

# Does ideology matter in local politics? Analyzing local party manifestos in Belgium

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## Abstract

*In comparative political science considerable debate remains on the role of ideology in local politics and, more specifically, whether the local political conflict can be structured along a “national” left-right dimension. A growing battery of empirical research underpins the relevance of left and right at the local level, but these studies are often conducted in the American context, in larger cities and from the perspective of the voters. In order to close these gaps in the literature this paper addresses the shape of the local political conflict by analyzing local party manifestos in Flanders (Belgium). By conducting a computational text analysis with Wordscores I will estimate local parties’ policy positions and whether these can be mapped on a general, economic and cultural left-right dimension in both small and large municipalities.*

Keywords: ideology, local politics, party manifestos, computational text analysis

## INTRODUCTION

In 1934, Fiorello LaGuardia was sworn in as the 99<sup>th</sup> mayor of New York City. On a platform that was supported by both Republicans, reform-minded Democrats and Independents he won the local elections putting the Democratic Party’s machine Tammany Hall aside. LaGuardia promised New Yorkers honest and efficient government that was free from corruption. Making an end to party political patronage he re-established merit-based employment within the city administration (Kessner, 1989). His desire for non-partisan local politics is best illustrated by one of his quotes: “*There is no Democratic or Republican way of cleaning the streets*”. This famous saying knows many variations (Adrian, 1952) and has even parallels in European countries, i.e., “*there is no Socialist or Conservative way to dig a ditch*” in the UK (Copus, Wingfield, Steyvers & Reynaert, 2012) and “*there are no Christian street lights or Socialist public toilets*” in Germany<sup>2</sup> (Eschenburg, 1964; Nyhuis, 2017). Furthermore, the quote inspired political theorist Benjamin Barber who praised city leaders’ pragmatism and ideological flexibility in his bestseller *If mayors ruled the world* (Hidalgo & Lee, 2017; Barber, 2013).

With the saying LaGuardia, Barber and others point to the technocratic and non-partisan nature of local politics. They conceive local governing as largely outside the political (i.e., partisan) sphere and merely factual and harmonic. Here, different actors commonly strive for a single best solution to local issues (Copus et al., 2012). Nevertheless, this traditional notion is challenged by a new view on local politics being partisan and ideological. Adherents of this vision argue for the current prevalence of partisanship in a polity level where initially this was less the case (Copus & Erlingsson, 2012). Here, organizations associated with the various functions of parties became institutionalized and dominant in decision-making. Political exchange is said to increasingly galvanize around partisan interests and frames. Therefore, electoral competition is conducted in (national) ideological terms (Kjær & Elklit,

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<sup>2</sup> Translated from German: “*Es gibt keine christliche Straßenbeleuchtung und keine sozialistischen Bedürfnisanstalten*”.

2010). As both views persist, the long-standing debate on the role of ideology in local politics remains in the comparative literature (Anzia, 2021).

A specific issue that has been raised in this debate is whether the local political conflict can be structured along a left-right dimension. Can we discern the same left-right divide at the local level as at the national level or does local politics revolve around different discussions? A growing battery of empirical research seems to support the relevance of left and right (Warshaw, 2019), but these studies are often conducted in the American context, in larger cities and from the perspective of the voters. The angle of the European political systems, small and medium-sized municipalities and the local parties is not sufficiently addressed up to now. In order to close these gaps in the literature I will address the structure of the local political conflict by analyzing local manifestos in Flanders (Belgium), in several regards a representative case of Europe. By conducting a computational text analysis with Wordscores I estimate local parties' policy positions and whether these can be mapped on a general, economic and cultural left-right dimension in both small and large municipalities. The paper starts with an overview of the literature on the role of ideology in local politics and, subsequently, outlines the hypotheses. In the next sections I introduce the Flemish case and elaborate on the Wordscores method. Since I am still exploring Wordscores, the results and conclusions parts have yet to be written. As such, this paper will provide essential and novel insights into political conflict and the relevance of ideology at the local level.

## IDEOLOGY IN LOCAL POLITICS

Whether ideology and, more broadly, partisanship play an important role in local politics is subject to a long-standing debate within political science. One of the first to - at least indirectly - address the issue was Peterson with his book *City Limits* (1981) in which he put forward *an alternative theory of urban politics*. Peterson (1981, p. 3) denounces that in the US “*too often cities are treated as if they were nation-states*” with local politics resembling national politics and vice versa. In the perspective he opposes, the public policies of these so-called *miniature republics* are the result of competition and bargaining between different groups within the municipality. Hence, in order to explain local policies scholars should study the relative power of these groups. However, Peterson argues that political scientists overlook the limits municipalities are confronted with. As opposed to national politics the local level is constrained in terms of functions and autonomy. Therefore, relations between the local and the central levels of government have a more significant impact on local public policies than intra-municipal competition.

