

Position-taking and issue salience in local manifestos. Evidence from Belgium.

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Abstract

In national politics, parties take diverging positions along several dimensions and each emphasize different issues. However, do these ideological differences exist on the local level as well? Local politics is often conceived as largely outside the political (i.e., partisan) sphere and merely factual and harmonic. It is said that local political actors commonly strive for a single best solution to local issues. This paper investigates to what extent local party competition is driven by ideological opposition. I assess whether there are substantial ideological differences between local parties by analyzing 200 local manifestos in the context of Flanders (Belgium). Using computational methods - Wordscores and a BERT-model - I examine variance in local parties' left-right positions and issue salience, respectively. Based on institutional isomorphism theory and the franchise party model I expect a larger ideological distance between different parties operating in the same municipality than between branches of the same party in different municipalities.

Keywords: ideology, position-taking, issue salience, local politics, party manifestos, computational text analysis

INTRODUCTION

One of the key functions of political parties is the articulation of interests, values, and policy options. Essentially, parties are policy-driven organizations that are rooted in a certain ideology. They compete for votes and offices in order to pursue their policies. In doing so, parties take diverging positions along a set of given dimensions and prioritize certain issues over others. In national politics, the substantial variation in positions and issue emphasis between political parties is treated as a given in much scholarly work (Nyhuis, 2017). However, do these ideological differences exist on the local level as well? Local politics is often conceived as largely outside the political (i.e., partisan) sphere and merely factual and harmonic (Oliver et al., 2012). Instead of a clash between fundamental world views municipal policy-making is said to revolve around finding optimal solutions for practical problems (Nyhuis, 2017; Copus et al., 2012).

Existing research on the ideological differences between local parties is scarce. The local level remains underdeveloped in the field of party politics in general and party ideology in particular. A limited

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number of studies assessed local party chapters' left-right positions, but did not systematically examine the distance between them (Gross & Jankowski, 2020; Otjes, 2023) or only focused on differences between local branches of the same party instead of the variation between different parties operating in the same municipality (Deschouwer, 1996; Devos et al., 2007; Buelens et al., 2008; Blockmans et al., 2013; Van de Voorde et al., 2018). Issue salience does not even play a role in our understanding of local party competition at all. Moreover, most research only addresses local parties' policy preferences indirectly by using the positions of parties at the national level as proximate measures or conducting surveys among local politicians.

This paper is one of the first to investigate to what extent local party competition is driven by ideological opposition in a direct manner. I assess whether there are substantial ideological differences between local parties by analyzing 200 local election manifestos in the context of Flanders (Belgium). Using computational methods, I estimate local parties' left-right positions and issue salience. The first will be extracted with the established text scaling method Wordscores (Laver et al., 2003), whereas the latter will be retrieved with a BERT-model, a highly innovative transformer-based classifier (de Vries et al., 2021; Otjes & de Natris, 2023). Based on institutional isomorphism theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Broekema et al., 2022) and the franchise party model (Carty, 2004) I expect a larger ideological distance between different parties operating in the same municipality than between branches of the same party in different municipalities. In addition, I hypothesize this distance will be larger in terms of positions than issue salience and for issues parties own than issues without clear ownership.

The paper starts with an overview of the literature on ideological differences in local politics and, subsequently, outlines the hypotheses. In the following sections I introduce the Flemish context and elaborate on the computational methods. The results and conclusion parts have yet to be written. As such, this study will provide essential and novel insights into party competition at the local level. It also contributes to the growing research agenda on local manifestos. Methodologically, this paper will display the potential of BERT-models for text analysis in the social sciences.

IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES IN LOCAL POLITICS

Roughly, we can identify two ways in which ideological competition between political parties takes place (Libbrecht et al., 2009). On the one hand, parties place themselves differently in an ideological space. According to Anthony Downs' proximity theory (1957), parties take diverging positions on a set of several issue dimensions. Whereas some parties want more government intervention in the economy, others propose less regulation and lower taxes. Some parties firmly oppose immigration,

while others welcome refugees. Most of these specific issue dimensions can be captured under an overarching left-right cleavage. In large parts of the world, party competition is structured by the left-right divide (Lindqvist & Dornschneider-Elkink, 2023; Huber & Inglehart, 1995). The continuum is useful in summarizing the broad positions of parties and serves as a reference structure that helps them communicate their ideological stances (Dalton & McAllister, 2015). On the other hand, parties compete by emphasizing different issues (Budge & Farlie, 1983). They prioritize certain policy areas over others. Whereas some parties allocate a lot of attention to economic topics, others focus more on new issues, such as environmental protection. By systematically highlighting a particular issue parties try to gain and maintain ownership over it (Petrocik, 1996). If voters perceive parties as more competent on and identify parties more strongly with issues they consider important, they will be more inclined to vote for this party (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Bouteica & Lefevre, 2020).

Hence, these theories expect substantial ideological differences between political parties. In national politics variation in position-taking and issue salience is repeatedly shown by a plethora of studies (Klingemann et al., 1994; Krouwel, 1999; Budge & Klingemann, 2001; Volkens & Klingemann, 2002) and consistently mapped by long-running comparative projects, such as MARPOR (Lehmann et al., 2022) and CHES (Jolly et al., 2022). Generally, levels of ideological polarization have even risen since the mid-1990s (Dalton, 2021). However, do these ideological differences exist on the local level as well? Local politics is often conceived as largely outside the political (i.e., partisan) sphere and merely factual and harmonic (Oliver et al., 2012). The literature suggests several reasons for the non-ideological character of municipal politics. In his book *City Limits* (1981) Paul Peterson denounces that in the US “*too often cities are treated as if they were nation-states*”. Political scientists overlook the limits municipalities are confronted with. As opposed to national politics, the local level is constrained in terms of functions, autonomy and revenue. Cities have few policy options, because 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 presence of substantial ideological differences 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. 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). As municipal politics is

factual and harmonic, parties pursue policies that are in the interest of the municipality at large. This idea is especially salient in the rhetoric of independent local lists that make up an important part of the electoral offer in European local party systems (Aars & Ringkjøb, 2005; Steyvers & Heyerick, 2017; Steyvers et al., 2008; Otjes, 2018).

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. These branches will walk in the ideological footsteps of the national party they belong to. Two theories account for this claim. First, institutional isomorphism theory expects municipal chapters to experience several institutional pressures from their central party headquarter (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Broekema et al., 2020). *Normative* pressures such as the shared party ideology ensure local party representatives will generally hold like-minded ideas. *Coercive* pressures, in turn, encompass the national headquarter's influence on local branches' policy preferences by providing model manifestos (Van de Voorde et al., 2018). Indeed, the local level mirrors the left-right distances at the central level, as research finds municipal branches tend to take highly similar stances with regard to their national party (Deschouwer, 1996; Devos et al., 2007; Buelens et al., 2008; Blockmans et al., 2013; Gross & Jankowski, 2020; Otjes, 2023).

Second, the franchise party model (Carty, 2004) posits that parties increasingly behave as stratarchically organized entities. The central headquarter is responsible for the overall party brand, whereas local chapters exploit it in their electoral campaign. It is especially profitable for local candidates who are able to identify themselves with a reliable and well-known product. It seems rational that local parties will emphasize topics already claimed by their national party, as issue ownership is an important asset in times of elections (Petrocik, 1996). However scarce, several studies indeed show a high degree of congruence in issue salience between a national party and its local branches (Buelens et al., 2008; Van de Voorde et al., 2018). This presupposes that the ideological differences of the national level trickle down to the local level.

Next to the party politicization of local government it is argued parties and politicians have to make ideological decisions on the local level anyway (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. This margin has even substantially increased over the past decades (Ladner et al., 2016, 2019). 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).

