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 body 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 257 local party manifestos in Flanders (Belgium). By conducting a computational text analysis with Wordscores I estimate local parties' policy positions on the general, economic and cultural left-right dimension in small, medium-sized and large municipalities. I find that the order of the local parties on the left-right scales bears very close resemblance to the order in the Flemish party system. Furthermore, the degree of congruence between the municipal and national level is not affected by municipal size.

INTRODUCTION

In 1934, Fiorello LaGuardia was sworn in as the 99th 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 et al., 2012) and *"there are no Christian street lights or Socialist public toilets"* in Germany[2] (Eschenburg, 1964; Nyhuis, 2017). Furthermore, the quote inspired political

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[2] Translated from German: *"Es gibt keine christliche Straßenbeleuchtung und keine sozialistischen Bedürfnisanstalten"*.

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 (Oliver et al., 2012). 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, 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 shape of the local political conflict by analyzing 257 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 on the general, economic and cultural left-right dimension in small, medium-sized and large municipalities. I test whether the order of the local parties on the left-right scales follows the order in the Flemish party system. Moreover, I assess the role of municipal size in the degree of congruence between the municipal and national level of party competition. The paper starts with an overview of the literature on the role of ideology in local politics and, subsequently, outlines the hypotheses. In the following sections I introduce the Flemish case and elaborate on the Wordscores method. The results and conclusions are presented in the last parts of the paper. As such, this research provides 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. Cities *"cannot make war or peace; they cannot issue passports or forbid outsiders from entering their territory; they cannot issue currency; and they cannot control imports or erect tariff walls"* (Peterson, 1981, p. 4), as local government has a subordinate legal status (Einstein & Kogan, 2016). 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 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; Oliver et al., 2012; Schleicher, 2007). 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 (Oliver et al., 2012; Warshaw, 2019) and in Europe independent local lists make up an important part of the electoral offer (Aars & Ringkjøb, 2005; Steyvers & Heyerick, 2017). These political initiatives constitute a non-ideological alternative to the chapters of the national parties (Steyvers et al., 2008; Copus et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, in the past few years more data on public opinion, policies and elites' positions on key issues at the local level have emerged. Based on this evidence many studies have challenged the traditional notion of Peterson and introduced a new view on local politics being partisan and ideological (Anzia, 2021). 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 (Steyvers & Heyerick, 2017; Van de Voorde et al., 2018). They point to the entry of national parties in the local political arena by the establishment of local branches 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 (Schleicher, 2007). 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 attention and resources to their services (Ashworth, 2000; Cann, 2018; Mortensen et al., 2022) and choose between different options in a multitude of policy-related issues (Copus et al., 2012; Einstein & Kogan, 2016). 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 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. Nevertheless, this theoretical assumption is undermined by a growing body of empirical research that underpins the relevance of the left-right dimension in municipal politics (Warshaw, 2019). Scholars found that local party chapters place themselves substantially differently 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 & Trounstine, 2014) and local authorities are responsive to the left-right views of the mass public (Tausanovitch & Warshaw, 2014; Einstein & Kogan, 2016). 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, i.e. voting motives and public opinion. The perspective of the local parties, the organizations that make the electoral pledges, is not sufficiently addressed up to now. Second, many studies are conducted in the *urban* politics field, only encompassing larger cities (Oliver et al., 2012). 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; Mortensen et al., 2022; Kumar & Stenberg, forthcoming). 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 the positions of local parties on the 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. Indeed, an enormous amount of literature in social sciences underlines that the traditional left-right cleavage on the extent to which the state can intervene in the economy is complemented by a 'new' cultural dimension. This political conflict between libertarianism and authoritarianism, often called 'GAL-TAN', revolves around identities, lifestyles and the conduct of politics itself. As the salience of cultural issues such as immigration, multiculturalism and climate has grown, the dimension plays an increasingly important role in political competition in Europe (Rovny & Polk, 2019; Häusermann & Kriesi, 2015; Marks et al., 2006). One could argue this is not only the case at the national, but also at the local level of government. Next to economic policy areas such as local taxes and housing, local politics also deals with public safety, the shelter of refugees and environmental issues (Breeman et al., 2015; Mortensen et al., 2022). Therefore, 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.

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 (Oliver et al., 2012; Kumar & Stenberg, forthcoming). 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 arguments underpin this hypothesis. First, there is a positive relationship between the party politicization of local politics and municipal size (Kjær & Elklit, 2010). While in small municipalities independent local lists remain strong, the party systems of large local authorities have a more national outlook (Steyvers et al., 2008; Otjes, 2018; Dodeigne et al., 2020). Although the concept of party politicization 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 leads to more general and complex - and consequently, ideological - political discussions, whereas politics in small localities revolves around more practical issues. On the one hand, political preferences in larger municipalities are more heterogeneous, because these jurisdictions include more people with different concerns and opinions (Denters et al., 2014). On the other hand, the scope of politics is broader. Large municipalities have the capacity and scale to provide more specialized services to their citizens (Newton, 1982; Oliver et al., 2012). In order to cope with this plethora of functions politicians will have to address the bigger picture. In the political debate *"they will need to spend more time on the principles and less time on every little detail"* (Mortensen et al., 2022, p. 46). This complexity could lead politicians and parties in large municipalities to conceive local issues more ideologically and in terms of left and right.

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 et al., 2021). Independent 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 independent 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 the left-right dimension. 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 et al., 2021) and high level of party politicization - the degree of votes and council seats for the *national* parties (Gendźwiłł et al., 2022) - in Flanders[3] 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

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[3] In terms of nationalization Belgium consists of 'three separated worlds'. Whereas in Flanders local party competition is strongly nationalized, the party systems in Wallonia and Brussels are more localized (Dodeigne et al., 2020).