Next to the economic and institutional constraints that limit the influence of partisan and ideological factors local government is characterized by a distinctive set of competences. The main functions of municipalities are mostly different from the issues that dominate national politics. More specifically, the local level is highly concerned with service provision, such as water, sewer, garbage and public safety services. Furthermore, these issues are perceived as technical and non-ideological, often illustrated by the quote of Adrian (1952) that there is “*no Republican way to pave a street and no Democratic way to lay a sewer*”. Hence, in local politics actors commonly strive for a single best solution to problems (Warshaw, 2019; Anzia, 2021; Cann, 2018; Copus et al., 2012). Finally, the technocratic nature of local politics is demonstrated by the (lack of a) party system. In the US many local elections are non-partisan (Warshaw, 2019) and in Europe local lists make up an important part of the electoral offer (Aars & Ringkjøb, 2005; Steyvers & Heyerick, 2017). These political initiatives constitute a true local alternative to the chapters of the national parties (Steyvers, Reynaert, De Ceuninck & Valcke, 2008; Copus et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, this traditional notion is challenged by a new view on local politics being partisan and ideological. According to this perspective, local politics is strongly influenced by national politics and constitutes a place where wider national party battles are fought (Aars & Ringkjøb, 2005; Copus et al., 2012). Some scholars even claim local politics is nationalized (Van de Voorde et al., 2018). They all

point to the entry of national parties in the local political arena by the establishment of local chapters that compete in municipal elections. Hence, local party systems increasingly resemble the national party system (Rokkan, 1966; Steyvers et al., 2008; Kjær & Elklit, 2010). According to Copus and his colleagues (2012), this trend also brought ideological concerns to dominate local decision-making. Indeed, parties and politicians have to make ideological decisions on the local level as well. Just as in national politics, local government is embedded in a context of scarcity which requires choices on *“who gets what, when, and how”* (Lasswell, 1936). Although there are limits to their functions and autonomy, there always remains some margin for local self-government. Consequently, local authorities have to set priorities in allocating resources to their services (Ashworth, 2000; Cann, 2018) and choose between different options in a multitude of policy-related issues (Copus et al., 2012). The idea there is a single best solution to all local problems is doubtful in this regard. In sum, there may be no Republican way to pave a street or a Democratic way to lay a sewer, but there is certainly *“a Republican and Democratic (...) view about how many of these things there are, who builds them, who maintains them, where they are and who pays for them”* (Copus et al., 2012, p. 221).

Assuming that ideology is relevant in local politics, I arrive at a second question on the shape of the ideological conflict. How does ideology manifest itself on the local level? In national politics party competition is often centred around a left-right cleavage. Left and right are quasi-universal concepts that have a substantial meaning up to this day. The continuum is useful in summarizing the broad positions of parties and voters and serves as a reference structure that helps them communicate their ideological stances to one another (Dalton & McAllister, 2015). However, can we apply left and right to the local level as well? Adherents of the traditional view of local politics argue that left and right may structure the national political conflict, but not necessarily the local one given its distinctive character. They believe the ideological cleavages at the local level do not map onto national cleavages. Nevertheless, this theoretical assumption is undermined by a growing battery of empirical research that underpins the relevance of the left-right dimension in municipal politics (Warshaw, 2019). Scholars found substantial differences in local party chapters' self-placement on a left-right axis (Deschouwer, 1996), partisan conflicts are structured along the left-right dimension (Debus & Gross, 2016; Nyhuis, 2017; Gross & Jankowski, 2020), left-right ideology plays an important role in local voting behavior (Tausanovitch & Warshaw, 2013, 2014; Hajnal & Trounstone, 2014) and local authorities are responsive to the left-right views of the mass public (Tausanovitch & Warshaw, 2014). Moreover, several American studies find that national and local cleavages in public opinion often map onto the same main dimension of left and right (Cann, 2018; Tausanovitch & Warshaw, 2014; Warshaw, 2019).