In brief, there are strong theoretical arguments for variation in positions and issue salience among local parties. The traditional view of Peterson does not reflect 21st century local government, because it largely neglects its party politicization and growing autonomy. The stronger role of national parties and higher levels of self-government indicate the pre-eminence of substantial ideological differences in municipal politics. Moreover, several studies suggest local chapters of the same party are ideologically very close. Conversely, I expect branches of different parties will take diverging positions and each emphasize different issues. I hypothesize the following:

H1: The ideological distance will be larger between different parties in the same municipality than between branches of the same party.

The ideological distance will be measured both in terms of position and salience. Positions are generally seen as more rigid than relative attention for issues. Parties maintain their positions to please grassroots supporters, whereas they change issue emphasis to attract new voters. Altering positions is more risky, because it could harm a party’s credibility and alienate rank and file members. Issue salience, in turn, is perceived as the package in which the positions are wrapped and thus less controversial to change (Bouteca & Devos, 2016; Harmel et al., 1995; Janda et al., 1995). This idea, stemming from the party change literature, can also be applied to the study of local parties’ policy preferences. For local branches, it might be harder to deviate from their national party in terms of positions than in terms of issue salience (Van de Voorde et al., 2018). In order to be responsive to municipality-specific needs they will be more inclined to emphasize other issues than to shift their position on these issues. For example, in a municipality with high levels of tourism all parties will allocate more attention to this topic compared to localities without many visitors. However, these parties can still have diverging ideas how to manage mass tourism. Moreover, in this study I examine position-taking on an overarching left-right scale. A position shift on one particular dimension will not automatically translate into a change on the left-right axis. For these reasons I hypothesize that the

distance between different parties operating in the same municipality will be larger in terms of position than issue salience.

H2: The ideological distance between different parties operating in the same municipality will be larger in terms of position than issue salience.

However, not every issue is equally important for a political party. Some issues are deemed more key than others, because they lie at the core of a party's ideology and are owned by a party (Bouteca & Devos, 2016; Klingemann et al., 1994; Petrocik, 1996). Consequently, parties will always allocate high levels of attention to these topics. For example, I assume a Green Party branch will strongly emphasize environmental protection, regardless of the municipality where it operates. For vote-seeking and policy-seeking motives, local parties will distinguish themselves by focusing on the issues they are associated with. Other topics, such as tourism to repeat a previous example, are not owned by a particular party and might therefore be addressed by the whole ideological spectrum. The importance of this type of issues might depend to a greater extent on specific characteristics of localities. Hence, the ideological distance between different parties operating in the same municipality will be smaller for issues without clear ownership.

H3: The ideological distance in salience between different parties operating in the same municipality will be larger for issues parties own than for issues without ownership.

THE CONTEXT OF FLANDERS (BELGIUM)

The extent to which local party competition is driven by ideological opposition 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. The local government system essentially has two tiers, with municipalities ($N = 581$) as the first and provinces ($N = 10$) as the second. In the complex Belgian multi-level democracy municipalities are responsible for important policy areas, such as public safety, spatial planning, the public domain, transport, leisure and social affairs. In 2002 the regions acquired the competence to set the constitutive framework for and execute the oversight on the local authorities (Steyvers, 2022). Furthermore, the Belgian party system is split along ethno-territorial lines resulting in varying sets of parties in each region. Hence, the Belgian municipalities are embedded in differing institutional settings and party systems along the part where they are located. This research focuses on the region of Flanders.

