actually precedes the state reforms. In other words, we hypothesise that the focus on decentralisation among state-wide parties induces a decentralisation in institutional settings.

Territorial reforms and regional autonomy issues are nowadays key issues in Western Europe. In numerous countries, the debate around the (re-)organisation of the state and the creation and autonomy of decentralised institutions managed to become salient in the political agenda and often gets into the media and the public opinion. A significant number of countries have a decentralised institutional design. This design of course varies strongly across time and across countries – think for example of the comparison between German and UK's decentralisations – but the topic is no longer a taboo, even in the case of countries with a long tradition of centralism as, for example, France. Institutional reforms and more autonomy to sub-national levels are not regarded as exceptional and are part of the “normal” adaptation of the state structure to the evolution of the society. A global trend towards more decentralisation/federalism across West-European countries has even been identified by numerous political scientists.

Political actors are primarily concerned with these debates on territorial reforms. Besides other major division among actors and parties, the importance of the centre-periphery cleavage in the understanding of today's politics has been largely stressed since Lipset and Rokkan (1967). This cleavage is also salient at the national level (not only at the regional level) and provides useful tools for the understanding of the relative positions of the political actors. Based on this cleavage, the analysis of the ethno-regionalist parties have been an important concern in the literature in political science on sub-national politics (see mainly De Winter and Türsan, 1998 ; Delwit, 2005 ; De Winter, Gomez-Reino and Lynch, 2006 ; Tronconi, 2009), but almost concentrate solely on these actors. National or state-wide parties are as much important in the understanding of the centre-periphery cleavage.

Apart from recent works (see for example Dandoy and Sandri, 2007 ; Hopkin and van Houten, 2009), the position of the state-wide parties on sub-national issues and on the debate on territorial reforms has been neglected in the literature. Traditionally, the literature on state-wide parties focuses on the importance of the “nationalisation” of politics. More recently, their territorial organisation has been analysed regarding their centralised or decentralised structure and organisation, the relative role and importance of national and sub-national leaders, etc. In addition, the voting behaviours at national and sub-national elections are being compared and recent analyses focus on the concept of second-order elections.

According to Hopkin and van Houten (2009), the state wide parties are crucial actors in the debate on territorial reforms in a country. First of all, they have to provide answers to the pressures (for example towards more regional autonomy) created around the territorial

structure of a state. These challenges to the existing shape of the institutions cannot stay unanswered and these parties have to position themselves on these issues. Secondly, any state reform or process of decentralisation or federalisation in a country has to pass through the approval and support of the state-wide parties. Regionalist parties often do not have the electoral and institutional strength to impose any reform of the multi-level structure of the state. The cooperation and the negotiation with the national actors and parties are therefore necessary in this process. In addition, state reforms often constitutionally require special majorities in the national chambers in order to implement such decentralisation or federalisation, implying the enlargement of the amount of parties that take part of the negotiations around the scope and the extent of the reforms.

We intend to analyze the attention that political parties – and particularly state-wide parties – dedicate to decentralisation and federalisation issues. With the help of three case studies (Great-Britain, Italy and France between 1945 and 2002), Mazzoleni (2009) intended to link this attention to environmental and internal factors and provide an explanation for the variations of this attention. According to his hypothesis, “shocks concerning the regional structure of the state (...) entail a variation in parties’ attention to regionalisation in their manifestos” (Mazzoleni, 2009: 203). In other words, when state reforms – mainly towards decentralisation – occur, the political parties will emphasize the importance of the issue of territorial reforms, compared to other issues.

The first hypothesis of this paper deals with the relationship between the state structure and the attention given by political parties to the issue of territorial reforms in their manifestos but will reverse Mazzoleni’s hypothesis, according to which we would observe an increase of attention to the decentralisation issue after a state reform. Indeed, we intend to prove that, as institutional reforms have to be decided, negotiated and implemented by political parties, the issue of centralisation or decentralisation will be high on the party agenda and that this topic will be broadly shared by a large number parties. In other words, we expect an increase of attention to the issue of territorial reforms in the manifestos of the parties before the actual state reforms and that they would reduce this attention after the reform and go back to their ‘traditional’ issues. As state reforms are often the result of long term negotiations and as some of them require large majorities to be implemented, we expect that the positions on the future state reform will be part of the electoral pledges in the manifestos during the preceding elections as any other public policy reform would be. The voters have therefore the possibility to electorally sanction or support the parties’ positions on the issue of territorial reforms.

In this regard, two conditions have to be respected when one wants to observe a change in a state structure. First of all, the centralisation or decentralisation issue has to be present and to have a significant impact on the agenda of the “core” parties. Indeed, even if the issue of territorial reforms is owned by the regionalist parties, we expect that the so-called contamination would be particularly strong before a state reform. In other words, we hypothesise that, as large parties have to be part of the negotiation process leading to a state reform, we would observe an increase of attention to the issue of territorial reforms in their manifestos before the reform. Secondly, even if major political parties - needed for any state reform - dedicate much attention to the issue of territorial reforms, a consensus must appear on the issue among parties. They all should not only speak about it, but they should do it in a similar way. We might therefore expect that a consensus among the main political parties in the direction of centralisation would lead to a centralisation of the structure of the state and

that a consensus in the direction of decentralisation would similarly lead to a reorganisation of the structure of the state towards more decentralisation of federalisation.

Using data from the Comparative Manifesto Project (Budge et al., 2001 and Klingemann et al., 2006) between 1950 and 2003 in 41 countries, Dandoy (2009) tested whether political parties dedicate more attention to decentralisation in the years preceding a state reform. The obtained results confirm that the issue of the territorial reforms is more clearly emphasized in the political parties' electoral manifestos before a state reform than after. Contrary to Mazzoleni's hypothesis, he globally observed a drop of attention to this issue at the occasion of elections following the state reform, even if some parties allocate significant parts of their attention to the ex-post evaluation of the reform.

On the contrary, the hypothesis according to which large parties - as they play a more important role in the state reform than smaller parties - would significantly increase their attention to the issue of territorial reforms in their manifestos is not confirmed (Dandoy, 2009). If the overall trend is still towards more attention to this issue before the state reform than after (and partly confirming the contamination hypothesis), the small parties – mainly ethno-regionalist ones – are still the ones “owning” the issue. The consensus towards territorial reforms is quite strong among large parties as only four parties tend to stress an opposite direction in their manifestos than other parties. The relative importance of a state reform is also proven to be relevant in the observed cases as large state reforms are preceded by an important attention given to decentralisation issues compared to the small institutional reforms.

H1a. Political parties dedicate more attention to territorial reforms in their manifestos before a state reform than after.

H1b. Any state reform is preceded by an increase of attention to territorial reforms in the manifestos of the governing parties

1.2. Ethno-regionalist parties and the issue of the territorial reforms

The conceptualization of the socio-political phenomenon of ethnic mobilization within territorial concentrated areas, encompassing both aspects of ethnic conflict and nationalism, is based on the idea that parties stand for goals and support ideologies that are rooted in the cleavages that define their identity (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Rokkan and Urwin, 1982). Following this perspective, we may assert that ethno-regionalist parties stand for the empowering of the ethnic groups they claim to represent (Türsan, 1998).

The most encompassing definition of the socio-political phenomenon of ethnic mobilization is the notion of “ethno-regionalist party” adopted by De Winter and Türsan (De Winter & Türsan, 1998). With this term are designed the parties that not only claim for the political reorganization of the state territorial structure, but also base these claims on the existence of ethnic cleavages within the considered area. The label of “ethno-regionalist party” is aimed at capturing the regional-territorial dimension as well as the cultural, linguistic and identity elements of this particular form of nationalism. These parties root their regional identity claims upon ethnic distinctiveness. In fact, the “ethno-regionalist party” label integrates the reference to the notion of *ethnos*, intended as culturally bounded community, within the

concept of territorial concentration at sub-state level (Gellner, 1983; Connor, 1994; Brown, 2000).