Constitution (Plees, 2006). In order to solve this puzzle this research will assess the shape 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 positions on the general, economic and cultural left-right dimension. Estimating party preferences 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). 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). 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., Bouteca, 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, 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 (Bouteca, 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).

In order to extract policy positions from manifestos this research will make use of Wordscores (Laver et al., 2003; Lowe, 2008). The basic idea behind this method is that parties and politicians with similar ideological beliefs use similar words in their texts (Otjes, 2021). More specifically, the frequency distribution of words in *virgin texts* (texts of which the programmatic positions are unknown) is

compared 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 manifestos of PVDA, Groen, Vooruit, cd&v, Open Vld, N-VA and Vlaams Belang for the federal election in 2010 and the regional, federal and European elections in 2014 and 2019[4]. The reference texts will be linked with the parties' left-right positions in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) of 2010, 2014 and 2019 (Jolly et al., 2022), in this case the *reference scores*. This methodology was already successfully applied by Gross & Jankowski (2020) for local parties in Germany.

However, this study goes beyond the *Local Manifesto Project* by conducting two additional analyses with Wordscores. As an adequate estimation of local parties' policy positions is dependent upon the choice of reference texts and reference scores, it is pivotal to test whether changes in these variables lead to substantially different outcomes. Hence, I will run two alternative analyses next to the base estimation (see Table 1). For the first alternative I use data from MARPOR as reference scores (Lehmann et al., 2022). The coders of this longstanding comparative project extract ideological positions from parties' election manifestos. This implies the connection between the reference scores and the reference texts is extremely strong, as the first were directly derived from the latter. The second alternative involves model manifestos for the local elections as reference texts. Model manifestos are texts of the central party headquarters that serve as a framework or at least inspiration for the platforms of the local chapters. These ideological guidelines are common in Flanders, but not in several other political contexts (Gross & Jankowski, 2020). By my knowledge, this is the first time this type of document will be used as reference to position local parties with Wordscores. The main advantage is that model manifestos address local issues which makes the comparison with the local programs more suitable. For the estimation I select the model manifestos of the aforementioned seven parties for the local elections of 2012 and 2018. Together with the other analyses this will give a robust picture of local chapters' positions. If the three estimations 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 is confirmed.

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[4] Parties wrote one manifesto for both the regional, federal and European elections that took place on the same day in 2014 and 2019.

Table 1: Wordscores analyses

Analysis	Reference texts	Reference scores
Base	National party manifestos (2010 federal elections and 2014 & 2019 regional, federal and European elections)	CHES (expert positions on *lrgen*, *lrecon* & *galtan* in 2010, 2014 and 2019)
Alternative 1	National party manifestos (2010 federal elections and 2014 & 2019 regional, federal and European elections)	MARPOR (positions on the RILE-index, *economy* & *society*[5] for the corresponding manifestos)
Alternative 2	Model manifestos (2012 & 2018 local elections)	CHES (expert positions on *lrgen*, *lrecon* & *galtan* in 2014 and 2019)

Regarding the virgin texts the focus is on the manifestos of the *national* party branches that participated in the local elections of 2012 and 2018 in Flanders, whenever one was available and comprised more than 1000 words. This choice implies independent local lists and electoral alliances between two or more parties are not selected. Although extracting positions from these manifestos would be very interesting in itself, the results would not be useful to answer the research question. Independent local lists and electoral alliances are merely local phenomena and cannot be applied to compare the ideological competition at the municipal level with the central level. 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 26 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. To test

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[5] *Economy* and *society* are two dimensions composed of several coding categories which I computed myself following MARPOR's guidelines.

this hypothesis I divide the 39 localities under study into three categories based on the number of inhabitants (Small, Medium & Large; see Appendix) and assess for these size clusters how often a certain order of Wordscores party positions on the three dimensions can be observed. I have not made use of the Belfius typology to categorize the municipalities, since it is too fine-grained and includes other variables than municipal size.

The local manifestos were retrieved by using the internal database of research group Gaspar as well as consulting party websites and contacting local politicians. This labor-intensive work resulted in a unique dataset, since these documents are not systematically collected in Flanders (see Wegschaider et al., forthcoming for how difficult collecting local manifestos can be). In contrast, the manifestos of the *national* parties were easily found via Polidoc and MARPOR. In a second step the documents are converted from Word/PDF to txt with the help of Tesseract and Tabulizer, two packages in R (Plenter, under review). In order to correctly measure the ideological differences stopwords, city and party names, the date of the manifesto and/or election, graphs, pictures, candidate information and content tables are removed from the texts. The party name *Groen* is omitted manually, because the same word could also refer to greenery and nature. I conduct the Wordscores analysis in R with the Quanteda package, running codes that are similar to those of *the Local Manifesto Project* (Gross & Jankowski, 2020).