Although there is considerable evidence that the local political conflict is centred around a left-right cleavage, we must not be blind to several shortcomings in the current literature. First, research on the relevance of a left-right dimension on the local level is primarily occupied with the voter's perspective. The perspective of the local parties, the organizations that make the electoral pledges, is not sufficiently addressed up to now (Gross & Jankowski, 2020). Second, many studies are conducted in the *urban* politics field, only encompassing larger cities. This bias could have serious implications for the validity of the literature, as the nature of the political conflict in small and medium-sized municipalities might be different than in large localities (Kjær & Elklit, 2010). Third, most of the cited work is American neglecting the very different European context. In the US, for example, polarization between Democrats and Republicans is increasing which eventually trickles down to the local level (Warshaw, 2019). This partisan realignment could render the aforementioned research less generalizable in relation to other political systems. In order to close these different gaps in the literature this research will address the shape of the local political conflict by analyzing local party manifestos in Flanders (Belgium), in several regards a representative case of Europe. I will estimate local parties' policy positions and whether these can be mapped on a left-right dimension. Although the debate on the role of ideology at the municipal level remains, I expect the local political conflict is centered around a left-right cleavage, based on recent empirical studies (Warshaw, 2019).

**H1:** The local political conflict is structured along a left-right dimension.

Gross and Jankowski, the founders of *the Local Manifesto Project* (2020), found the general left-right continuum can be used to estimate party positions on the local level in Germany. However, their approach to left and right was multidimensional, highlighting an economic and a cultural variant (libertarian vs. traditional/authoritarian). Indeed, one could argue local government revolves around both economic and cultural discussions, e.g., the construction of social housing (economic left-right) or the installation of CCTV cameras (cultural left-right). Although the evidence is scarce, I do not only hypothesize the relevance of a general, but also an economic and cultural left-right dimension.

**H1a:** The local political conflict is structured along an economic left-right dimension.

**H1b:** The local political conflict is structured along a cultural left-right dimension (libertarian vs. traditional/authoritarian).

However, does *the* local political conflict exist? As earlier mentioned, there might be meaningful differences between small and large municipalities within one political system. Unfortunately, previous research has neglected the effect of municipal size by failing to include small and medium-sized localities. I want to address this shortcoming, as I believe the local political conflict in cities is to a larger extent conceived in left-right terms than in small localities. Two theoretical arguments underpin this hypothesis. First, there is a positive relationship between the nationalization of local politics and municipal size (Kjær & Elklit, 2010). While in small municipalities local lists remain strong, the party systems of large local authorities have a more national outlook (Steyvers et al., 2008). Although the concepts of party politicization and nationalization should not be confused with the relevance of left and right, they indicate the importance of national parties and the ideological concerns - potentially in terms of left and right - they insert into local government (Copus et al., 2012). Second, the larger scale of cities could lead to more theoretical - and consequently, ideological - political discussions, whereas politics in small localities could revolve around more practical issues.

**H2:** The local political conflict in large municipalities is structured along left-right dimensions to a larger extent than in small municipalities.

## THE CASE OF FLANDERS (BELGIUM)

The structure of the local political conflict and whether it can be conceived in left-right terms will be studied in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Belgium is a federal and consociational democracy embedded in the Napoleonic or Southern European state tradition (Devos, 2016, p. 489; Steyvers, 2022). The local government system essentially has two tiers, with municipalities ( $N = 581$ ) as the first and provinces ( $N = 10$ ) as the second. In Belgium, the role of ideology in local politics is increasingly debated. A prominent illustration is a recent opinion article by the mayor and former Liberal Party leader Gwendolyn Rutten in which she argues ideology is almost non-existent at the local level. Rutten even claims local parties have become obsolete, because voters hardly notice their programmatic differences. "On the local level", she writes, "it is mainly the personality and the commitment of a mayor and the executive board that matters" (Rutten, 2022). Her article prompted a reaction by a councilor and fellow party member who took an opposite stance (Minnens, 2022).

Belgium is a very valuable case to study for two reasons. First, in several regards the country is representative of the European political systems. Both in terms of average municipal size and local autonomy Belgium takes an intermediate position in comparative perspective. Just as in other European countries, national parties have entered the local political arena by establishing municipal branches. Hence, the ideological competition at the local level is conducted in multi-party systems that are nationalized to a large extent. However, *nationalization* effectively means *regionalization*, since the Belgian party system is split along ethno-territorial lines. In Flanders, the parties that can be found in parliament and in local councils are the far-left *PVDA*, the Green party *Groen*, the Social Democratic *Vooruit*, the Christian Democratic *cd&v*, the Liberal *Open Vld*, the Regionalist *N-VA* and the far-right

*Vlaams Belang* (Steyvers, 2022; Gendźwiłł, Kjær & Steyvers, 2021). Local lists also play an important role in local politics, especially in small municipalities (Steyvers et al., 2008).

