Does the left-right cleavage matter in local politics? An analysis of local party manifestos across municipal sizes

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Abstract

In comparative political science the question whether the local political space can be structured along a left-right dimension is being strongly debated. A growing body of research underpins the relevance of left and right in local politics, but these studies are often conducted from the perspective of voters and, above all, in large cities. In order to close these gaps in the literature, this paper addresses the shape of the local political space and the role of municipal size by analysing 257 local party manifestos in the context of Flanders (Belgium). With the help of Wordscores, local parties' policy positions on the general, economic and cultural left-right dimension in small, medium-sized and large municipalities are analysed. The findings show a strong ideological resemblance between local branches of the same party and between local branches and their national party, but this relationship is not affected by municipal size.

Keywords: Computational text analysis, Ideology, Left-right, Local politics, Party manifestos

Zusammenfassung

In der vergleichenden Politikwissenschaft wird die Frage, ob der lokale politische Raum entlang einer Links-Rechts-Achse strukturiert werden kann, heftig diskutiert. Eine wachsende Zahl von Forschungsarbeiten untermauert die Relevanz von links und rechts in der Kommunalpolitik, aber diese Studien werden häufig aus der Perspektive der Wählerschaft und vor allem in Großstädten durchgeführt. Um diese Lücken in der Literatur zu schließen, befasst sich dieser Beitrag mit der Form des lokalen politischen Raums und der Rolle der Gemeindegröße, indem er 257 lokale Wahlprogramme im Kontext von Flandern (Belgien) analysiert. Mit Hilfe von Wordscores werden die politischen Positionen der lokalen Parteien zur allgemeinen, wirtschaftlichen und gesellschaftlichen Links-Rechts-Achse in kleinen, mittleren und großen Gemeinden analysiert. Die Ergebnisse zeigen eine starke ideologische Ähnlichkeit zwischen Ortsverbänden der gleichen Partei und zwischen den Ortsverbänden und ihrer nationalen Partei, wobei diese Beziehung nicht von der Gemeindegröße abhängt.

Résumé

En politique comparée, la question de savoir si l'espace politique local peut être structuré sur l'axe gauche-droite fait l'objet d'un vif débat. De plus en plus d'études confirment l'importance de la gauche et de la droite en politique locale, mais ces études prennent souvent le point de vue des électeurs.trices et, surtout, sont menées dans les grandes villes. Afin de combler ces lacunes dans la littérature, cet article aborde l'agencement de l'espace politique local et le rôle de la taille de la commune en analysant 257 programmes de partis locaux en Flandre (Belgique). A l'aide de Wordscores, les positions politiques des partis locaux sur l'axe gauche-droite général, économique et culturel, dans les petites, moyennes et grandes communes sont analysées. Les résultats montrent une forte ressemblance idéologique entre les sections locales d'un même parti et entre les sections locales et leur parti national, mais cette relation n'est pas affectée par la taille de la commune.

Riassunto

La questione se lo spazio politico locale possa essere strutturato lungo una dimensione destra-sinistra è ampiamente dibattuta nella scienza politica comparata. Un numero crescente di ricerche evidenzia la rilevanza di questa dicotomia anche nella politica locale, tuttavia, tali studi si concentrano prevalentemente sugli elettori e sulle grandi città. Per colmare queste lacune, il presente lavoro esamina la natura del conflitto politico a livello locale e il ruolo della dimensione comunale, analizzando 257 manifesti di partiti locali nelle Fiandre (Belgio). Attraverso l'uso di Wordscores, vengono investigate le posizioni politiche dei partiti locali lungo la dimensione destra-sinistra, sia a livello generale che nelle sfere economica e culturale, nei comuni di diverse dimensioni (piccoli, medi e grandi). I risultati rivelano una forte somiglianza ideologica tra le sezioni locali dello stesso partito e tra queste ultime e i rispettivi partiti nazionali, indipendentemente dalle dimensioni del comune.

INTRODUCTION

In 1934, Fiorello LaGuardia was sworn in as the 99th mayor of New York City. On a platform that was supported by Republicans, reform-minded Democrats and Independents alike, 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[1] (Eschenburg, 1964; Nyhuis, 2017). Furthermore, the quote inspired political

[1] 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* (Barber, 2013; Hidalgo & Lee, 2017).

With the saying LaGuardia and Barber 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, organisations associated with the various functions of parties became institutionalised and dominant in decision-making. Political exchange is said to increasingly galvanise 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; Lucas, 2023).

A specific question that has been raised in this debate is whether the local political space 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 body of empirical research seems to support the relevance of left and right (Warshaw, 2019), but these studies are often conducted from the perspective of voters and, above all, in large cities (Oliver et al., 2012). The angle of the local parties is not sufficiently addressed up to now, as well as the effect of municipal size, because small and medium-sized localities are often not examined. In order to close these gaps in the literature, I will address the shape of the local political space and the role of municipal size by analysing 257 local manifestos in the context of 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 test whether local chapters of the same party form ideologically coherent clusters *(horizontal resemblance)* and take similar positions with regard to their national party *(vertical resemblance)*. Moreover, I assess the effect of municipal size on these relationships. I find the local political conflict can be conceived in terms of left and right, but this does not apply to a larger extent in large municipalities than small municipalities.