Some argue that ethno-regionalist parties should theoretically focus on one issue. The reasoning is that if they focus on one single theme, the one of increased autonomy, they would have a larger impact on agenda setting rather than dilute their issues on different topics (Rasmussen, 1991). In this regard, as the regional concentration of electoral support is an asset for a maximal representation, the thematic concentration of the political objectives is viewed as an asset for maximal policy influence. Moreover, some scholars have assessed not only the impact of ideology on the electoral success of ethno-regionalist parties, but also the importance of the relative level of radicalization of autonomist claims on the electoral performance of these parties. The more moderated ethno-regionalist parties usually obtain better electoral results than the radical ones, especially within proportional electoral systems (Montabes et al., 2004).

On the contrary, previous studies stressed that ethno-regionalist parties have enlarged the number of political issues they are dealing with, and not only focusing on this single issue of devolution and decentralisation. There are several hypotheses that may explain this greater thematic diversity. First of all, they search for electoral success. As the ultimate goal of a political party is to win elections and to govern, the enlargement of its target electorate is obviously required. This enlargement can be made in two different ways: either they enlarge their target constituencies and try to attract similar voters as theirs but from neighbouring regions, either they try to get a greater diversity in public. As far as this latter strategy is concerned, they try to enlarge their electoral supply by including new themes or issues such as the environment or the European integration in order to attract other types of voters.

The erosion of traditional social boundaries in the late 1960s caused the weakening of formerly highly distinctive collective identities and therefore the ideological and political distinctiveness of parties became rather blurred. Based on a Downsian model of party competition, Kirchheimer's model (1966) asserted the progressive convergence of parties to more centrist positions within their party systems as well as the retrenchment of traditional denominational cleavages' salience in shaping the belongings and attitudes of citizens. Moreover, as parties no longer encapsulate a specific social group, party membership is losing its previous importance with regards to party's internal decision making as well as to electoral campaign techniques and party financing.

Thirdly, the electoral programmes became less divisive and claimed to serve the interests of the electorate at large. The electoral strategies become more offensive, in order to reach the larger part of the electorate as possible. Thus, parties have begun to offer generic programmes and to avoid controversial questions and to downgrade basic political options in favour of the more immediate compensation of electoral success (Mair, 1990). Kirchheimer (1966) assumed that parties would emphasize more and more office-seeking goals, rather than the implementation of a specific political programme. Within this perspective, the elections decide the choice of the leaders rather than the choice of policies.

Within the "catch-all" typology, party functions are soundly transformed: parties aim mainly at conquering conditional electoral support and at penetrating the increasingly de-aligned West European electorates. The consequent "professionalisation" of political parties and

strengthening of the role of party leadership are explained by the party's need to widen their voter base in an increasingly complex and competitive electoral market. Therefore, parties are forced to shift away from ideological goals towards more tactically defined principles and to concentrate their political action upon policy issues which would engender minimal resistance in the electorate (Wolinetz, 2002).

On the other side, a significant electoral success for ethno-regionalist parties may permit them to join the regional or national cabinet. This government participation often allows them to partly realise their electoral pledges or, at least, make their issues of territorial reforms reach the government's agenda. In addition, other parties may be 'contaminated' by this issue and put it by themselves on the government's agenda or support any state reform towards more devolution. As a result, their electoral 'mission' is sometimes fully accomplished and this means that, via their electoral strength, they managed to gain some institutional advancement towards autonomy. Political parties often do not want to leave the political arena even if the majority of their claims have been achieved.

In order to avoid their disappearance from the political sphere, three strategies can be identified (Gomez-Reino et al., 2006). First of all, ethno-regionalist parties can keep on stressing, in their manifestos and in their discourses, on the autonomy issue, but in a radicalised way. They have to go a step further in their claims and ask for more institutionalised advancement like, for example, the claim for full independence for the region this party comes from (Sandri, 2011). Second, they can transform into a 'governing party' that is a party focused on conserving rather than pushing further the newly acquired autonomy or decentralisation, that tends to stand in the middle of the right-left cleavage and that makes use of political behaviours such as patronage or clientelism. Finally, they can 'open' their party agenda to new issues or existing cleavages.

The claim for (regional) autonomy has been considered as the main characteristic of ethno-regionalist parties. Many authors studying the ethno-regionalist parties observed the centrality of the issue of territorial reforms in the ideology of the ethno-regionalist parties (see for example Smith, 1991; Rasmussen, 1991; De Winter, 1998; Seiler, 2005) and all agreed that this issue is the most relevant. More specifically and as far as the electoral manifestos are concerned, De Winter (1998: 204) clearly stated that "the defining characteristic of ethno-regionalist parties' programs is undoubtedly their demand for political reorganisation of the existing national power structure, for some kind of 'self-government'".

Two remarks have nonetheless to be done. First, the type of decentralisation or self-government claimed varies among parties. If one draws a typology, this theme is not homogeneous and differs from one ethno-regionalist party to another. Based on De Winter (1998) and Swenden (2006), we can distinguish between six types of parties: protectionist parties that seek preservation and development of their culture within the existing state ; autonomist parties that request more competencies for specifically their region or territorial entity ; national-federalist parties that want a reorganisation of the whole state that would lead to more autonomy of all regions ; independentist parties that seek for total independence of their region ; irredentist parties that claim for independence and the annexation of some territorial parts of the neighbouring state ; and 'rattachist' parties that want to be part of the neighbouring state they share similar cultural identity with.

Secondly, the relative space occupied by other issues in the political claims of the ethno-regionalist parties also varies. For some authors, the issue of territorial reforms is said to be central and the ‘only’ defining characteristics (a unique claim), the other themes being marginal (Smith, 2001). For others, the issue of territorial reforms is said to be central and the only invariant theme. Other aspects of public policies or other claims are part of the ethno-regionalist parties’ discourse, but they are not stable as the ‘self government’ one (Seiler, 2005). Finally, the issue of territorial reforms is said to be central but other themes may also be part of the specific identity of the ethno-regionalist parties (De Winter, 1998; Tronconi, 2005; Gomez-Reino et al., 2006).

When compared to other parties, this type of demand for more ‘self-government’ is not only considered as the defining characteristic but also what differentiate them from other party families (De Winter, 1998). As these claims are at the centre of the ideology of the ethno-regionalist parties, compared to other party families, we may hypothesise:

H2: The manifestos of ethno-regionalist parties deal more with the issue of territorial reform than other parties.

1.3. Party competition on decentralisation

As stated above, ethno-regionalist parties can gain some electoral successes. These successes are obviously considered as a direct threat to other established political parties (Alonso and Gomez, 2010). According to De Winter (1998), there are two strategies for other party families to react to this new electoral threat represented by ethno-regionalist parties. First, they can invite them into regional and/or national cabinets. The logic behind is that this kind of party is viewed as quite unprepared and may lose its credibility when carrying public policy responsibilities. In the Belgian example, the different ethno-regionalist parties participated five times to the national government and always lost minimum 3% of their voters during the following elections (with the exception of the FDF in 1981 that still managed to win 0,2%).

Secondly, the state-wide parties can leave the ethno-regionalist parties out of the cabinets and try to implement themselves the agenda of the ethno-regionalist parties. This ‘contamination’ hypothesis can be found in previous research (Rokkan & Urwin, 1983; Smith, 1991; De Winter, 1998; Swenden, 2006; Meguid, 2008; Alonso & Gomez, 2010). As the traditional or state-wide political parties suffer from the electoral successes of the ethno-regionalist parties, they want to attract the electors that voted for the ethno-regionalist parties. They therefore enter in competition on the own issues of the ethno-regionalist parties and ‘copy’ their statements and manifesto of the topics of territorial reforms.¹ In addition, a position of this issue is also important in the framework of multi-party systems as it might play a significant role in coalition building (De Winter, 1998). The positions on the territorial reforms may offer an alternative to coalition formation based traditional cleavages and render government formation easier if several political parties share the same perspective on this issue.

¹ Even though parties belonging to different party families often do not share the same opinion regarding decentralisation (Swenden, 2006).