RESULTS

The base Wordscores estimation gives each local party a score on the general, economic and cultural left-right dimension. To allow for aggregate analysis the municipal branches are grouped under their national party name. The horizontal boxplots below display the positions for each party (see Figure 1, 2 & 3). It becomes immediately clear the parties' positions are structured on a left-right axis. The left-right rank order of the local parties bears very close resemblance to the order in the Flemish party system. On the general left-right dimension the sequences of parties are even identical. Concerning the economic subdimension I find no differences, with the exception of far-right Vlaams Belang. In the 2010 expert survey the party is the most rightist on economic matters, but their shift to the left on this dimension results in centrist scores in the two consecutive CHES waves. This makes it difficult to position the Vlaams Belang chapters between the other parties. Only with regard to the cultural dimension, I observe substantial dissimilarities, with Marxist PVDA and Christian Democrat cd&v being more leftist and Liberal Open Vld being more rightist than expected from the scores in CHES. However, the cultural left-right dimension covers a very diverse set of policy issues which makes any party order more arguable (see also the differences between the three waves of CHES). For example, Open Vld is

very progressive on LGBTQ+ and abortion rights, but not necessarily on climate and immigration. Moreover, municipal politics deals with other cultural matters than higher levels of government. The relatively more conservative positions of PVDA and cd&v and the more progressive position of Open Vld in the CHES surveys might have resulted from a focus on moral issues and European integration, but these policy areas are far less salient at the local level.

As mentioned earlier, the Wordscores estimation is dependent upon certain reference texts with reference scores. Changes in these variables can lead to different outcomes. Therefore, I conducted two additional analyses: one with MARPOR data as reference scores and one with model manifestos for the local elections as reference texts. For comparison the results of the three analyses are shown per ideological dimension (see Figure 4, 5 and 6). Concerning the general left-right scale the order of the parties is almost identical for all estimations. However, on economic issues the first and second alternative display other rank orders at the right end of the political spectrum than the base analysis. Especially the position of Vlaams Belang differs, which can be explained by the choice of reference scores. As only the centrist scores of the CHES waves of 2014 and 2019 are included in Alternative 2, the far-right party seems more moderate compared to the other analyses. For the cultural dimension, finally, it is the other way around with different party orders on the left. Base and Alternative 1 suggest PVDA is the most leftist party, followed by Groen and Vooruit. This is also the order of the national parties according to MARPOR. Alternative 2, on the other hand, shows Groen as culturally the most progressive and places PVDA more towards the center which is more in line with the CHES scores for these parties. Both findings can be theoretically underpinned, as the Greens, for example, are more leftist on environmental issues, whereas the far-left is somewhat more radical on immigration and integration. Although parts of the additional analyses differ to some extent from the base estimation, they still show very similar party rank orders and also point to left and right as the cleavage that shapes the local political conflict. Moreover, the small variance can easily be explained from a theoretical and methodological point of view. Hence, H1 is confirmed.

Figure 1: Local party positions on the general left-right dimension (base analysis)
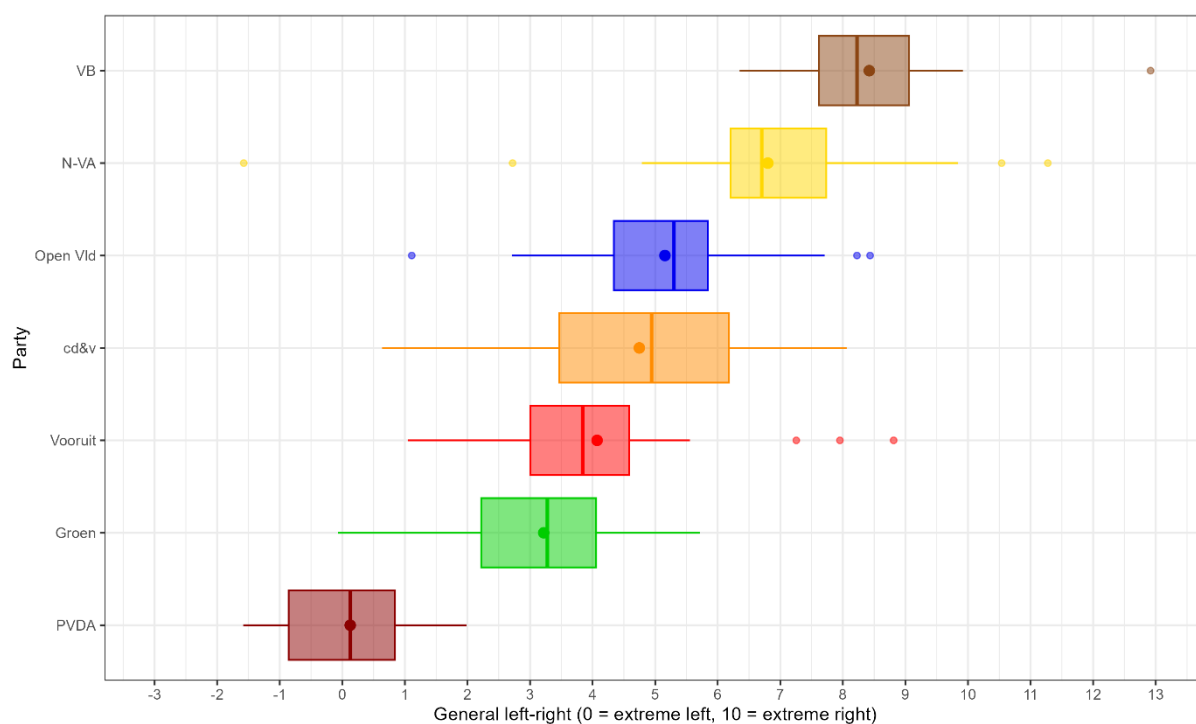
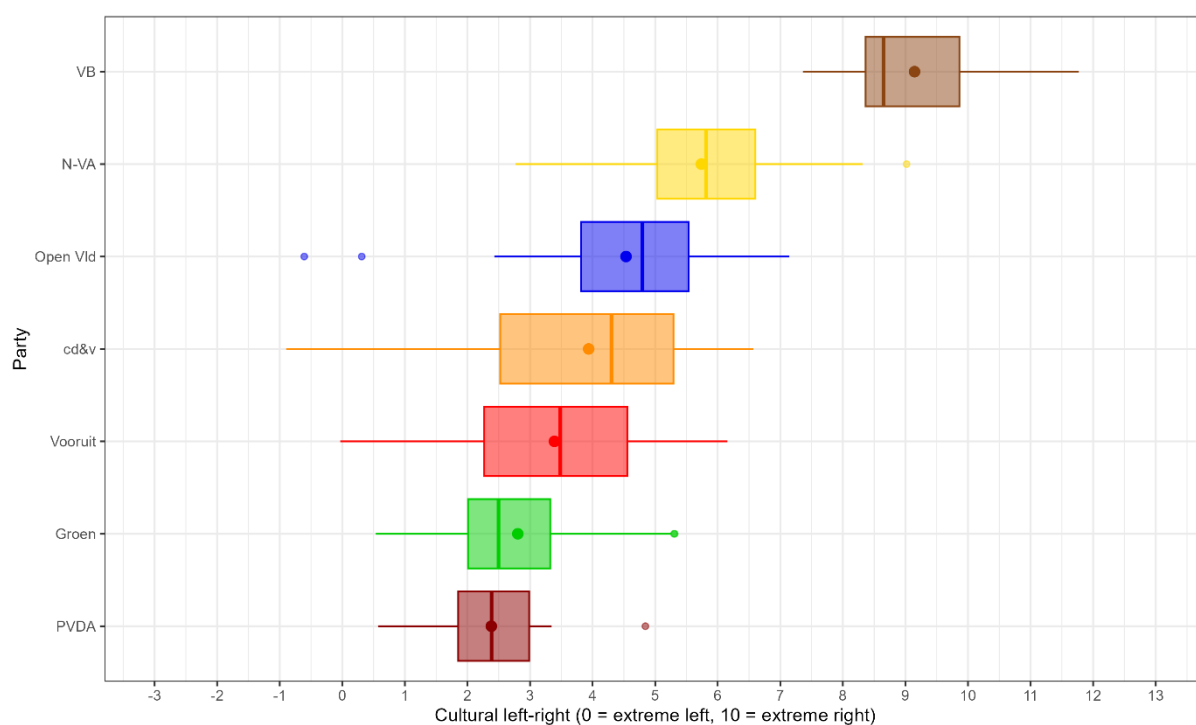National party order according to CHES: PVDA < Groen < Vooruit < cd&v < Open Vld < N-VA < Vlaams Belang