The paper starts with an overview of the literature on the role of ideology and the left-right cleavage in local politics and how this relates to municipal size. Subsequently, I outline the hypotheses. In the following sections, I introduce the Flemish context and elaborate on the Wordscores method. The results and conclusions are presented in the last parts of the paper. As such, this study provides essential and novel insights into party politics and the relevance of ideology at the local level. The

findings have far-reaching implications on the extent to which ideologically fueled competition between national parties is a suited mode of decision-making at the municipal level. Finally, this study also contributes to the growing research agenda on local manifestos, by presenting a unique dataset of 257 party programs and computational analysis with Wordscores.

IDEOLOGY AND THE LEFT-RIGHT CLEAVAGE 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 (Anzia, 2021; Lucas, 2023). One of the first to address the issue - at least indirectly - was Paul Peterson with his book *City Limits* (1981) in which he put forward *an alternative theory of urban politics*. Peterson (1981) denounces that in the US "too often cities are treated as if they were nation-states" (p. 3) 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, 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, autonomy and revenue. 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 characterised 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, sewage, garbage and public safety services. Furthermore, these issues are perceived as managerial 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 (Schleicher, 2007; Copus et al., 2012; Oliver et al., 2012; Cann, 2018; Warshaw, 2019; Anzia, 2021; Matthews et al., 2022). In Northern America, this non-ideological conception is shared by voters (Matthews et al., 2022) and elites – especially local politicians on the moderate right (Lucas, 2023). Finally, the technocratic nature of local politics is demonstrated by the (lack of a) party system. In Northern America, many local elections are non-partisan (Oliver et al., 2012; Warshaw, 2019;

Bucchianeri, 2020; Matthews et al., 2022; Lucas, 2023) and in Europe, independent local lists make up an important part of the electoral offer (Aars & Ringkjøb, 2005; Steyvers & Heyerick, 2017). These political initiatives claim they do not adhere to a specific ideology and constitute an authentic local 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; Lucas, 2023). 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 nationalised (Van de Voorde et al., 2018). They point to the entry of national parties in the local political arena through 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). As local elections are considered second-order (Reif & Schmitt, 1980) to some extent,[2] national party identification and ideological assertions are said to drive local vote choice. In the same manner, partisan strategies at the municipal level are affected by conditions and calculations at the main national political arena (Kjær & Steyvers, 2019). According to Copus and his colleagues (2012), this party politicization 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. This margin has even substantially increased over the past decades (Ladner et al., 2016, 2019, 2023), including in highly politicised domains, such as the welfare state (Hansen & Klausen, 2002; Gross et al., 2024). 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 issues (Copus et al., 2012; Einstein & Kogan, 2016). The idea that 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

[2] However, recent literature nuances the second-orderness of local elections (Kjær & Steyvers, 2019). They are not considered as important as national elections, but are less second-order than European elections (Heath et al., 1999; Rallings & Thrasher, 2005; Lefevere, 2013). According to Kjær and Steyvers' (2019) second-tier approach, the stakes of place-bound elections and voting are on a continuum between local and national whereby the exact position differs between individuals, localities and countries.

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).

How does ideology then manifest itself on the local level? In national politics, party competition is centred around a left-right cleavage. Left and right are concepts that have a substantial meaning up to this day and are relevant in large parts of the world (Huber & Inglehart, 1995; Jahn, 2023; Lindqvist & Dornschneider-Elkink, 2024). The continuum is useful in summarising 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 the left-right divide 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; Blockmans et al., 2013), that party competition is structured along the left-right dimension (Nyhuis, 2017; Gross & Jankowski, 2020; Otjes, 2023), that left-right ideology affects local coalition formation (Laver et al., 1998; Bäck, 2003; Skjæveland et al., 2007; Debus & Gross, 2016; Otjes, 2023) and plays an important role in local voting behaviour (Tausanovitch & Warshaw, 2013, 2014; Hajnal & Trounstine, 2014), and that 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 (Tausanovitch & Warshaw, 2014; Cann, 2018; Warshaw, 2019).

Although there is considerable evidence that the local political space is centred around a left-right cleavage, the current literature still has several limitations. More specifically, much of the academic work is primarily occupied with the voters' perspective, i.e., voting motives and public opinion (see Tausanovitch & Warshaw, 2013, 2014; Hajnal & Trounstine, 2014; Einstein & Kogan, 2016; Cann, 2018; Matthews et al., 2022). The perspective of the local parties - the organisations that make the electoral pledges - is not sufficiently addressed to date. In order to close this gap in the literature, this research will address the underlying ideological structure of local parties' policy positions by analysing their manifestos. Although the debate on the role of ideology at the municipal level remains, I expect local parties' policy preferences to be centered around a left-right cleavage, based on the growing degree of local self-government and importance of national parties. As underpinned by empirical evidence, the latter have strong ideological considerations on the municipal level as well.