Second, Belgium remains a puzzle in relation to this research topic. There is almost no empirical evidence on the dimensions of the local political conflict. Theory is not better in predicting the role of ideology, since the characteristics of the Belgian/Flemish local government system give different indications on what might be expected. On the one hand, the enduring existence of local lists that often denounce any ideological adherence (Steyvers et al., 2008; Copus et al., 2012) and the non-ideological voting motives in local elections (Dassonneville et al., 2013; Dodeigne et al., 2020) could reduce the relevance of left and right. Furthermore, the scope of ideological competition remains limited, as local parties and politicians cannot make a lot of decisions about few policy areas due to the rather restricted range of functions designated to the Belgian municipalities. On the other hand, I assume the regional outlook of the local party systems (Gendźwiłł, Kjær & Steyvers, 2021) and high level of party politicization - the degree of votes and council seats for the *national* parties (Gendźwiłł, Kjær & Steyvers, 2022) - will give meaning to left and right on the local level. Moreover, in spite of their limited range of functions local authorities play an increasingly important role in the Belgian multi-level democracy by exerting their local self-government. Municipalities have in fact the right to organize everything that is considered to be of *local importance*, as enshrined in the Belgian Constitution (Plees, 2006). In order to solve this puzzle this research will assess the structure of the local political conflict by analyzing local party manifestos with a text scaling method. By my knowledge, this is the first paper that will study this in the Belgian context. The research is restricted to the Flanders region, as it constitutes a distinct democratic space characterized by its own party system and the Dutch language (in which the local party manifestos are written).

## DATA AND OPERATIONALIZATION

In this paper the hypotheses will be tested by making use of local parties' election manifestos. I assess their policy positions and whether these can be mapped on a general, economic and cultural left-right dimension. Estimating party positions with the use of manifestos is a long-standing tradition within political science (e.g. Klingemann et al., 2006), but has only scarcely been used in local politics (Van de Voorde et al., 2018). Only very recently scholars have started to code local manifestos with the use of the computer (Gross & Jankowski, 2020; Otjes, 2021). Computerized coding is necessary to use the huge amount of manifestos available at the local level. Other approaches for extracting party positions, such as expert surveys or hand coding of manifestos (for an oversight of all these methods see, e.g., Bouteica, 2011), are too labor-intensive (Van de Voorde et al., 2018). Moreover, expert surveys are expensive and - more fundamental - probably less reliable. Even for experts and local political actors, it is impossible to provide accurate information on the policy positions of every local party that might compete for seats in local councils (Gross & Jankowski, 2020, p. 78). Hand-coding of manifestos is not feasible for the local context, but manifestos are considered as a useful source to estimate party policy positions (see e.g. MARPOR). Manifestos are highly comparable, because they are written at the same time and can be used for longitudinal research. They can also be regarded as the official position of the entire party. This is an advantage that manifestos have over surveys amongst local politicians. The latter do not necessarily articulate the position of the whole party (Bouteica, 2011, pp. 123-133). Finally, manifestos are written in a similar tone and style, which makes them particularly suitable for computational analysis, as this technique sometimes relies on the assumption of a similar text-generating process (Gross & Jankowski, 2020).

Although there has been some criticism about computational text analysis (e.g. Bruinsma & Gemenis, 2019), the technique is considered as promising (Slapin & Proksch, 2008) and was used for numerous publications (for an oversight see Bruinsma & Gemenis, 2019). In order to extract policy positions from manifestos this research will make use of Wordscores (Laver, Benoit & Garry, 2003; Lowe, 2008). The basic idea is to compare the frequency distribution of words in *virgin texts* (texts of which the

programmatic positions are unknown) with the frequency distribution of words in *reference texts* (texts of which the positions are known). Hence, the position of a party on a-priori defined policy scales - in this case the left-right dimensions - is estimated based on the use of a certain vocabulary. The choice of the reference text is crucial for a proper estimation of party positions. These texts need to be long (Klemmensen et al., 2007) and should cover the entire range of ideological dimensions under study (Gross & Jankowski, 2020, p. 81). That is why I will use the manifestos that were proposed by the different *national* parties at the elections closest to the local elections under study, i.e., the 2010 federal election and the regional, federal and European elections of 2014 and 2019 in Flanders/Belgium. The reference texts will be linked with the parties' left-right positions in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey<sup>3</sup>. This choice was also made by the founders of the *Local Manifesto Project* (Gross & Jankowski, 2020, p. 82). If the analyses show the rank order of the local parties on the left-right continuums bears close resemblance to the rank order at the central level, H1 can be confirmed. In order to assess this congruence the Wordscores descriptives will be complemented by a regression analysis connecting the left-right rank orders.