Party competition based on the assessment of party positions has been a topic largely dealt with in political science literature. Two main competing hypotheses have been developed, based on two opposing theoretical patterns of party competition. Party positions have been mainly used for explaining the electoral successes and defeats of political parties. Both theories – spatial theory and saliency theory – focus on such explanatory patterns, arguing that party positions matter in the electoral results of party. But party positions have been seldom used for explaining the content of the party manifestos itself, i.e. as a dependent variable rather than an independent one. In this paper, we will reframe both theories in order to explain party positions on the decentralisation issue.

The goal of our paper is to explain the positions of the various political parties on the issue of decentralisation. Our main assumption is that the electoral success of the regionalist parties has an impact on the position of (all) the other parties on that issue. This assumption basically relies on the fact that the electoral success of the regionalist parties directly threatens the other political parties and that these parties may adapt their strategy in order to face that new electoral challenge. Regarding the different strategies parties can adopt regarding a successful niche parties, Meguid (2008) develops an analytical model that broadly corresponds to the two main theories of party competition (spatial theory and saliency theory). This model will also be adapted for testing our main assumption.

Indeed, party competition is narrowly linked with policy issues. Parties are identified in connection with specific issues and patterns of political competition heavily rely on those issues. In other words, the spaces of party competition are defined by party positions on salient policy issues over which parties compete (Krouwel, van Elfrinkhof, 2009; Louwerse, 2009). Some theories directly link the parties and the voters with specific issues, such as the issue ownership theory, according to which parties are credible and reliable on certain issues and voters would vote for these parties that ‘own’ the issues.² In addition, the importance of issues in today’s party competition is linked to the decreased importance of party ideology (Walgrave, De Swert, 2007). According to Elmelund-Praestekaer, “issues play an important role in contemporary election campaigns, because voters to an increasing extent choose a party according to the party’s position on specific issues rather than its ideological position” (2011: 209).

The spatial theory originates from the seminal works of Black (1948) and Downs (1957). Their theory of party competition relies on the concept of the median voter. Political parties should adapt their position in order to get closer to the median voter’s position. Later, the spatial theory has been enlarged around the relative position of voters and parties. The classical spatial theory assumes that voters make decisions through a comparison of their own positions on issues and the positions of parties on the same issues. A person votes for the party nearest to him on his issues. Consequently, the spatial theory of party competition implies that parties are vote-maximizers and that they offer the electorate the policy packages that are closest to the voters’ own preferences.³

² However, there is a large difference between the fact that a party emphasizes an issue and the fact that he owns it. In the voters’ minds, parties can own an issue without emphasizing it and vice-versa.

³ These original models only care about winning elections. They have been adapted in order to explain other political phenomenon, such as policy outcomes (Wittman, 1973; Smirnov, Fowler, 2007).

The pattern of party competition derived from the spatial theory is a direct confrontation between parties (Petry, Landry, 2001). Indeed, since political parties compete in the same voter's space and since voters vote according to the position of parties on certain salient issues, parties will compete with each other on the (same) specific issues. Two similar phenomena can be hypothesised, based on this confrontational pattern of party competition, based on the voters' position or on the winning party's position. First, if political parties compete for the very same issues, according to the voters' position, the theory expects to witness party convergence on these issues.⁴ The parties will tend to adopt a policy position on the same issues.

Secondly, if a party manages, via a specific position on an issue, to attract votes, the theory expects to witness issue contamination. This contamination implies that, in the case of a new issue successfully relayed by a party or in the case of an electoral success of a niche party, the political parties will consequently increase their attention to this issue. In other words, political parties will 'copy' the position of the winning party on the issues that have been identified as owned by this party or that are known to be responsible of its success (Smirnov, Fowler, 2007). The strategy of the parties adopting positions the winning party's issue or of the party successfully relaying the new issue similarly may be labelled as accommodative (parties offer the same policy on the same issue) or adversarial (parties offer diverging policies on the same issue) (Meguid, 2008).

As a result, the first hypothesis of our paper in line with the spatial theory is that the electoral success/defeat represented by the regionalist party (especially when it manages to attract voters from other parties) is fought by the other political parties in a confrontational way. Independently on the chosen strategy (accommodative or adversarial), we expect to witness that parties will decrease their emphasis of the decentralisation issue following the electoral defeat of the regionalist parties.

H3a. (Confrontational hypothesis) Political parties will de-emphasize the decentralisation issue in their manifestos when the regionalist party is electorally defeated.

This contamination hypothesis has been already empirically confirmed. Analysing the content of the manifestos of 12 regionalist parties in four different countries, Dandoy and Sandri (2007) proved that, if the decentralisation or autonomy issue is clearly a theme that belongs to the regionalist parties (with the notable exception of Finland), this superiority in terms of space dedicated to this issue inside the manifestos of the regionalist parties is more or less threatened by the other (state-wide) parties. Not only their attention to the issue of territorial reforms is stagnating after decades of growth, but other parties seem to have been contaminated by the issue. They observe that other parties, indistinctly of their country, used the same issue of the territorial reforms in their manifestos, with the same tendency to stagnate in the last decades. These results were confirmed by Mazzoleni (2009) and Alonso and Gomez (2010) who conclude that the electoral successes of regionalist parties in the observed countries explain the increase in emphasis for territorial reforms in the case of the state-wide parties.

⁴ Party convergence has been empirically confirmed by numerous studies. See for example: Budge, Robertson, 1987; Mair, 1995; Caul, Gray, 2000; Arzheimer, Carter, 2006.

But this hypothesis of manifesto adaptation following the success/defeat of the regionalist party may be split according to the degree of electoral threat represented by the regionalist party. Following Meguid (2008: 97), the larger the electoral threat represented by the regionalist party, the larger the focus will be on the regionalist party issue (i.e. decentralisation and demands for further territorial reforms). Indeed, the gain of votes lost by each party is crucial when evaluating the impact of the regionalist party defeat. A party would not react the same way if it loses or wins votes while the regionalist party loses in size.

The saliency theory has been mainly developed by Budge, according to which “parties talk past each other” (1987: 24). The basis of this theory is that, contrary to the spatial theory, parties do not compete by opposing each other, but by selectively emphasizing certain (specific) issues. The pattern at stake here is a party position divergence. Parties compete with each other by putting forward their political priorities rather than struggling on the same political issues. In other words, parties, through their manifesto, try to promote their ‘ownership’ on some key issues and priorities. This theory is based on the assumption that parties compete by emphasizing policy issues that give them electoral advantages and by ignoring those issues that belong to other parties or play down issues they view as unfavourable. This type of strategy has been labelled as a ‘dismissive’ strategy by Meguid (2008), i.e. parties avoid talking about other parties’ owned issues.

Other studies (see for example Klingemann, 1987, Petry, Landry, 2001; Katsanidou, Gemenis, 2010; Van der Brug, 2001) demonstrated that the actual pattern of party competition is rather a mixed one. Party strategies display a mix of confrontational as well as dismissive characteristics. Depending on the issue at stake, on the nature of parties that compete and on a series of contextual variables, parties may decide on different strategies and adapt the content of their manifestos accordingly. The most important variable in this regard is the type of issue. As emphasized earlier, valence issues are issues all parties agree on the final outcome while position issues consist in issues on which parties take different (and sometimes diverging) stands. In this regard, position issues are more often associated to confrontational strategies while valence issues are associated with the saliency theory (Kitschelt, 1994; Budge, 2001; Alonso, Gomez, 2010; Katsanidou, Gemenis, 2010).

Even if decentralisation cannot be considered as a valence issue but rather as a position issue, our hypothesis concerning the patterns of party competition on the decentralisation issue implies that political parties will avoid talking about this issue and will continue focusing on their own issues. On the contrary, the stronger the regionalist party and the larger its emphasis on the decentralisation, the less the other parties will focus on the regionalist party issue. It is expected that the emergence of a niche party focusing on the decentralisation will lead to a decrease of attention to that issue in the other parties’ manifestos.