> **H1**: Local parties' policy positions are organised in a left-right political space that is similar to the national level.

Gross and Jankowski (2020) found that 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 is 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 (Marks et al., 2006; Häusermann & Kriesi, 2015; Rovny & Polk, 2019). One could argue that 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 hypothesise the relevance of a general, but also an economic and cultural left-right dimension. I expect both dimensions to be equally important.

> **H1a**: Local parties' policy positions are organised in an economic left-right political space that is similar to the national level.
>
> **H1b**: Local parties' policy positions are organised in a cultural left-right political space that is similar to the national level.

MUNICIPAL SIZE AND THE LEFT-RIGHT CLEAVAGE

Many studies on the salience of the left-right divide are conducted in the *urban* politics field, only encompassing larger cities (Oliver et al., 2012). This bias is not only found in American research, but also recent European endeavours on local party manifestos do not consider small localities (Gross & Jankowski, 2020). The predominant focus on urban areas could have serious implications for the validity of findings, as the nature of the political space in small and medium-sized municipalities might be different than in large localities (Kjær & Elklit, 2010; Mortensen et al., 2022; Kumar & Stenberg, 2023). I want to address this shortcoming in the literature by including manifestos of local parties in these smaller localities. I assume the local political space in large municipalities to be to a larger extent conceived in left-right terms than in small municipalities. Two arguments underpin this hypothesis. First, there is a positive relationship between the party politicisation of local politics and municipal size (Kjær & Elklit, 2010). While in small localities personal relations often suffice, parties are a necessary intermediary to connect citizens with the political system in large cities. In addition, the type of party that prevails also looks differently. 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 politicisation should not be confused with the relevance of left and right, it indicates 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 specialised 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**: There is a positive relationship between the degree to which the local parties' policy positions are organised in a left-right political space and municipal size.

THE CONTEXT OF FLANDERS (BELGIUM)

Whether local parties' policy preferences are organised in a left-right space 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 2022, the Belgian municipalities included on average 19.938 inhabitants; for the localities in Flanders, the average municipal size was slightly higher with 22.330 inhabitants. 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 a very valuable political system to study, because with regard to the role of political parties it constitutes a *most likely* context. If the national left-right divide does trickle down to the local level,

I should find it here in the first place. First, local government is parliamentary in design. Voters elect a council that in turn appoints a collegial and collective executive (Steyvers, 2022). In this system, parties are the actors that hold the legislative branch and the executive branch together. In Belgium, however, parties even surpass all other political players and dominate the complete decision-making process. This is reflected in very high levels of party discipline and a vigorous majority-opposition dynamic in councils (De Rynck, 2000). As the power of parties manifests itself at all levels of government, Belgium is a textbook example of a *partitocracy* (Dewachter, 2003). The prominent role of parties in municipal politics potentially coheres with the relevance of the left-right dimension, because party systems are primarily organised along ideologies and societal cleavages (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). In contrast, local politics in semi-presidential contexts, such as Germany where the executive is led by a directly elected mayor, might be more focused on the style and competence of candidates (Bottom & Reiser, 2014).

Moreover, the strong presence of parties is more outspoken at the local level in Flanders than in the other Belgian regions. The local party systems are characterised by high levels of nationalisation and party politicisation (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 (Gendźwiłł et al., 2021; Steyvers, 2022). These national parties[3] obtain a very high degree of votes and council seats in local elections (Gendźwiłł et al., 2022). This differs from the more localised party systems in Walloon municipalities (Dodeigne et al., 2020) as well as the Netherlands where independent local lists gain almost one third of the vote (Otjes, 2023).

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. We can expect policy-seeking parties to insert ideologically distinct positions in these manifestos which are then adopted by the local branches. In contrast to other political contexts, such as Germany (Gross & Jankowski, 2020), these ideological guidelines are common in Flanders. 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. As central party headquarters know voters care about local issues (Marien et al., 2015), local branches are even explicitly requested not to copy the texts entirely and give their platforms a municipality-specific touch.

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

In sum, the dominance of national parties and their ideological influence make Flanders an adequate context to assess the shape of the local political space. Local government differs in several regards from Germany and the Netherlands, where similar studies have already been conducted (Gross & Jankowski, 2020; Otjes, 2023). By addressing a new polity we will gain a more profound insight into political conflict and the relevance of ideology at the local level.

DATA AND OPERATIONALISATION

In this paper local parties' positions will be estimated 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; Braun, 2023), but has only scarcely been used in local politics (Van de Voorde et al., 2018). Manifestos are considered as a useful source to assess ideological position-taking. In these comprehensive documents, parties explain all policies that they ideally intend to enact when elected and entering government (Braun, 2023). Furthermore, 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 preferences of the whole party (Bouteca, 2011, pp. 123-133; Braun, 2023). Expert surveys, in turn, are expensive and probably less reliable (Van de Voorde et al., 2018). Even for experts, it is impossible to provide accurate information on the policy positions of every local party that might compete for seats in municipal councils (Gross & Jankowski, 2020, p. 78).