The focus is on the manifestos from the parties that participated at the local elections of 2012 and 2018 in Flanders. All parties that participated at the given elections are under study, whenever a manifesto was available. This choice implies local lists are also selected, as previous research has shown they can be mapped in an ideological space as well (Nyhuis, 2017; Gross & Jankowski, 2020; Otjes, 2021). Concerning the selection of municipalities, I opt for the 13 localities the Flemish Government regards as *centrumsteden*, i.e., municipalities that have a relatively high number of inhabitants with reference to their area and, consequently, exert a lot of central functions in terms of employment, healthcare, education and leisure for these areas (Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur, 2021). Next to these large cities I make use of the sample of 23 Flemish municipalities that were part of the *Belgian Local Elections Study 2018* (Dodeigne et al., 2020) and the *PartiRep Exit Poll 2012* (Dassonneville et al., 2013). The organizers of these exit polls selected these cases by using the typology of Belfius bank in which all Belgian/Flemish municipalities are divided into socio-economic clusters. The decision on how many localities in each group of the typology had to be included in the sample was based on the proportion of inhabitants each cluster represents within both Belgium and Flanders. After the number of cases to be extracted from each cluster was determined, the municipalities were randomly drawn based on their NIS-code, ensuring geographical distribution (Dassonneville et al., 2013). Hence, the selection of localities in the exit polls is an adequate reflection of the local level in Flanders with rural, semi-urban and urban municipalities of different population size included. This enables me to assess the impact of municipal size, as outlined in H2. More specifically, I expect to find more local-national resemblance in terms of the left-right rank order of parties in large municipalities than in small municipalities. Again, I conduct a regression analysis to test this hypothesis. The left-right congruence between the local and the central level will be linked with size categories in which the municipalities under study are designated (see Appendix). I have not made use of the Belfius typology to label the cases, since it is too fine-grained and includes other variables than municipal size.

Before the left-right positions can be retrieved, the manifestos are cleaned by removing city and party names, the date of the manifesto and/or election, graphs, pictures, candidate information and content tables. The party name *Groen* is omitted manually, since the same word could also refer to greenery and nature. I conduct the Wordscores analysis in R, running codes that are similar to those of the *Local Manifesto Project*.

## RESULTS

*Yet to be written*

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<sup>3</sup> More specifically, the positions on the *Irgen*, *Irecon* & *galtan* dimensions.



## CONCLUSION

*Yet to be written*

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## APPENDIX

*PhD project Raf Reuse*

### **The shape and impact of ideological competition in local politics. A study of local party manifestos in Flanders**

In comparative political science considerable debate remains on the role of ideology in local politics. In my research project I want to contribute to this discussion by assessing the shape and impact of ideological competition in local politics in Flanders (Belgium). More specifically, I will conduct an automatic quantitative content analysis of local election manifestos. Extracting party positions from manifestos is a long-standing tradition in political science, but it has not attracted abundant scholarly attention in local politics. Based on the Wordscores method the project will map the policy preferences of local party branches in a sample of Flemish municipalities for two consecutive elections (2012 & 2018). The retrieved manifesto data will be used to assess which dimensions structure the local political conflict and the differences between the parties on these dimensions (shape of ideological competition). Furthermore, I estimate the role of ideology in voting behavior, coalition building, and coalition agreements by connecting the data with other resources (impact of ideological competition).

#### *Selection of municipalities in size categories*

<b>Number of inhabitants</b>	<b>Municipalities</b>
-20.000	Anzegem, Berlare, Bredene, Heers, Heuvelland, Koekelare, Schilde, Tessenderlo & Vleteren
20.000 - 40.000	Aarschot, Eeklo, Kortenbergh, Lochristi, Tielt, Tongeren, Torhout, Willebroek & Zaventem
40.000 - 60.000	Beringen, Deinze, Dilbeek & Turnhout
60.000 - 80.000	Genk, Hasselt, Kortrijk, Oostende, Roeselare & Sint-Niklaas
80.000+	Aalst, Antwerpen, Brugge, Gent, Leuven & Mechelen