H3b. (Dismissive hypothesis) Political parties will emphasize the decentralisation issue in their manifestos when the regionalist party is electorally defeated.

Similarly to our confrontational hypothesis, the electoral threat represented by the regionalist party is relative to the electoral loss witnessed by its competitors. The effect of the regionalist party success on the other parties’ manifestos has to be combined by an assessment of the electoral defeat of its opponents.

In this regard, there exist several subjective indicators of political positions of the parties. The particularity of the estimations based on party manifestos is that they clearly determine the position of a party at each election, based on its electoral program. By definition, the obtained information comes from an official document that was approved by the party: it is not even unusual that the majority of the party members and affiliates have to formally approve the document before the elections. Electoral programs are therefore considered as a valid indicator of the positions of parties regarding certain domains of public policy at a given point in time (Volkens, 2002).

II. Data and variables

In this section, we will briefly present the data we will use in our attempt to explain the content of party manifestos regarding the decentralisation issue as well as our main dependent, independent and control variables.

2.1. Data

In the framework of a research project aimed at analyzing the positions of the Belgian political parties, a systematic thematic coding of the content of the party manifestos was set. Inspired by the original work of Baumgartner and Jones (1993), the Belgian agenda setting project⁵ uses a slightly adapted version of their topical codebook to identify and track issue attention within several policy agendas (of parties, parliament, government, media, etc.) from 1977 to 2008. The codebook contains over 250 topic codes, organized by main topic category.

Party manifestos were coded per quasi-sentence, a procedure used by the Manifestos Research Group's CMP handbook (Budge et al., 2001). This coding procedure consists of identifying all the issues put forward in a document. So, if several ideas are expressed within a larger sentence, they would all be coded. This procedure applies very strict rules with respect to identifying such core ideas or quasi-sentences and was carefully executed. In addition, our coding procedures allows a multiple coding for the same quasi-sentence and various dummy variables were also added allowing us to identify pledges, titles, references to other parties, etc. About 250,000 quasi-sentences were coded, with an average of 2,435 per manifesto.

Regarding our time frame, 1978 can be considered as the starting point of contemporary Belgian politics. Up to 1968, the three mainstream parties displayed united and bilingual structures but, in a period of 10 years (1968-1978), the Belgian unitary party system became totally regionalised as each mainstream party split into two independent parties (one Flemish, one French-speaking). These events had an important impact on various aspects of the Belgian political arena, among which party positions. In our research, we therefore decided to focus on this contemporary period, starting with the elections preceding the split of the last mainstream party in 1978⁶ up to the 2007 federal elections, i.e. the 10 legislative elections that occurred from 1977 to 2007.

⁵ This project, under the direction of Prof. Stefaan Walgrave (University of Antwerp) for the Belgian case, is financed by the European Science Foundation (ESF) and consists of a collaboration between several European countries, including Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

⁶ The 1977 manifesto for the Social-Democrat PS and SP is still common.

Regarding our case selection, we included all parties that were at least represented in three elections in the federal House of Representatives, i.e. 13 parties: two Christian-Democrats, two Social-Democrats, two Liberals, two Greens, two Extreme-right and three Regionalists. With the exception of the French-speaking PS, Ecolo and FN, all other parties changed their name within the observed period. In addition, several electoral alliances or cartels were formed, as well as few party splits, but the structure of the party system remained quite stable over time. We have therefore coded the content of the manifestos of about nine to 11 parties for each election year.⁷ Our database therefore consists in the content of 106 party manifestos on about 250 different policy issues and spread of 30 years.

2.2. Dependent variable

Our dependent variable consists in the amount of attention dedicated to decentralisation in the Belgian party manifestos. Different methods can be used to quantitatively measure differences between parties on one single issue in party manifestos: counting words, sentences, paragraphs, pledges, etc. Similarly to the CMP frame, we measured this attention as the percentage of policy arguments or quasi-sentences in each manifesto that are directly related to the decentralisation issues.

The CMP data and its categories “decentralisation – positive” (code 301) and “decentralisation – negative” (code 302) do not cope with the characteristics of the Belgian political system.⁸ As a result, our coding procedure specifically tries to face this challenge and therefore combines four aspects of the territorial debate in Belgium. As indicated above, the CAP codebook comprises about 250 policy issues. Among these various issues, no less than four sub-categories directly deal with the decentralisation issue: the inter-level relations (code 2001), the state reform (code 2033), the specific status of Brussels (code 2014) and linguistic issues (code 2311). This paper presents results based on an index aggregating these four distinct aspects.

In the Graph 1, we present the relative importance of the decentralisation issue in the two Belgian party systems, representing the average attention to that issue in all significant Flemish and French-speaking manifestos since 1977. Both trends are weighted by each party electoral strength (in % of the total number of votes at the national level). We observe that decentralisation is a relatively important issue the Belgian electoral campaigns as it represents on the average respectively 4,99% and 4,93% of the content of all Flemish and French-speaking party manifestos. Obviously, differences are to be observed among parties, between the quasi-absence (0,04%) of the issue in the party manifesto of the Flemish socialist party (SP.A) in 2007 to the 29,49% of importance in the case of the *Vlaams Blok* (VB) in 1978.

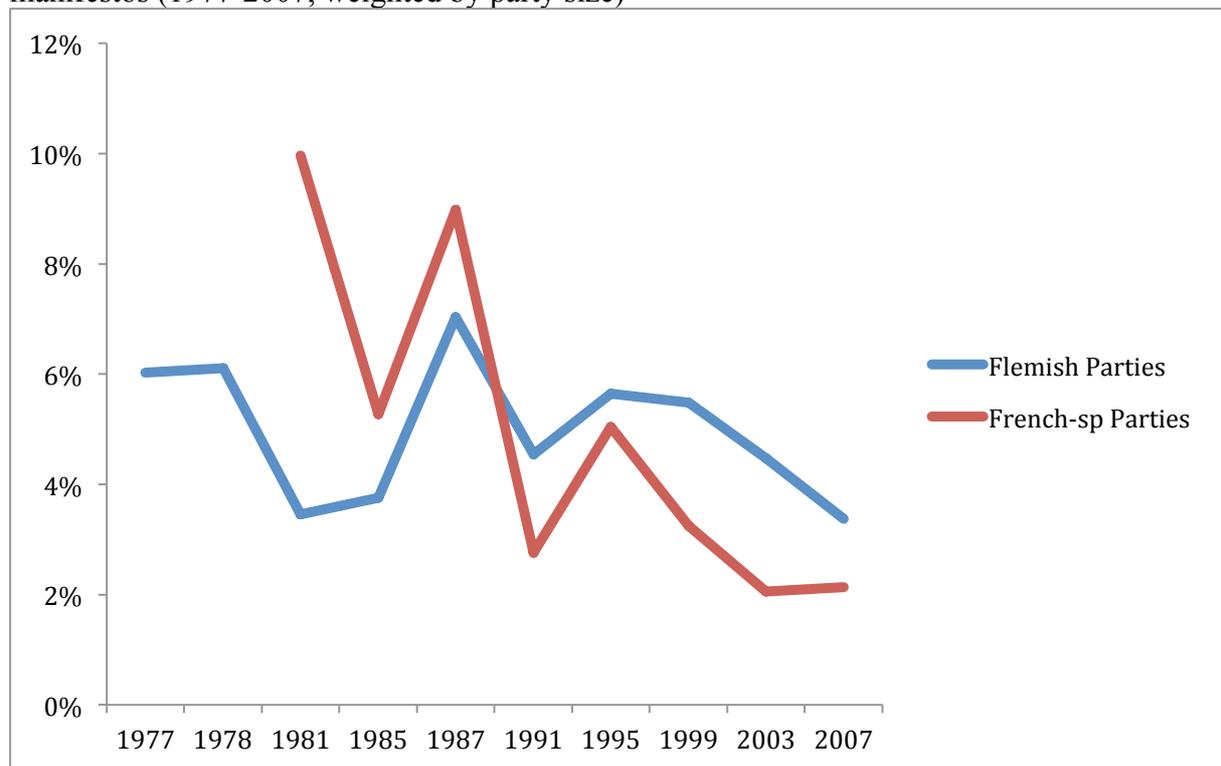
Assessing the overall trends towards more or less emphases on decentralisation issues in the party manifestos, we observe that, in the Belgian case, party manifestos do decrease since 1987 in both party systems. Even if we have missing data for the French-speaking parties for

⁷ We are unfortunately missing the party manifestos of the FN for 1991 and 1995 (this party represented respectively 1,05% and 2,28% of the votes for these two elections). French-speaking manifestos for the elections of 1977 and 1978 are still being coded at the time as we speak.