The manifestos are analysed by making use of a computational method. Only very recently, scholars have started to code local manifestos with the use of the computer (Debus & Gross, 2016; Gross & Debus, 2018; Gross & Jankowski, 2020; Otjes, 2021, 2023). Automated text analysis is considered as promising (Slapin & Proksch, 2008) and was applied for numerous publications (for an overview see Bruinsma & Gemenis, 2019). Computerised coding is necessary to use the huge amount of manifestos available at the local level. Hand-coding is simply too labour-intensive.

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 scaling 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. The focus is on the programs of the branches of the seven major Flemish parties that participated in the local elections of 2012 and 2018, whenever one was available and comprised more than 1000 words.[4] Additionally, the manifestos of independent local lists (ILL) are also analysed to serve as a comparison group to test H1 (see below). 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). This 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.[5] 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; see Table A3 in Appendix). This methodology was already successfully applied by Gross and Jankowski (2020) and Otjes (2021, 2023) for local parties' positions in Germany and the Netherlands, respectively. Furthermore, comparing the word use of national parties with their local branches with Wordscores constitutes a *most likely* approach regarding the relevance of the left-right cleavage. If I do not find clear evidence of left-right structured policy positions, there is very strong reason to question the importance of this dimension at the local level anywhere.

In addition to the descriptive results, I assess whether the local political space is structured along the left-right cleavage by examining *horizontal* and *vertical* resemblance in position-taking. The first element involves the distance between local branches of the same party. If the left-right cleavage matters, a party should form a coherent ideological cluster in which its municipal chapters take similar positions. I test this claim by conducting an F-test that compares the variance within each party with the variance in Wordscores positions of independent local lists (Otjes, 2023). The latter is a loosely defined group that in theory could take very different stances on the left-right dimensions. I expect the variance of the ILL sample to be significantly higher. Additionally, I study whether municipal chapters take a similar position with regard to their national party. If the left-right divide matters, local branches of the same party should not only constitute a relatively homogeneous cluster, but also take the "right" place on the ideological spectrum. The chapters of the far-left PVDA should not take rightist positions, for example. To examine this vertical resemblance, I will assign every local branch the left-right score of the corresponding national party and study the relationship with its Wordscores position

[4] Klemmensen et al. (2007) recommend this threshold in order to conduct a valid Wordscores analysis.
[5] Parties wrote one manifesto for both the regional, federal and European elections that took place on the same day in 2014 and 2019.

via a Pearson correlation test. The left-right values for the national parties are retrieved from the CHES (Jolly et al., 2022) and the Manifesto Project (MARPOR) (Lehmann et al., 2022). I hypothesise high and significant coefficients.

The Wordscores analysis is conducted for the local parties in a well-balanced sample of 39 Flemish municipalities. Included in this selection are 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 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 horizontal and vertical resemblance for large municipalities than small municipalities. To assess the first element, I divide the 39 localities under study into three categories based on the number of inhabitants (Small, Medium & Large; see Table A1 in Appendix). I compare the variances between the categories, again by means of an F-test. The variance of the three size categories is calculated as the average of the variance of each size category for each national party. I expect a significantly higher variance for small localities compared to medium-sized and large municipalities and for medium-sized municipalities compared to large municipalities. Regarding the effect on vertical resemblance, I add municipal size as a mediating variable in a linear regression with the Wordscores positions as the dependent and the CHES/MARPOR scores as the independent variables. In this test municipal size is a continuous variable. In order to provide more meaningful results, the number of inhabitants for each locality is divided by 10.000. I hypothesise the effect of CHES/MARPOR on Wordscores will increase, if municipal size increases.

The local manifestos were retrieved by consulting party websites as well as contacting local politicians. This labour-intensive work resulted in a corpus of 257 party programs of which the average and median number of words is 12.184 and 9.108, respectively (see Table A2, Figure A1 & A2 in Appendix). Additionally, I gathered 27 manifestos of independent local lists to test H1. This corpus is a unique dataset, since it is the first time Flemish local manifestos are systematically collected on this scale (see Wegschaider et al., 2022, for how difficult collecting local manifestos can be). In contrast, the manifestos of the *national* parties were easily found via Polidoc and the Manifesto Project (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, 2023). 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 documents. The party name *Groen* is omitted manually, because the same word could also refer to greenery and nature. In addition, the words in the texts are also stemmed. The Wordscores analysis itself is conducted in R by means of the Quanteda package. The raw scores are rescaled according to the Laver, Benoit and Garry transformation, which is preferred over the Martin and Vanberg transformation. The latter is very sensitive to the reference texts' length and proportion of non-discriminating words and is more suitable when using only two reference texts and a small number of virgin texts (Benoit & Laver, 2008; Martin & Vanberg, 2008). In contrast, my data comprise 21 reference texts and 284 virgin texts, including the 27 ILL manifestos.