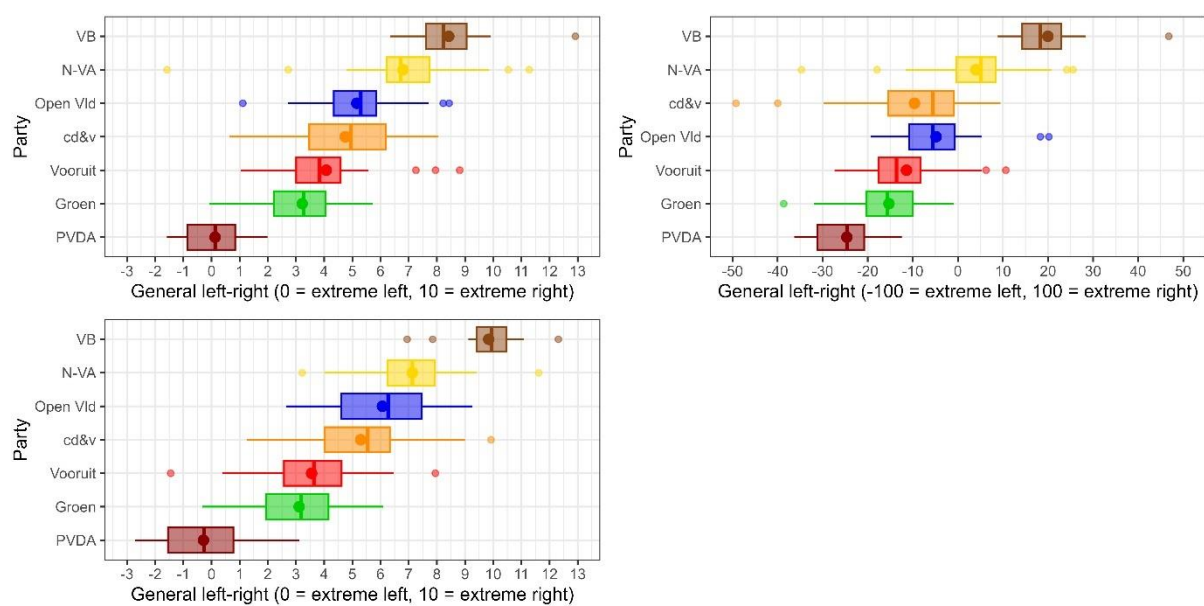**Figure 2: Local party positions on the economic left-right dimension (base analysis)**
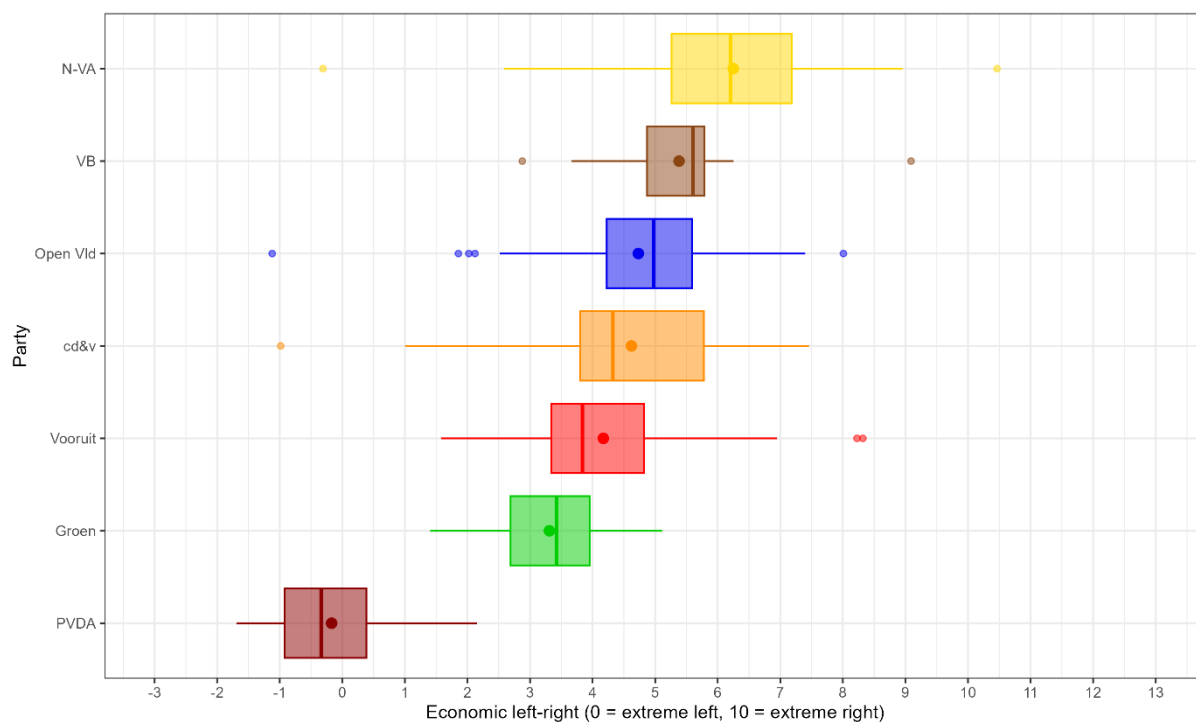
National party order according to CHES 2010: PVDA < Groen < Vooruit < cd&v < Open Vld < N-VA < Vlaams Belang; national party order according to CHES 2014 & 2019: PVDA < Groen < Vooruit < Vlaams Belang < cd&v < Open Vld < N-VA