⁸ Even if some authors such as Meguid (2008: 69) or Dandoy (2009) use these categories in order to calculate positions on that issue.

the elections of 1977 and 1978, these evolutions do not occur rather in parallel. Decentralisation occupies on the average between 4% and 10% of the content of the manifestos in the 1977-1987 period but while it remained rather salient in the Flemish party system around 5%, it drastically decreased in the manifestos of the French-speaking parties to reach 2,05% and 2,13% in respectively 2003 and 2007.

Graph 1. Average attention to decentralisation in Flemish and French-speaking party manifestos (1977-2007, weighted by party size)



2.3. Independent variables

Our first independent variable deal with the territorial reforms – also called state reforms. The observed period (from the national elections of 1977 until the federal elections of 2007) contains no less than 10 national/federal elections but also four significant territorial reforms in Belgium.⁹ In 1980, competencies were transferred from the central state to the communities, i.e. welfare and matters directly connected with individuals. In addition, the Walloon and Flemish regions are formally installed (the question of the Brussels region is postponed). Each entity has now its own assembly and executive. At the same time, a special court, called Arbitrage Court is set up to regulate conflict between federal law and regional or community decree.

In 1989, more competencies were delegated to the communities (such as education) and to the regions (such as public transportation, works, financing of subordinate entities). Moreover, the Brussels-Capital region and specific institutions like the community commissions (French,

⁹ The only significant state reform that is not covered by this paper is the 1970 reform that led to the creation of the cultural communities and of the regions. In 1999, a limited territorial reform occurred, mainly concerning an increased fiscal autonomy of the regions.

Dutch and mixed - designed for a better application of the communities' competencies within the Brussels borders) were created. A new system of financing of those entities is also set up as federated entities have their own resources that are allocated progressively, according to the principle of fair return.

In 1993, Belgium officially becomes a Federal State. The regions and communities (theoretically) receive residual competencies ; the Federal government remains responsible for the matters explicitly stated in the Constitution and in special legislation. More important, the members of the regional or community assemblies (later: regional and community parliaments) are directly elected. Federated entities receive more budgetary means and a transfer of competencies and a partial transfer of resources occurred from the French-speaking community to the Walloon region and to the French-speaking community commission in Brussels.

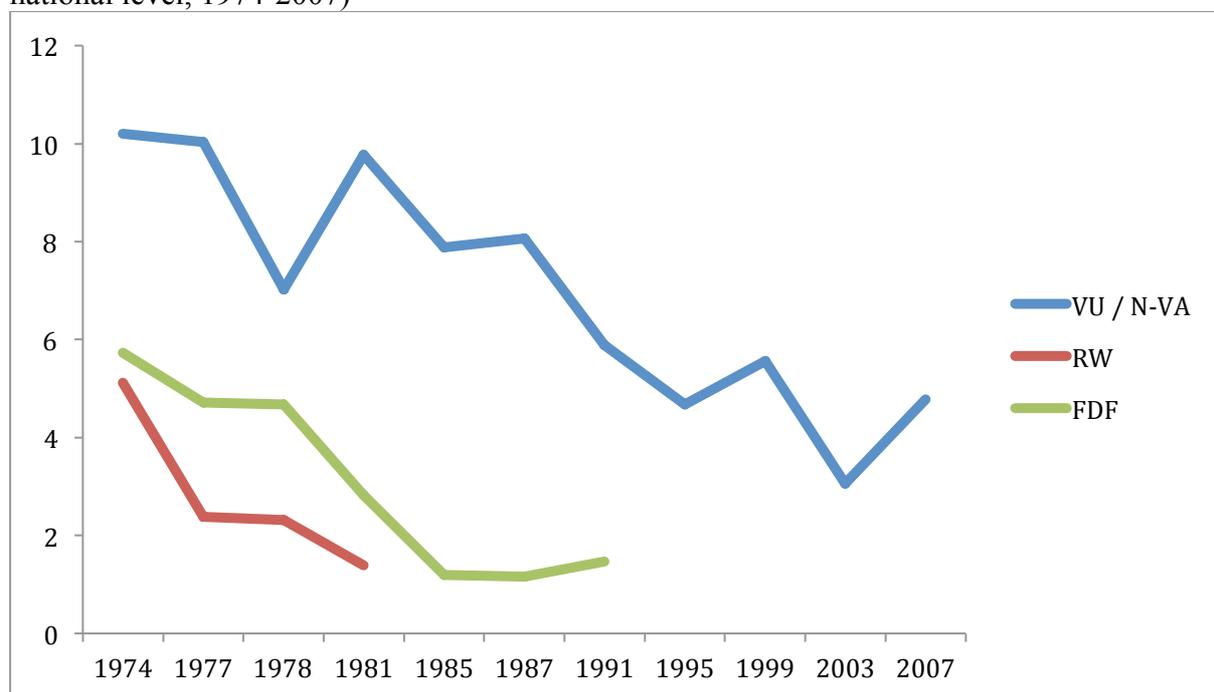
Finally, in 2001, the federal state delegates complete competencies in agriculture, external trade, local governments, development aid and electoral expenditures control to the regions and the communities. The regional and community finances are again adapted towards more fiscal autonomy and fiscal competition. In addition, the Brussels institutions are reformed, especially regarding the representation of the Flemish representatives and the financing of the community commissions.

The territorial reform variable has been operationalized in two different ways. First of all, this variable has been considered as a dummy, indicating whether a state reform occurred during the previous legislature (*State Reform Dummy*). Secondly, since Belgium witnessed a gradual decentralisation process over the years, we operationalized this variable as a scale (*State Reform Scale*), i.e. '1' for the elections occurring after the first state reform (between 1970 and 1980), '2' for the elections occurring after the second state reform (between 1980 and 1989), '3' for the elections occurring after the third state reform (between 1989 and 1993), '4' for the elections occurring after the fourth state reform (between 1993 and 2001) and '5' for the elections occurring after the fifth state reform (after 2001).

Our hypotheses regarding party competition on the decentralisation issue (H3a and H3b) rely primarily on the electoral success of the regionalist party in each party system. We developed two different indicators of the electoral strength of the regionalist party. The first one, similar to Meguid, 2008, consists in its absolute electoral result (in % of the votes at the national level) (*Regionalist Party Size*), while the second (*Regionalist Party Success*) measures the electoral trend in the results of the regionalist party since the last elections ($e_0 - e_{-1}$). These two measures will allow us to determine whether the regionalist parties represent an (growing) electoral threat for the other parties in each party system.

The three main Belgian regionalist parties witness similar electoral fortunes since 1974 (see Graph 2), i.e. an important electoral decline. In the case of the Flemish regionalist party (VU then N-VA), the party went from about 10% of the votes at the national level down to about 5%. In other words, the party lost about half of its votes on a 30 years period in almost a linear way. The faith of the French-speaking regionalist parties (RW and FDF) is even more significant since both parties actually disappeared from the party system (both partly joined the liberal party). This complete disappearance is not without consequence since there is – on the French-speaking side – almost no competitor on the decentralisation issue after 1991.