Flanders is an interesting case to study, because the local party systems are characterized by high levels of nationalization and party politicization (Dodeigne et al., 2020). By establishing hundreds of

municipal branches 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* succeeded in dominating the local political arena (Steyvers, 2022; Gendźwiłł et al., 2021). These national parties² obtain a very high degree of votes and council seats in local elections (Gendźwiłł et al., 2022). This differs from the localized party systems in Walloon municipalities (Dodeigne et al., 2020). Furthermore, the powerful position of national parties in Flanders has consequences for local ideology. Central party headquarters exert influence on the local chapters by providing them with model manifestos (Van de Voorde et al., 2018). These documents involve general positions on local policy areas, often combined with *best practices* from specific localities. It is important to note, however, that the model manifestos are designed to help local chapters to draft their *own* election program. They serve as inspiration and are not binding. Local branches are even explicitly requested not to copy the texts entirely and give their platforms a municipality-specific touch.

DATA AND OPERATIONALIZATION

Most studies address ideological differences between local parties *indirectly*. Political scientists have used the programmatic positions of parties at the national level as proximate measures (Denters, 1985; Goerres & Tepe, 2013; Steunenbergh, 1992; Laver et al., 1998). Other research has relied on the self-positioning of local councillors on a general left-right dimension (Bäck, 2003; Egner et al., 2013). Similarly, in several Belgian studies chairs of local chapters were asked to position their party on a left-right axis and indicate which issues are most important to them (Deschouwer, 1996; Devos et al., 2007; Buelens et al., 2008; Blockmans et al., 2013). In this paper the position and issue salience of local party branches will be measured *directly* by making use of their election manifestos. Estimating party preferences with the use of manifestos is a long-standing tradition within political science (Klingemann et al., 2006), but has only scarcely been used in local politics (Van de Voorde et al., 2018). Manifestos are considered as a useful source to assess party policy positions and issue salience. 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 the aforementioned surveys amongst local politicians. The latter do not necessarily articulate the preferences of the whole party (Bouteca, 2011, pp. 123-133).

The manifestos will be analyzed by making use of computational methods. Only very recently scholars have started to code local manifestos with the use of the computer (Gross & Jankowski, 2020; Otjes,

² Although these are in fact regional parties, I will consistently use the term *national* to be in line with the comparative literature.

2021, 2023). Although there has been some criticism about computational text analysis (Bruinsma & Gemenis, 2019), the technique is considered as promising (Slapin & Proksch, 2008) and was applied for numerous publications (for an overview see Bruinsma & Gemenis, 2019). Computerized coding is necessary to use the huge amount of manifestos available at the local level. Hand-coding is simply too labour-intensive. However, this research will make use of *supervised* methods to estimate parties' position and issue salience. The computational analysis will make estimations on a-priori defined concepts, based on existing data derived from expert surveys and manual coding of manifestos. In this regard, this cluster of techniques combines the best of both worlds, as the automatization allows me to process a large amount of data and at the same time I rely on measures from established methods. *Unsupervised* methods such as Wordfish and topic models that look for patterns in texts without any form of human steering are very difficult to validate (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013) and are subject to more criticism (Koljonen et al., 2022; Hjorth et al., 2015).

In order to extract the left-right 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). Therefore, the policy preferences of a text can be estimated by comparing its vocabulary with a text of which the ideological leaning is already determined. That is exactly what Wordscores does: it compares 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) on an a-priori defined policy scale. In this study, the local manifestos are clearly the virgin texts. Regarding the reference texts, the choice of an adequate set of documents is crucial for a proper estimation of party positions. The 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 2019³. The reference texts will be linked with the parties' general left-right positions in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) of 2010, 2014 and 2019 (Jolly et al., 2022). This methodology was already successfully applied by Gross & Jankowski (2020) and Otjes (2021, 2023) for local parties' positions in Germany and the Netherlands, respectively.

³ Parties wrote one manifesto for both the regional, federal and European elections that took place on the same day in 2014 and 2019.