Figure 3: Local party positions on the cultural left-right dimension (GAL-TAN) (base analysis)

National party order according to CHES 2010: Groen < PVDA < Vooruit < Open Vld < cd&v < N-VA < Vlaams Belang; national party order according to CHES 2014: Groen < Open Vld < Vooruit < PVDA < cd&v < N-VA < Vlaams Belang; national party order according to CHES 2019: Groen < Open Vld < Vooruit < PVDA < N-VA < cd&v < Vlaams Belang

Figure 4: Local party positions on the general left-right dimension (combined)

Base = top left; Alternative 1 = top right; Alternative 2 = bottom left

Figure 5: Local party positions on the economic left-right dimension (combined)
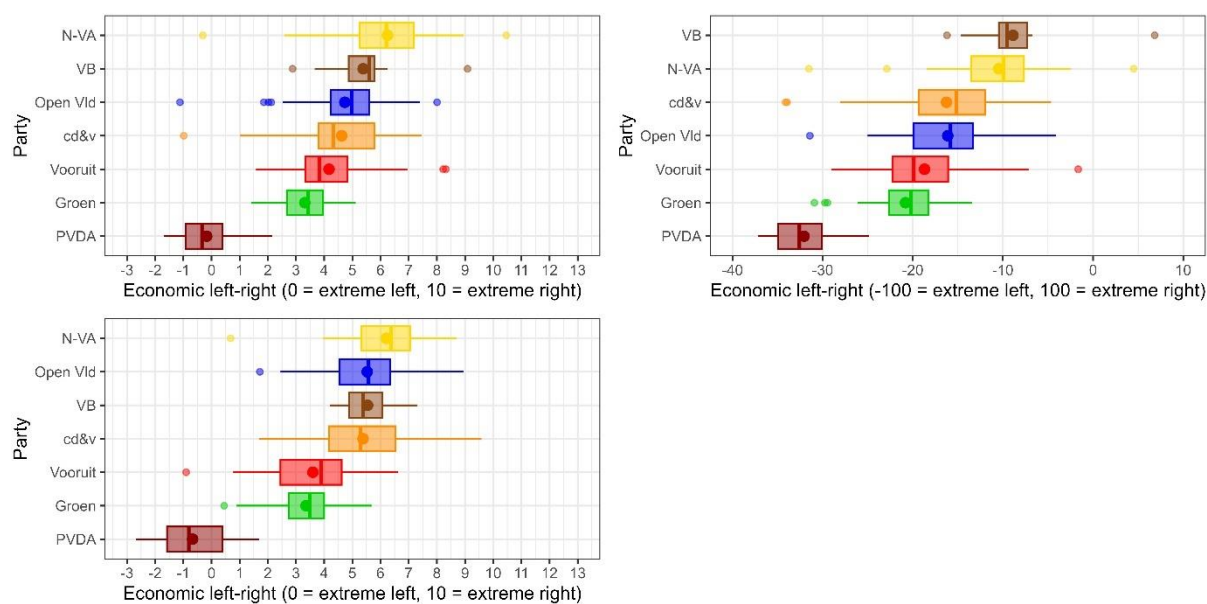
Base = top left; Alternative 1 = top right; Alternative 2 = bottom left

Figure 6: Local party positions on the cultural left-right dimension (GAL-TAN) (combined)