Graph 2. Electoral performance of the three regionalist parties (in % of the votes at the national level, 1974-2007)



One of our main explanatory variable concerns each individual party's electoral success or defeat. Spatial models often used the argument of the electoral successes and failures as an explanation for moving its position in the direction of the median voter, of other competitors or even to more extreme positions. Budge, Ezrow, and Mc Donald (2010) found evidence that the electoral success of a party is important to predict its policy moves. When the party gains votes, it will continue in the same policy direction, while when it loses votes, it will reverse its position and emphasize different issues. Similarly, Smirnov and Fowler (2007: 18) hypothesized that a winning party will move its manifesto to a more extreme position, i.e. it would move away from the median voter and get closer to its preferred policy. The other parties would also move into the direction of the winning party.

We believe that winning or loosing elections (*Party Defeat*) has an impact on the content of the electoral manifesto. We expect that a party that lost the elections will focus on new issues especially when the regionalist parties are successful while a winning party should not change its manifesto strategy and keep on emphasizing the same policy issues. We operationalised this variable by looking at the difference between the elections results of a party since the last elections ($e_{i,t} - e_{i,t-1}$). Since parties are perfectly aware of the results of the opinion polls that precede the elections, or are at least able to identify the main electoral trends concerning their party, we believe that looking at the electoral evolution since the last elections is a good proxy for assessing whether the party is in era of electoral decline or success.¹⁰

¹⁰ For the period anterior to the linguistic split of the mainstream parties (i.e. before 1978 for some of these parties), we assessed their electoral results based on a calculation of the votes in the different constituencies: the ones in Wallonia (that is mainly French-speaking), the ones in Flanders (that is mainly Flemish-speaking) and the ones in Brussels (i.e. bilingual constituencies), distinguishing between French-speaking and Flemish votes.

Government participation is another key variable in the explanation of our models, even if it can somehow be related to party size (see the section on control variables) and electoral success. The variable of government participation has often been used as a dependent variable explained by the content of the manifestos (i.e. parties that are close ideologically are more likely to form a coalition – see for example Aarts, MacDonald and Rabonowitz, 1999; Lowerse, 2009), but also as independent or control variable (see for example Tavits, 2008). According to Budge and Farlie (1983), government record is important for understanding the issues of an electoral campaign. A party in the opposition should emphasize specific issues as a way to put the government in difficulty but analyses of the Spanish case taught us that there is no influence of government participation (Alonso, Gomez, 2009). In addition, manifestos from governing parties display an “inability to provide distinct programmatic positions in the government functions” (Kritzinger, McElroy, 2010: 24) and Marks et al. (2007) expect that the positions of the governing parties tend to be less radical and less innovative than opposition ones.

Still, we believe that government participation plays a significant role in explaining the content of party manifestos and more particularly the emphasis put on decentralisation. Similarly to Marks et al. (2007), we expect that the manifestos of parties in government have to develop policy positions on every issue dealt with their government (especially concerning the policy related to the portfolios held by their ministers). Opposition parties may choose the topic they focus on more freely. We therefore hypothesise that – combined with other variables such as electoral success and regionalist party success – opposition parties would more largely emphasize the issue of decentralisation since they are less constrained than governing parties. We operationalised this variable (*Opposition*) in a simple way, i.e. using a dummy variable, independently from the amount of portfolios held by each party and from its participation in regional cabinets.

But this indicator does not entirely reflect the reality if the majority vs. opposition divide in Belgium. Not all parties participate to federal cabinets and some of them – for example the extreme-right parties, due to the *cordon sanitaire* strategy – never entered such governmental coalition. And we expect that being in the opposition for the last 30 years or for only one legislature (i.e. four years) is not experienced the same way by a party. Indeed, due to the Belgian consociational system, many mainstream – but also some niche – parties are prepared to enter the federal cabinet. This preparation should, among others, mean that their positions and issues should be regarded as acceptable by other parties, i.e. their manifesto should not be too extreme but rather look similar to the one of a governing party. On the other hand, parties that stayed for decades in the opposition should dedicate their manifesto to more narrow positions and to criticisms of the government actions. As a result, we expect that parties that stayed a long period of time in the opposition are more adaptive and are able to dedicate more attention to decentralisation issues than other parties. This variable (*Years in Opposition*) has been operationalised based on the number of years a party spent into the opposition since its last government participation.

A variable included in our model concerns party families. In order to verify whether some parties belonging to certain party families are more prone to emphasize decentralisation than others, we introduced party family dummies for the two christian-democrats, the two social-

democrats, the two liberals, the two extreme-rights and the two green parties.¹¹ As outlined above, parties may react differently to the regionalist party threat, depending on their ideology and their policy closeness to the regionalist parties. According to the literature on niche parties (see for example Meguid, 2008), it is expected that niche parties – such as green and extreme-right parties – would focus their manifesto on very small number of core issues and would be less reactive than mainstream parties to the regionalist party electoral fortunes. In the Belgian case, the mainstream parties received the label of ‘traditional’ parties. The traditional parties are the three political parties (then party families since 1968-78) that dominated the party system since the end of the 19th century. Not only certain party families should be more adaptive to the decentralisation issue in their manifesto, but it is expected that traditional party families should as well be more reactive to regionalist party threats than niche parties (extreme-right and greens). We created a dummy variable (*Traditional*) opposing traditional parties and niche parties.

2.4. Control variables

Some other variables have been used in our models in order to control for different phenomena. These control variables are language, party size and manifesto length.

A characteristic of the Belgian electoral systems is its scission according to linguistic lines. Broadly speaking, Flemish parties do not address French-speaking voters and vice-versa, even in the officially bilingual city of Brussels. Since the split of the traditional political parties into language-based sister parties (between 1968 and 1978), manifestos are no longer released in both languages and not even translated. Language is in this framework an important variable as it allows distinguishing Flemish from French-speaking parties. It is likely probable that Flemish parties react differently from French-speaking parties to the electoral defeat of the regionalist parties within the two distinct party systems.

Indeed, we observed distinct patterns between Flemish and French-speaking parties regarding the importance given to decentralisation (see Graph 1 above). The observed differences in the electoral faith of the regionalist parties and their different emphasis to the decentralisation issue over time may induce different reactions from the other parties. Overall, both trajectories do not seem to be related. This variable *Language* has been operationalized as a dummy variable.

The size of each party (*Party Size*) has been measured through its electoral strength. The party size, calculated in percentage of the votes at obtained elections, is a good proxy for party size.¹² In our hypotheses, party size is not of prime importance since it is rather its electoral faith that could explain its emphasis on the decentralisation issue. Nonetheless, we will control for party size in our models.

¹¹ A regionalist party dummy was also added to our first series of models.

¹² A variable based on the amount of seats gained by each party that can be hardly used in absolute or in relative terms (i.e. in variation of the number of seats since previous elections). The reform of the federal parliament in 1993 brought among others a decrease of the amount of seats in the House, from 212 to 150. As a result, and with the exception of the FN that gained one additional seats as this party doubled its electoral results, all Belgian parties lost seats between the 1991 and the 1995 elections. In addition, the seats in the parliament are divided according to their linguistic regime (Flemish vs. French-speaking) in specific constituencies. As a result, a Flemish and a French-speaking party receiving the same amount of votes will not receive the same amount of seats.

Finally, we will control for the length of the manifesto. Indeed, previous empirical analyses with the same data (Dandoy, 2011) demonstrated that manifesto length matters when one wants to analyse its content. The content of a party manifesto is not similar in a small or in a large manifesto. We therefore included a variable based on the number of coded quasi-sentence in each manifesto (*Manifesto Length*).

III. Results

In this section, we will test several models in order to explain party attention to decentralisation in party manifestos. The structure of our data is a cross-sectional times series one, under the form of a panel (same parties at different points in time). Since our dataset might be troubled by autocorrelation and/or heteroscedasticity, we opted for regression models with panel-corrected standard errors (PCSE). Given the fact that we have maximum 10 observations for each party, we choose for the Prais-Winsten estimation.¹³

Before testing our different hypotheses and models, we ran a control model. In this model, we included our three control variables (see section 2.4.), i.e. language, party size and manifesto length. The three control variables appear to be significant. For the variable concerning the size of the party, based on its electoral results, and the length of the manifestos, their coefficient is negative while remaining modest. It means that an increase of 1% in the size of the party leads to a decrease of attention to decentralisation of 0,34% in its manifesto. In other words, smaller parties dedicate slightly more attention to decentralisation than larger parties while parties that draft smaller manifestos also dedicate more attention to that issue. Language is also significant but positive, meaning that Flemish parties allocate an attention that is 4% larger than in the case of their French-speaking counterparts. Overall, the model explains about one fourth the attention to decentralisation ($R^2 = .25$). Unsurprisingly, the coefficient for the constant is strong and positive.