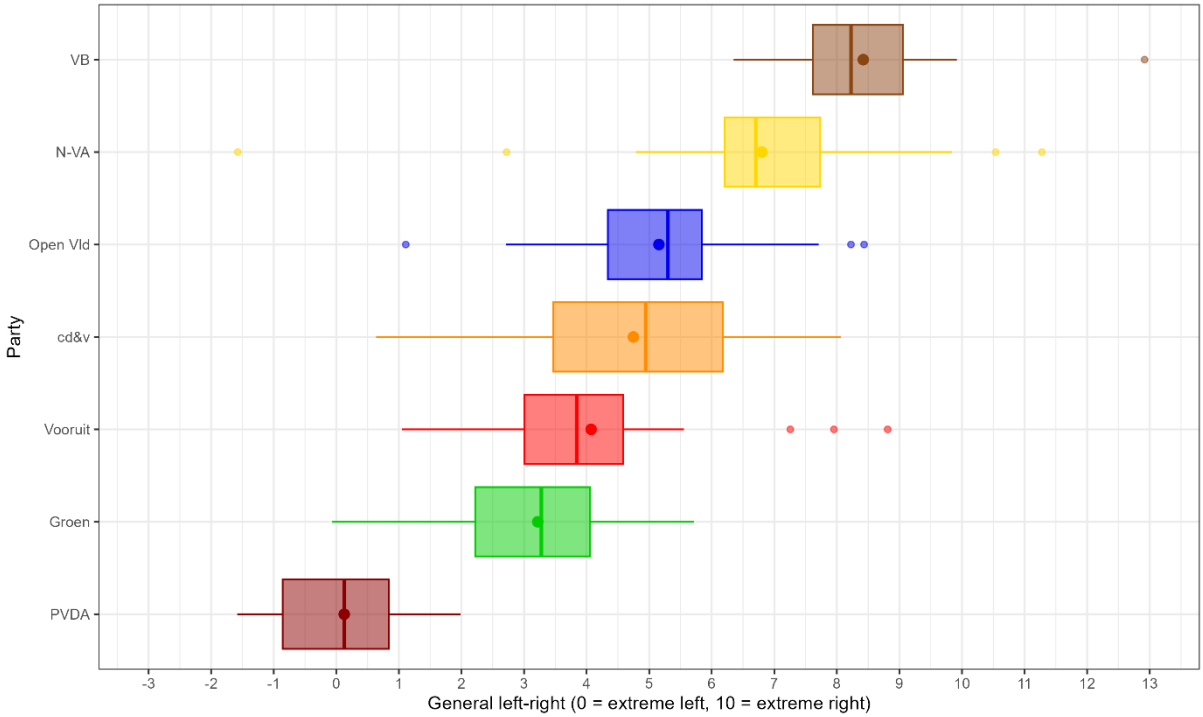
RESULTS

The Relevance of the Left-Right Cleavage

By means of Wordscores each local party is assigned 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 policy preferences for each party (see Figures 1, 2 and 3). It appears that 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 sequence of parties is even identical, with PVDA as the most leftist party, followed by Groen, Vooruit, cd&v, Open Vld, N-VA and Vlaams Belang. 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. Furthermore, there is a large positional distance on the economic and cultural cleavages between the most radical parties on these scales - PVDA and Vlaams Belang, respectively - and the other parties.