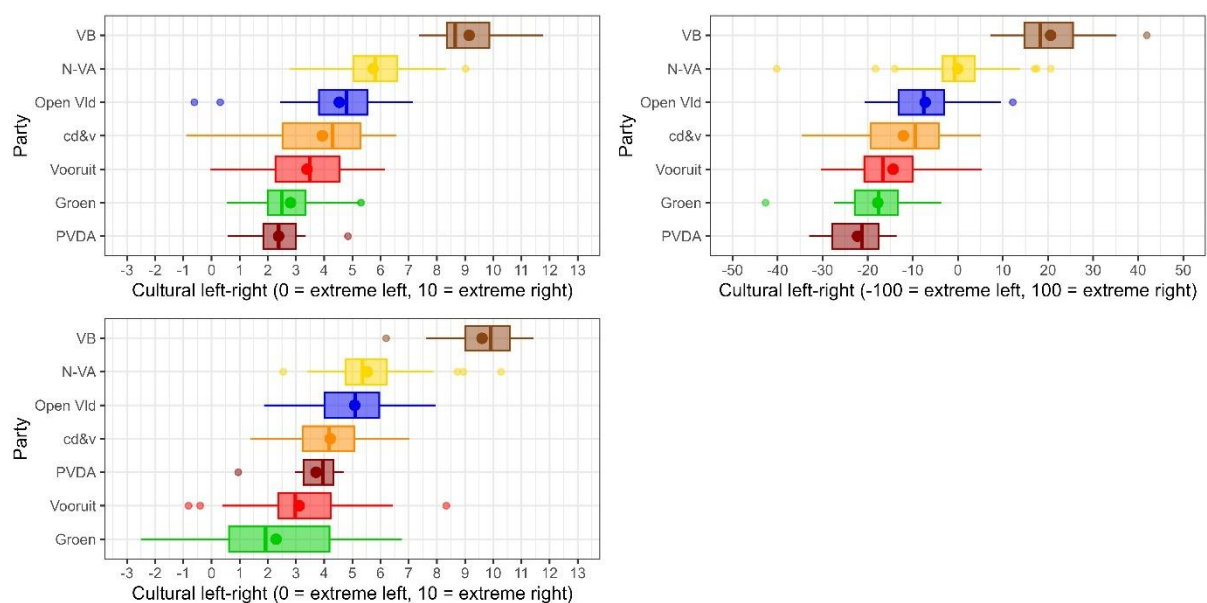Base = top left; Alternative 1 = top right; Alternative 2 = bottom left

In order to further refine the analysis I add tables that display how often a certain order of Wordscores party positions on the three dimensions can be observed. I go from very evident conditions, such as Vlaams Belang being estimated further to the right than PVDA, to questionable ones, such as Vooruit being estimated further to the right than Groen. The *True* column counts the absolute number of cases - a comparison of two parties for one election in one municipality - for which the condition is met, whereas *False* measures the number of cases that do not comply. The proportion of *True* cases is presented in the last column. As shown by Table 2, most party orders regarding the general left-right scale are upheld. With the exception of the two last pairs of parties that are ideologically close to each other, the conditions are met in more than 80% of the cases. For the economic and cultural subdimensions presented in Table 3 and 4 I can also record high numbers on the most ideologically straightforward conditions. However, in the political center many local parties are positioned in different sequences than theoretically expected. For example, it is striking that on economic issues only in 59% of the cases Liberal Open Vld is positioned further to the right than Social Democrat Vooruit. Historically, these parties represent opposing economic interests, respectively Capital and Labor. In brief, the tables confirm that the left-right dimensions structure local party competition, but at the same time the ideological differences between the parties in the center are less outspoken than at the national level.

I also make use of the tables below to test whether municipal size affects the degree of congruence between the local and the national level of party competition. I hypothesize that in large municipalities the sequence of local parties on the left-right dimensions will resemble the order in the Flemish party system to a larger extent than in small and medium-sized municipalities. This is measured by disaggregating the full results in the tables along three categories of localities. Again, I investigate how often a certain order of local party positions can be observed, but now for small, medium-sized and large municipalities separately. It is, however, important to note that I do not dispose of PVDA and Vlaams Belang manifestos in small municipalities which implies certain conditions cannot be tested for that category. If H2 holds, the proportions of *True* cases in large municipalities will be above the average (the *All* column) in most of the conditions. Nevertheless, such a pattern cannot be found. For some conditions I count relatively more cases that are true from large cities, whereas for other conditions the small or medium-sized localities display higher-than-average proportions. This incoherent picture applies for all three dimensions under study. Hence, municipal size is not related to the degree of congruence between the left-right order of parties in the local and the national political systems. As the ideological conflict in large municipalities is not centered around left and right to a larger extent than in small localities, I have to reject H2.

Table 2: Rank-order of the local parties on the general left-right dimension (base analysis)

Condition	True				False				%			
	Small	Medium	Large	All	Small	Medium	Large	All	Small	Medium	Large	All
VB > PVDA		2	7	*9*		0	0	*0*		100	100	*100*
VB > Vooruit		2	9	*11*		0	0	*0*		100	100	*100*
VB > N-VA		1	12	*13*		1	1	*2*		50	92	*87*
N-VA > PVDA		2	13	*15*		0	1	*1*		100	93	*94*
N-VA > Vooruit	3	7	15	*25*	0	1	2	*3*	100	88	88	*89*
N-VA > cd&v	14	9	18	*41*	1	1	5	*7*	93	90	78	*85*
Vooruit > PVDA		2	9	*11*		0	0	*0*		100	100	*100*
Vooruit > Groen	1	8	10	*19*	2	1	5	*8*	33	89	67	*70*
Open Vld > cd&v	5	5	11	*21*	6	5	8	*19*	45	50	58	*53*

Read as (for example): Vlaams Belang is estimated to be further to the right (>) than N-VA in 13 out of 15 municipalities (87%) where they both drafted a manifesto; higher-than-average proportions are in green, lower-than-average proportions are in red.