Table 1. Control Model (all parties). Dependent variable: Percentage of attention to decentralisation issues.

		Model 0
Control Variables	Language	424.3361** (131.594)
	Party Size	-.3407089** (.1142849)
	Manifesto Length	-.1088358*** (.0280112)
Model Summary	Constant	1024.653*** (126.0639)
	N	97
	Groups	13
	R ²	.2549

Note: Prais-Winsten regression, heteroskedastic PCSE. *** $\rho < 0.001$; ** $\rho < 0.01$; * $\rho < 0.05$

¹³ The Prais–Winsten estimation is a technique managing the serial correlation of type AR(1) in a linear model. It is basically a modification of the Cochrane–Orcutt estimation in the sense that it does not lose the first observation of each individual (i.e. party) and, as a result, leads to more efficiency.

3.1. Territorial reforms

Our first hypothesis concerns the impact of the territorial reforms on party positions regarding decentralisation issues. We expected that political parties dedicate less attention to territorial reforms in their manifestos after a state reform. Our model 1 (see Table 2) confirm the importance of the three control variables – as well as the constant – but lead to a rejection of our hypothesis. Even if the coefficient of the state reform dummy is negative, meaning that the elections following a state reform witness a decrease of attention to decentralisation in party manifestos, it is not significant. We cannot conclude on any programmatic adaptation of parties to the new state structures. Nonetheless, the second operationalization of the state reform variable (based on a scale) is negative and significant. Related to the overall observed pattern of decrease of attention to decentralisation issues in the manifestos over the last 390 years, it means that the deeper the gradual decentralisation of the country, the less attention is given to decentralisation issues. Unsurprisingly, the demands for more decentralisation decrease in importance once the state is actually being decentralised.

Later, we developed a secondary hypothesis concerning the specific impact of territorial reforms on the manifestos of the governing parties since it is actually these parties that decide, vote and implement these changes. Even if our model (Model 2) does not allow to test this hypothesis directly, we observe that the incumbent variable (whether the party was in government at the time of the draft of its manifesto) do play a role. These parties allocate less attention to decentralisation than opposition parties.

Table 2. Territorial reform Model (all parties)

		Model 1	Model 2
State Reform Variables	State Reform (Dummy)	-128.1391 (116.1792)	-120.714 (114.7037)
	State Reform (Scale)	-125.8694** (46.29252)	-123.5201** (45.65093)
	Governing Party	-	-211.8657* (118.2851)
Control Variables	Language	400.4966** (126.0979)	357.5654** (126.6134)
	Party Size	-.3701897** (.1105853)	-.2683054* (.1275402)
	Manifesto Length	-.073798* (.0294597)	-.0719675* (.0289766)
Model Summary	Constant	1433.579*** (180.1283)	1437.724*** (177.4217)
	N	97	97
	Groups	13	13
	R ²	.3225	.3413

Note: Prais-Winsten regression, heteroskedastic PCSE. *** $\rho < 0.001$; ** $\rho < 0.01$; * $\rho < 0.05$.

3.2. Ethno-regionalist parties

Our second hypothesis concerned the differentiated attention dedicated to decentralisation and the larger emphasis on these issues in the case of ethno-regionalist parties. The first model we tested concerns the differences between traditional and niche parties. This variable is proven to be significant and negative, meaning that traditional parties allocate less attention to decentralisation than niche parties. Nonetheless, that model does not display a larger

explanatory power ($R^2 = .33$) than previous models based on territorial reforms variables. Interestingly the traditional party variable covers most the effect of our control variables, with the exception of the manifesto length. Our model (Model 4) controlling for the party family effects also confirms the important role of manifesto length on the decentralisation issue, i.e. larger manifestos leave less space (in relative terms) to that issue than larger manifestos.

This fourth model clearly demonstrates the ownership of the issue of decentralisation by the regionalist parties in Belgium. On the average, these parties allocate 10% additional attention to decentralisation than any other party family. Decentralisation and issues related to the state reforms are issues that constitute the programmatic specificity of the regionalist parties. The only exception is to be found in the case of the extreme-right parties. Similarly to the regionalist parties, they also allocate a substantive larger amount of attention (9%) to decentralisation than other party families. The extreme-right parties play in that sense an interesting role in the explanation of party emphasis on decentralisation. They are not only associated with issues such as migration or law-and-order but also with decentralisation ones. In addition, the overall explanatory power of the model is much larger than previous ones and more than 60% of the variation of the dependent variable is explained by our party family model.

Table 3. Party Family Model (all parties)

		Model 3	Model 4
Niche Variables	Traditional	-585.255** (180.3819)	-
	Christian-Dem.	-	45.67903 (101.8728)
	Liberal	-	-30.6433 (120.207)
	Regionalist	-	1010.941*** (182.0202)
	Green	-	-217.7163 (134.1171)
	Extreme-right	-	916.1256** (282.0438)
Control Variables	Language	244.0659 (136.5729)	180.4324 (106.9431)
	Party Size	.0943852 (.1589926)	-.0178082 (.1193311)
	Manifesto Length	-.1102144*** (.0272559)	-.0632959** (.0183977)
Model Summary	Constant	1079.623*** (133.8943)	535.6203** (170.2399)
	N	97	97
	Groups	13	13
	R^2	.3305	.6217

Note: Prais-Winsten regression, heteroskedastic PCSE. *** $\rho < 0.001$; ** $\rho < 0.01$; * $\rho < 0.05$. The Socialist party family used as a reference category.

3.3. Party competition

Our third set of hypotheses concerned the party competition phenomenon. In this perspective, the attention that parties allocate to decentralisation is determined by the actual patterns of party competition, i.e. the electoral success/defeat of the party that is clearly associated to

decentralisation issues. We believed that the strength and electoral success of the regionalist parties in both party systems had an impact on the amount of attention to decentralisation issues in the other parties' manifestos. In order to verify this hypothesis, we removed the regionalist parties from the database on party positions.

The results of the analyses without the presence of the niche parties on the decentralisation issue stress again the importance of the control variables in Model 5 (See Table 4). Flemish parties allocate more attention to that issue than their French-speaking counterparts while longer manifestos allocate less attention to decentralisation. But the overall explanatory power of this control model drops to .16. The addition of the party competition variables in the model (Model 6) modestly raises the explanatory power to .24. Even if the effect of language disappears, none of the party competition variables appears to be significant. Party positions on decentralisation are not determined by the regionalist party strength or by the regionalist party success. In other words, whatever the electoral fortunes of the regionalist parties, the other parties do not adapt their manifesto accordingly.

Table 4. Party Competition model (excl. regionalist parties)

		Model 5	Model 6
Party Competition	Regionalist Party Size	-	.5850841 (.3073364)
	Regionalist Party Success	-	-.6214135 (.407813)
	Party Defeat	-	.380336 (.2438698)
Control Variables	Language	303.4226* (135.1007)	-3.719171 (211.3466)
	Party Size	-.1856364 (.1219288)	-.205338 (.1190099)
	Manifesto Length	-.0747682** (.0253809)	-.0532494* (.023689)
Model Summary	Constant	743.0946*** (140.5754)	596.7463** (126.9645)
	N	81	81
	Groups	10	10
	R ²	.1633	.2365

Note: Prais-Winsten regression, heteroskedastic PCSE. *** $\rho < 0.001$; ** $\rho < 0.01$; * $\rho < 0.05$.