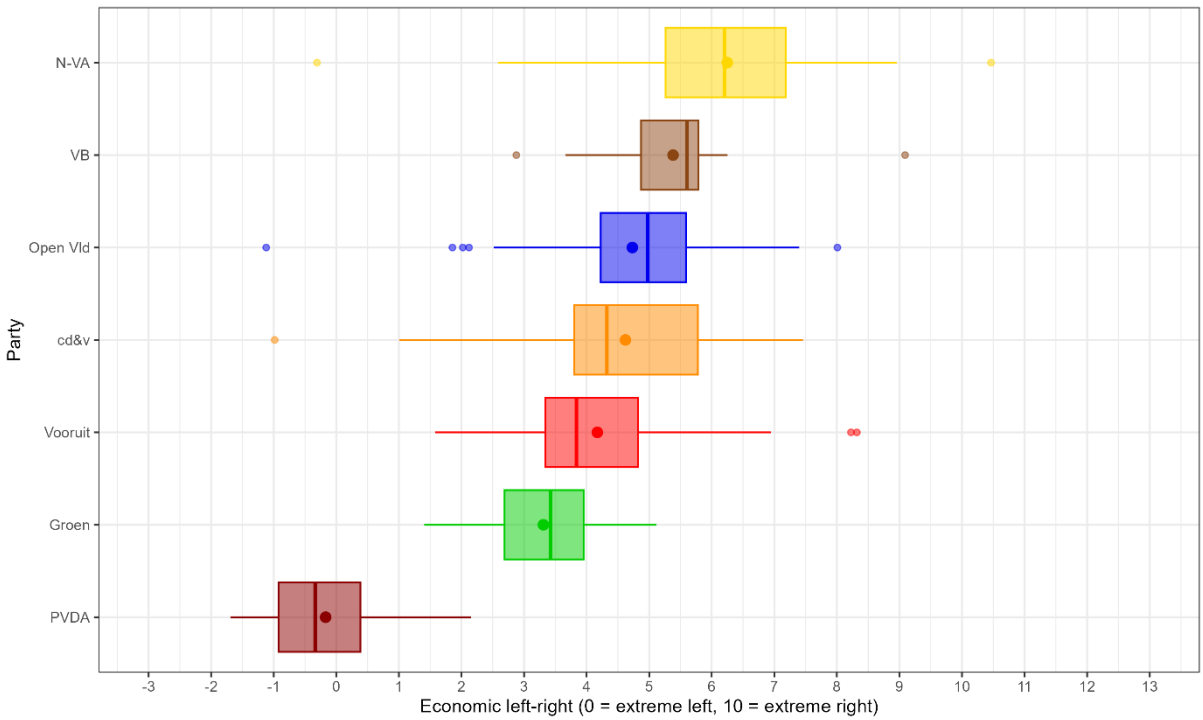
The descriptive results also display ideological disparity between local chapters of the same party. The long whiskers of the boxplots and the outliers show a party's municipal branches do not always take the same position. This intraparty variation indicates the importance of measuring local branches' policy preferences. However, the ideological spread also differs strongly between the parties. Not highly surprising, I find the largest variation within cd&v. The Flemish Christian Democrats are originally a centrist party with several factions (Workers, Farmers and Entrepreneurs) and an ideologically diverse membership (Bouteca et al., 2017). In turn, PVDA and Groen display more homogeneity. The variation between local chapters of the same party will be studied more thoroughly via a F-test.

Figure 1: Local party positions on the general left-right dimension



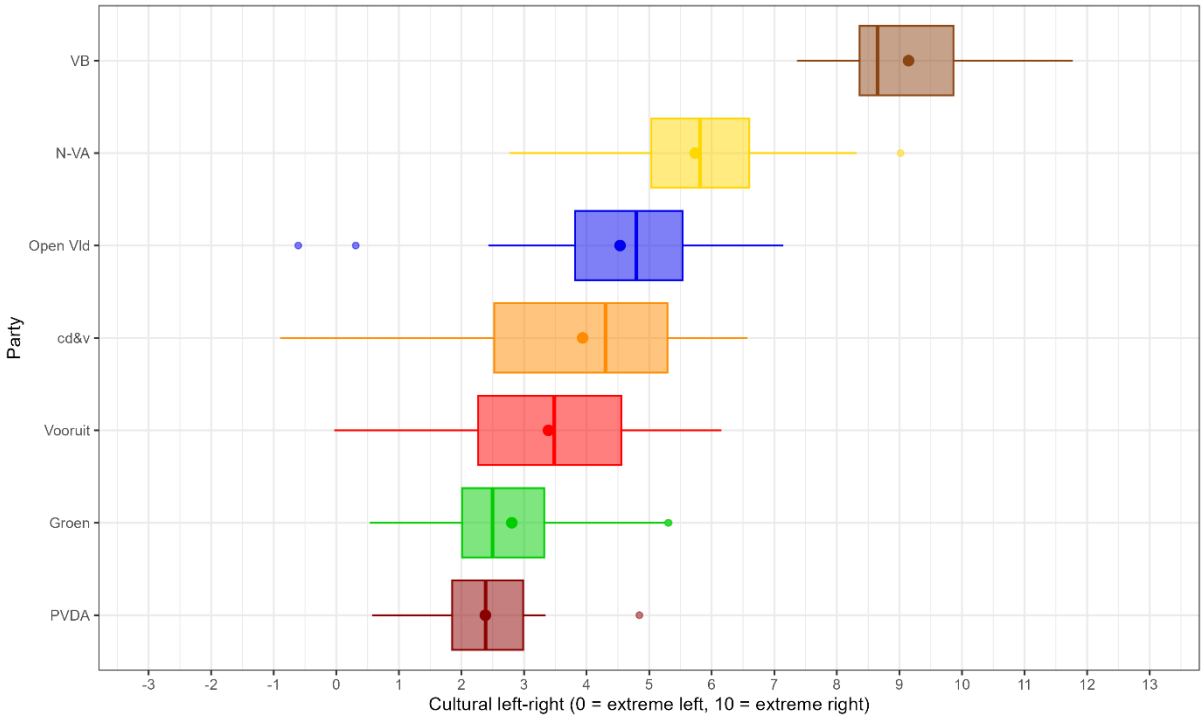
Note: The parties are ordered based on the mean position of their local branches. The national party order according to CHES is PVDA < Groen < Vooruit < cd&v < Open Vld < N-VA < Vlaams Belang. Note that the Wordscores positions can go below 0 and above 10, because they do not regard the CHES reference scores from which they are derived as a 10-point scale, but as mere numbers.