Table 3: Rank-order of the local parties on the economic left-right dimension (base analysis)

Condition	True				False				%			
	Small	Medium	Large	All	Small	Medium	Large	All	Small	Medium	Large	All
N-VA > PVDA		2	14	*16*		0	0	*0*		100	100	*100*
N-VA > Vooruit	3	7	13	*23*	0	1	4	*5*	100	88	76	*82*
N-VA > Open Vld	11	6	15	*32*	0	3	5	*8*	100	67	75	*80*
VB > Vooruit		2	9	*11*		0	0	*0*		100	100	*100*
Open Vld > PVDA		2	12	*14*		0	1	*1*		100	92	*93*
Open Vld > Vooruit	0	4	9	*13*	2	3	4	*9*	0	57	69	*59*
Open Vld > cd&v	5	5	11	*21*	6	5	8	*19*	45	50	58	*53*

cd&v > Vooruit	4	6	10	*20*	1	2	7	*10*	80	75	59	*67*
Vooruit > Groen	1	7	11	*19*	2	2	4	*8*	33	78	73	*70*

Read as (for example): N-VA is estimated to be further to the right (>) than Vooruit in 23 out of 28 municipalities (82%) where they both drafted a manifesto; higher-than-average proportions are in green, lower-than-average proportions are in red.

Table 4: Rank-order of the local parties on the cultural left-right dimension (GAL-TAN) (base analysis)

Condition	True				False				%			
	Small	Medium	Large	All	Small	Medium	Large	All	Small	Medium	Large	All
VB > Groen		2	9	11		0	0	0		100	100	100
VB > Open Vld		2	11	13		0	0	0		100	100	100
VB > N-VA		2	13	15		0	0	0		100	100	100
N-VA > Groen	7	9	14	30	0	0	2	2	100	100	88	94
N-VA > Open Vld	8	7	11	26	3	2	9	14	73	78	55	65
cd&v > Groen	5	5	10	20	3	4	5	12	63	56	67	63
cd&v > PVDA		2	10	12		0	3	3		100	77	80
cd&v > Vooruit	3	4	13	20	2	4	4	10	60	50	76	67
Vooruit > Groen	2	6	9	17	1	3	6	10	67	67	60	63

Read as (for example): N-VA is estimated to be further to the right (>) than Groen in 30 out of 32 municipalities (94%) where they both drafted a manifesto; higher-than-average proportions are in green, lower-than-average proportions are in red.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I studied the role of ideology and more specifically the left-right dimension in local politics. 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? As there remain opposing views both in political science and in society, the debate is far from settled. In order to contribute to this ongoing discussion I analyzed 257 local party manifestos in Flanders (Belgium), in several regards a representative case of Europe. By conducting a computational text analysis with Wordscores I estimated local parties' policy positions

on the general, economic and cultural left-right dimension. The analyses reveal the rank orders of the local parties on these scales bear very close resemblance to the orders in the national party system. This conclusion is even consistent across three different estimations. Hence, the local political conflict is also structured along the *"national"* left-right dimension. These findings are in line with the growing body of empirical research that supports the relevance of left and right in municipal politics (Warshaw, 2019). Moreover, the conclusions are especially similar to the results of the *Local Manifesto Project* that studied local party manifestos in Germany. By applying exactly the same methodology, Gross and Jankowski (2020) also found a strong congruence between local and national party competition. This research demonstrates that these findings transcend that specific political context.

At the same time caution is required in interpreting these results. Whether ideology matters at the municipal level is a very broad question, covering a plethora of aspects that never fit into one paper. In this contribution I focused on the rank orders of parties on the left-right divide and found these are highly similar with regard to the national level. However, I did not systematically investigate the distance between the parties on the left-right dimensions. Although the radical parties take very distinct positions, the intervals between the parties in the center seem not large. Equally, the boxplots and the tables displayed the internal heterogeneity of the parties. There is considerable variance in the policy preferences of local branches of the same party. Future research should thus not only address the order of parties on certain ideological dimensions, but also the distance between the parties. By studying both aspects we will obtain more insights into the relevance of ideology and the left-right cleavage at the local level.

Next to the shape of the local political conflict as such this paper also paid attention to whether it is affected by municipal size. I analyzed manifestos for the 2012 and 2018 local elections in a representative sample of large, medium-sized and small municipalities. By including the latter I defied the bias towards large cities (Oliver et al., 2012; Kumar & Stenberg, forthcoming). Nevertheless, the hypothesis that in large municipalities the local party competition is centered around a left-right axis to a larger extent than in small municipalities had to be rejected. I did not find any pattern in the degree of congruence between the local and national level of party competition. Even in small localities politics is characterized by ideological struggle, at least with regard to the order of parties on the left-right scale. Hence, the role of municipal size might be reconsidered. In order to draw more robust conclusions future research should assess the impact of municipal size on other aspects of ideological competition, such as distance and polarization. Furthermore, the study should be extended to other political systems and contexts.