But we have seen above in Model 4 that party families are important in understanding party positions and that, more particularly, the extreme-right party family plays a specific role in that process. In model 7 and 8 (see Table 5), we tested the impact of the different party families in interaction with the process of party competition. The variable of traditional vs. niche party does not seem to have a large impact on the model (even if the regionalist party size variable is significant in this model) since its explanatory power remains very low.

On the contrary, Model 8 demonstrates an important explanatory power since its R² is above .60, i.e. more than 60% of the variation of the dependent variable is explained by our model. Basically, two sets of variables do actually explain party positions on decentralisation in Belgian party manifestos. The first one concerns the party family dummies. As expected, the extreme-right parties do indeed allocate more attention to that issue than any other party family. Overall, these parties dedicate about 9% more attention to decentralisation than socialist, Christian-democrat and liberal parties. More surprisingly, the green party family

dummy is significant but negative. It means that these parties allocate on the average less attention than any other party family. These two variables demonstrate that the content of the manifesto of these two types of parties is independent from the party competition variables. They have their own programmatic logic, independently on the electoral fortunes of the regionalist party.¹⁴

Concerning the three remaining party families – i.e. the so-called traditional (mainstream) parties – their programmatic attention to decentralisation is significantly explained by the variables of party competition. Unlike green and extreme-right parties, these parties do actually react to the electoral fortunes of the regionalist parties. Model 8 demonstrates that the larger the size of the regionalist parties (calculated in percentage of the votes at the national level), the larger the space devoted to decentralisation issues in the manifestos of the socialist, Christian-democrat and liberal parties. This variable is highly significant and has an important impact since an additional 1% of the size of the regionalist party leads to an additional 0,8% of attention in these parties' manifestos. When one knows that the regionalist parties managed to obtain up to 10% of the votes, this is proven to have an important impact on the content of the manifestos of the traditional party families.

The second variable concerning party competition on the decentralisation issue concerns the electoral success of defeat of the regionalist parties (calculated in terms of difference in electoral result since previous elections). This variable is significant but negative, i.e. any electoral success of the regionalist party leads to a decrease of attention to decentralisation issues in the manifestos of socialist, Christian-democrat and liberal parties. Even if these results may seem contradictory, one can think about the example of a strong regionalist party that loses the elections. In that case, both phenomenon – being strong and losing the elections – lead to an increase of attention to decentralisation issues in its competitors' manifestos. These two variables of party competition do indeed measure two different processes (strength and success) and have a differentiated impact on party positions. Finally, the variable concerning party (other than the regionalist ones) defeat is not significant.

¹⁴ Since both coefficients go into opposite directions, this explains the lack of significance observed in Model 7.

Table 5. Party Competition model (excl. regionalist parties)

		Model 7	Model 8
Party Competition	Regionalist Party Size	.602986* (.2886806)	.8343409*** (.2010396)
	Regionalist Party Success	-.6275064 (.4007761)	-.7282923** (.2459601)
	Party Defeat	.2889488 (.2333951)	.2003052 (.1721699)
Party Families	Traditional	-179.2224 (191.0772)	-
	Christian-Dem.	-	81.66581 (93.61132)
	Liberal	-	-35.07056 (105.208)
	Green	-	-341.4804** (115.1759)
	Extreme-right	-	898.4993*** (248.8673)
Control Variables	Language	-68.96411 (182.6142)	-312.5285* (131.0896)
	Party Size	-.0864132 (.1568545)	-.1591608 (.1024627)
	Manifesto Length	-.0550095* (.0235679)	-.0174602 (.0164855)
Model Summary	Constant	635.2908*** (146.7296)	458.5363** (140.6751)
	N	81	81
	Groups	10	10
	R ²	.2436	.6030

Note: Prais-Winsten regression, heteroskedastic PCSE. *** $\rho < 0.001$; ** $\rho < 0.01$; * $\rho < 0.05$. The Socialist party family used as a reference category.

IV. Discussion

The objective of this paper was to explain the positions of the Belgian political parties on the issue of the territorial reform and decentralisation. This issue is very important in the Belgian national elections campaign agenda but variations across parties, regions and over time have been observed. This paper was based on three main hypotheses.

First of all, we intended to test whether parties do actually emphasize the issue of decentralisation differently according to the institutional environment. We expected that political parties will pay less attention to that issue after a state reform has been actually performed since this reform should encounter some of their demands made during previous election campaigns. Secondly, differences are to be observed across parties, mainly based on ideology. A specific type of party may be considered as a niche party on the issues of decentralisation and territorial reforms. Our second hypothesis simply posits that these parties – given their core ideology – should emphasize the issue of decentralisation more than any other party.

The last assumption concerns the electoral defeat of these regionalist parties and its impact on the position of the other parties on the decentralisation issue. This assumption basically relies on the fact that the electoral fortunes of regionalist parties directly threatens the other political

parties and that these parties may adapt their strategy in order to face that modified electoral equilibrium. Our hypothesis was that the pattern of party competition had a significant impact on the content of party manifestos. Leaving aside voter's positions, both spatial and saliency theories define party competition mainly as the consequence of the electoral fortunes of political parties and, more precisely, on the electoral success of the party that 'owns' the issue at stake. Two competing hypotheses have emerged based on these theories, one arguing that parties will be 'contaminated' with the successful party and will mimetically adopt its position, the other expecting that parties will avoid dealing with the issue of the successful party and will on the contrary focus on their core issues.

Based on a quantitative analysis of the party manifestos in Belgium for the last three decades, this paper demonstrated the importance of these three phenomena in the understanding of parties' attention to decentralisation. Our models concerning decentralisation displayed a modest explanatory power but robust results since PCSE model were used, controlling for heteroskedasticity between panels and for autocorrelation within panels. The obtained results demonstrated that performing territorial reforms does not reduce the amount of attention given to that issue in party manifestos. There is no impact of the territorial reforms on party positions and, statistically, parties do not de-emphasize the issue after a state reform. Nonetheless, territorial reforms have a long term impact since it is the gradual decentralisation of the state that induces a decrease of attention to decentralisation in party manifestos.

Secondly, our models demonstrated that regionalist parties do actually pay more attention to decentralisation and territorial reforms than any other parties. Regionalist parties can be labelled as niche parties 'owning' the issue of decentralisation in Belgium. But an exception is to be found in the position of the extreme-right parties (especially the Flemish one) that largely emphasize this issue in their manifestos.

Finally, the observed pattern of party competition in Belgium is rather mixed. In line with the confrontational perspective, we demonstrated that parties tend to adopt the same position as the one of the winning party or, in our case, to decrease their attention to decentralisation while the regionalist parties are losing. This mimetic behaviour is particularly observed when the party that 'owns' the issue is a large party. Concerning the regionalist party electoral defeat or success, our results showed that the dismissive perspective is also significant, meaning that parties pay more attention to the decentralisation issue when the regionalist party is actually losing the elections.

But not all parties react the same way to the regionalist party electoral fortunes. We presented evidence that, behind the regionalist parties, extreme-right parties dedicate the largest attention to that issue. If most of the parties do indeed increase the space dedicated to decentralisation in their manifestos when the regionalist party is strong, the emphasis in the extreme-right party manifestos remains independent from the electoral fortunes of the regionalist party.¹⁵ To go further, one may wonder whether decentralisation can be viewed as an issue that belongs to the core identity of the extreme-right parties. If decentralisation is indeed a core extreme-right issue, patterns of party competition in Belgium might be reframed.

¹⁵ To a lesser extent, the same phenomenon occurs for the green parties, but in an opposite way.

Finally, the most interesting results presented in this paper come from the variables that do not play a significant role in explaining the content of the party manifestos on the decentralisation issue. Our models demonstrated that few regional differences – i.e. Flemish vs. French-speaking party systems – can be observed. With the exception of the models concerning the impact of the different state reforms on party positions, both the party family and party competition models take over most of the inter-regional variation. In other words, there are few distinguishable differences between the two language-based party systems once the niche party – the regionalist parties – and its influence on the other parties is taken into account.

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