Figure 2: Local party positions on the economic left-right dimension



Note: The parties are ordered based on the mean position of their local branches. The national party order according to CHES 2010 is PVDA < Groen < Vooruit < cd&v < Open Vld < N-VA < Vlaams Belang; The national party order according to CHES 2014 & 2019 is PVDA < Groen < Vooruit < Vlaams Belang < cd&v < Open Vld < N-VA.

Figure 3: Local party positions on the cultural left-right dimension



Note: The parties are ordered based on the mean position of their local branches. The national party order according to CHES 2010 is Groen < PVDA < Vooruit < Open Vld < cd&v < N-VA < Vlaams Belang; The national party order according to CHES 2014 is Groen < Open Vld < Vooruit < PVDA < cd&v < N-VA < Vlaams Belang; The national party order according to CHES 2019 is Groen < Open Vld < Vooruit < PVDA < N-VA < cd&v < Vlaams Belang.

As mentioned earlier, an adequate estimation of local parties' policy positions with Wordscores 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 conduct two additional analyses next to the base estimation to check the robustness of the descriptive results (see Table A3 in Appendix). Concerning the first alternative, I use data from MARPOR as reference scores instead of CHES (Lehmann et al., 2022). The second alternative involves the model manifestos for the local elections as reference texts. As opposed to national manifestos, these documents address local issues which makes the comparison with the local programs more suitable. An elaborate discussion of the analyses, including figures, can be found in the Appendix. In sum, the three studies display consistent findings. They show very similar party rank orders and also point to left and right as the cleavage that shapes the local political space.

To answer the research question whether the local parties' policy preferences are organised in a left-right space, the descriptive findings are complemented by statistical analyses on the base estimation,

i.e. the Wordscores analysis with CHES as reference scores and national manifestos as reference texts. I study the *horizontal resemblance* between local chapters of the same party and the *vertical resemblance* between local chapters and their national party. Regarding the first element, I conduct an F-test that compares the variances in Wordscores positions between the group of independent local lists and the branches of each national party. The F-ratios are presented in Table 1. As all ratios are larger than 1, the variance within the cluster of independent local lists is always higher than for the national parties. This difference is statistically significant on the 0.001 level for the positions on the general and economic left-right dimension. Concerning the cultural left-right dimension, only four parties record a significantly lower variance. Overall, the clusters of the national parties are more ideologically coherent than the sample of independent local lists. However, this is much more the case for the general and economic dimensions than for the cultural dimension.

Concerning the vertical resemblance test, I assign every local branch the average CHES score of the 2010, 2014 and 2019 waves and the average MARPOR score of the 2010, 2014 and 2019 manifestos of its corresponding national party on the left-right dimensions. I examine whether a local party's given CHES and MARPOR value correlates with its Wordscores position. The Pearson correlation coefficients are displayed in Table 2 and the relationships are plotted in Figure 4. As expected, there is a very strong and meaningful link between the positions of the municipal branches and their national party. The correlation coefficients range from 0.530 to 0.717 and are significant on the 0.001 level. The relationship is stronger for the MARPOR scores than for CHES, especially on the cultural dimension. The correlations with MARPOR record small differences between the left-right scales, in contrast to the relationship with CHES where the coefficients are strongest for the general left-right dimension, followed by the economic, and finally, the cultural dimension.

Since the F-test and the Pearson correlation reveal high levels of horizontal and vertical resemblance, respectively, I largely affirm H1. The local parties' policy positions are organised in a left-right space, similar to national politics. However, this holds less true for the cultural dimension.

Table 1: F-ratios comparing the variance of ILLs with the variance of national parties

	Wordscores_general	Wordscores_economic	Wordscores_cultural
ILL > PVDA	13.33***	15.26***	3.94**
ILL > Groen	10.89***	17.93***	2.53**
ILL > Vooruit	6.49***	7.17***	1.80
ILL > cd&v	3.93***	5.49***	1.49

ILL > Open Vld	8.50***	6.18***	1.79*
ILL > N-VA	4.68***	5.70***	1.35
ILL > VB	6.47***	8.46***	2.63*