In order to measure issue salience in the local manifestos I make use of a BERT-model⁴. BERT – and transformers in general - are one of the latest advancements in computational text analysis. Based on pre-coded data this highly innovative technique can allocate (parts of) unseen texts to specific categories. In doing so, BERT does not only look at the words in the texts separately, but also takes their context into account by examining words that are often used together. This model is so advanced it is even capable in distinguishing between homonyms. Dictionaries and ‘traditional’ models of supervised machine learning, on the contrary, only rely on word frequencies to determine topic prevalence. Developed at the University of Groningen and pretrained on Dutch Wikipedia pages, novels and news articles, the variant of Bertje is specifically designed to classify texts in Dutch (de Vries et al., 2021). For this research, Bertje assigns sentences in the local manifestos to the policy categories of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP)⁵ (see Table 1). I employ the national manifestos and their CAP coding as a training dataset (Otjes & de Natris, 2023). So far, I only make use of the Dutch manifestos between 2006 and 2017, but I hope to obtain the coding for the Flemish party programs as well.

Table 1: Categories of the Comparative Agendas Project

Agriculture	Civil Rights	Culture & Sport
Defense	Domestic Commerce	Education
Energy	Environment	Foreign Affairs
Foreign Trade	Government Operations	Healthcare
Housing	Labour	Law & Crime
Macro-economics	Migration	Nature
Social Welfare	Technology	Transportation

The focus is on parties’ programs for the local elections of 2012 and 2018 in Flanders, whenever one was available and comprised more than 1000 words⁶. The party should also be represented in the council. Lists without councillors often do not write a manifesto and are mostly irrelevant for party competition. The analysis is conducted for the local parties in a sample of 38 municipalities of different

⁴ BERT stands for *Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers*.

⁵ Although local politics revolves to some extent around different policy areas than national politics, the CAP coding scheme can be applied to local manifestos. Categories, such as foreign trade and foreign affairs, that at first sight seem irrelevant for the municipal level, cover substantial elements of local policy-making in Flanders, such as fair trade initiatives, foreign aid and town twinning.

⁶ Klemmensen et al. (2007) recommend this threshold in order to conduct a valid Wordscores analysis.

size. This includes Flanders' 13 largest cities and 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). Nonetheless, only localities for which I have the programs of all parties that have gained representation in the council are selected. The ideological distance in the local party systems cannot be computed, if data for several parties are missing. Because most local chapters of far-right Vlaams Belang do not draft a manifesto themselves, I use their nation-wide manifestos for the local elections. These texts are not model manifestos merely meant for internal use, but published documents aimed at informing the public.

The local manifestos were retrieved by consulting party websites as well as contacting local politicians. This labor-intensive work resulted in a corpus of approximately 200 party programs of which the average and median number of words is XXX and XXX, respectively. This corpus is a unique dataset, since it is the first time Flemish local manifestos are systematically collected (see Wegschaider et al., 2023 for how difficult collecting local manifestos can be). In contrast, the manifestos of the *national* parties were easily found via Polidoc and MARPOR (Lehmann et al., 2022). 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). Furthermore, the date of the manifesto and/or election, graphs, pictures, candidate information and content tables are removed from the texts. For Wordscores specifically, stopwords as well as city and party names are also erased. The party name *Groen* is omitted manually, because the same word could also refer to greenery and nature. In addition, the texts are also stemmed. The Wordscores analysis itself is conducted in R by means of the Quanteda package. To retrieve parties' issue salience with Bertje, in turn, the manifestos are split in separate sentences. Consequently, the manually coded CAP data are divided in a training (70%) and a test (30%) dataset. When the model is tuned on the training dataset, it can be evaluated using the test dataset. Therefore, Bertje predicts the class of the text which is then compared to the manually coded data. The model reached a 0.76 overall accuracy. Except for the foreign trade category, the F1-scores are very good, ranging from 0.63 to 0.86. F1 is a combination of precision - the share of true positives on all classified positives - and recall - the share of true positives on all actual positives. The analyses were run on Python code in Google Colab. Google Colab provides Graphical Processing Unit activation which allows to speed up the computation process.

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