Finally, this research does not only comprise a valuable addition to the literature on the role of ideology in local politics, but also a data and methodology-related contribution. In order to obtain local parties'

left-right positions their election manifestos were analyzed by applying the text scaling method Wordscores. Wordscores is well-known computational text analysis technique in political science (Laver et al., 2003; Lowe, 2008), but not very frequently used to extract the policy preferences of local parties. Only very recently scholars have started to code local manifestos in Germany and the Netherlands with the use of Wordscores (Gross & Jankowski, 2020; Otjes, 2021). For the first time this study addresses the Flemish/Belgian case and employs national parties' model manifestos for the local elections as reference texts. These exploratory endeavors can be the first step in the making of a unique comparative dataset on the ideological preferences of local parties that can be used for several research purposes in political science.

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APPENDIX

For this paper I have analyzed 257 party manifestos for the 2012 and 2018 local elections in 39 small, medium-sized and large Flemish municipalities (see Table 1). Only the local branches of the seven major Flemish parties were considered. This includes the chapters that run under their national party name, but also chapters *in disguise*. In Flanders some national party branches present themselves under a local flag - often in combination with placing independents on their candidate lists. Although these organizations may have a local outlook, they remain strongly aligned to a national party (Steyvers & Heyerick, 2017).

The number of manifestos for each party is displayed in Table 2. Regionalist N-VA and Christian Democrat cd&v are best represented in the sample, as these parties are the most institutionalized at the local level in Flanders. In turn, I do not dispose of many programs of the far-left PVDA, because the party does not count many chapters (yet). In contrast, the far-right Vlaams Belang has many local branches, but most of them simply do not draft a platform. With regard to the length of the manifestos, the average number of words is 12.204 and the median is 9.128. The histogram below (Figure 1) presents the frequency distribution. However minor, I also observed differences between the parties, as displayed in Figure 2. The variance can partly be explained by municipal size. For example, PVDA and Vlaams Belang write on average longer manifestos, because only the platforms for their local branches in the largest cities were available.

Table 1: Selection of municipalities

Size (number of inhabitants)	Municipalities
Small (-25.000)	Anzegem, Arendonk, Berlare, Blankenberge, Bredene, Eeklo, Heers, Heuvelland, Koekelare, Kortenberg, Lochristi, Neerpelt, Nevele, Schilde, Tessenderlo, Tielt, Torhout & Vleteren
Medium (25.000 - 60.000)	Aarschot, Beringen, Deinze, Dilbeek, Pelt, Tongeren, Turnhout, Willebroek & Zaventem
Large (60.000+)	Aalst, Antwerpen, Brugge, Genk, Gent, Hasselt, Kortrijk, Leuven, Mechelen, Oostende, Roeselare & Sint-Niklaas

Table 2: Number of manifestos for each party

Party	Number of manifestos
PVDA	16
Groen	37
Vooruit	33
cd&v	56
Open Vld	43
N-VA	57
Vlaams Belang	15
Total	*257*

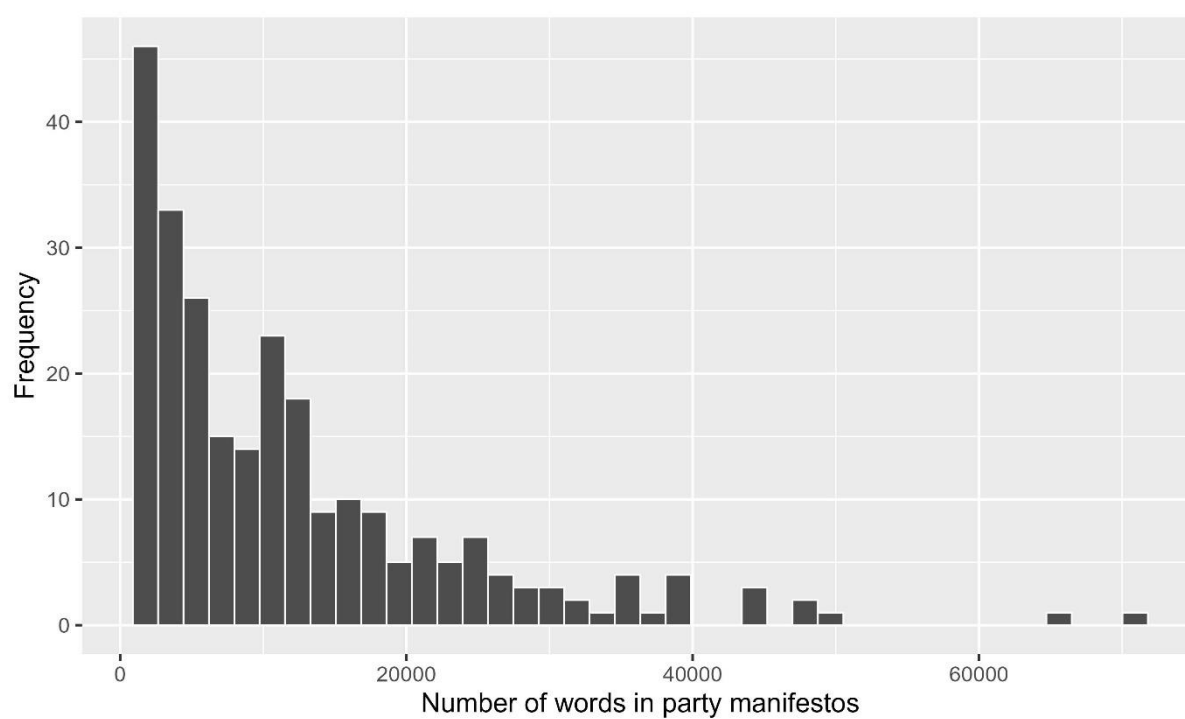**Figure 1: Frequency distribution of the number of words in manifestos**

Figure 2. Number of words in manifestos for each party