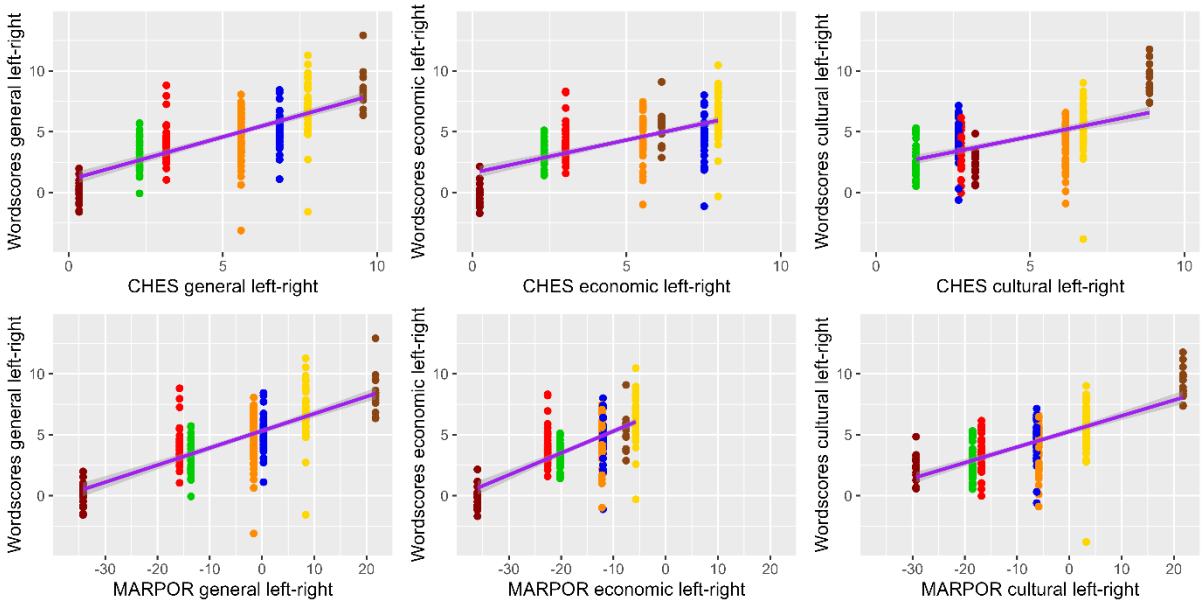
Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 2: Correlation matrix for Pearson test between CHES/MARPOR and Wordscores

General left-right	CHES	MARPOR
Wordscores	0.700***	0.717***
Economic left-right	CHES	MARPOR
Wordscores	0.617***	0.668***
Cultural left-right	CHES	MARPOR
Wordscores	0.530***	0.674***

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Figure 4 : Scatterplot for Pearson test between CHES/MARPOR and Wordscores



The Relevance of the Left-Right Cleavage and Municipal Size

I examine whether the local parties' policy positions are shaped in a left-right space to a larger extent in large municipalities than in small municipalities. Again, an F-test is conducted to assess the ideological homogeneity of different samples. I expect a significantly higher variance within small localities compared to medium-sized and large municipalities and within medium-sized municipalities compared to large municipalities. The variance within the three size categories is calculated as the average of the variance of each size category for each national party. The F-ratios are displayed in Table 3. As hypothesised, the cluster of small municipalities is less coherent than the group of medium-sized localities. Compared to large cities, however, there is only a significant difference on the economic left-right dimension. Furthermore, the variances for the medium category are smaller than for the large category. Hence, municipal size does not impact the horizontal resemblance between local chapters of the same party in the way I expected.

In addition to the F-test, I assess whether municipal size mediates the relationship between the Wordscores positions and the values of the CHES and MARPOR, respectively. I conduct a linear regression in which I add an interaction term between CHES/MARPOR and municipal size. I expect to find a positive interaction effect which means an increase in the number of inhabitants leads to a higher vertical resemblance between the local branches and their national party.

The models for all left-right dimensions are presented in Table 4. In order to assess the effect sizes, I added standardised regression coefficients (see Table A5 in the Appendix). The CHES and MARPOR positions explain a large and significant part of the Wordscores estimations. An increase of 1 on the CHES general left-right scale results in an increase of 0.654 in Wordscores. Equally, municipal size has significant effects. An increase of 10.000 inhabitants is associated with a decrease of 0.043 on the Wordscores general left-right dimension for the parties that score 0 on CHES. This relationship implies that local parties take relatively more leftist positions in larger municipalities. I did not find significant size effects for the regressions with MARPOR, however. The role of municipal size as a separate independent variable is further examined in the Appendix, revealing that this effect is mainly driven by PVDA's far-left economic positions and at the same time its absence in smaller municipalities.

Table 3: F-ratios comparing average party variance between small, medium-sized and large municipalities

	Wordscores_general	Wordscores_economic	Wordscores_cultural
Small > Medium	1.98**	2.16**	2.26***
Small > Large	1.28	1.45*	1.12

Medium > Large	0.65	0.67	0.50

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Nonetheless, the focus of this study is on the interaction between CHES/MARPOR and municipal size. The impact of CHES on Wordscores is positively modified by municipal size - an increase in municipal size is associated with an increase in vertical resemblance - but this effect is only statistically significant for the cultural dimension. Figure 5 shows the interaction effect of the GAL-TAN divide is also substantially larger compared to the other left-right cleavages. For the analysis with MARPOR, municipal size does not play a big role neither. The coefficients are positive, but even smaller than for CHES and insignificant for all dimensions under study. Consequently, only the vertical resemblance with CHES on the cultural dimension is significantly affected by municipal size. A larger number of inhabitants is linked with more ideological resemblance between the local chapters and their corresponding national party, but this is mostly due to chance. Based on this analysis and the F-test, I largely reject H2. There is no straightforward positive relationship between the degree to which the local parties' policy positions are organised in a left-right space and municipal size.

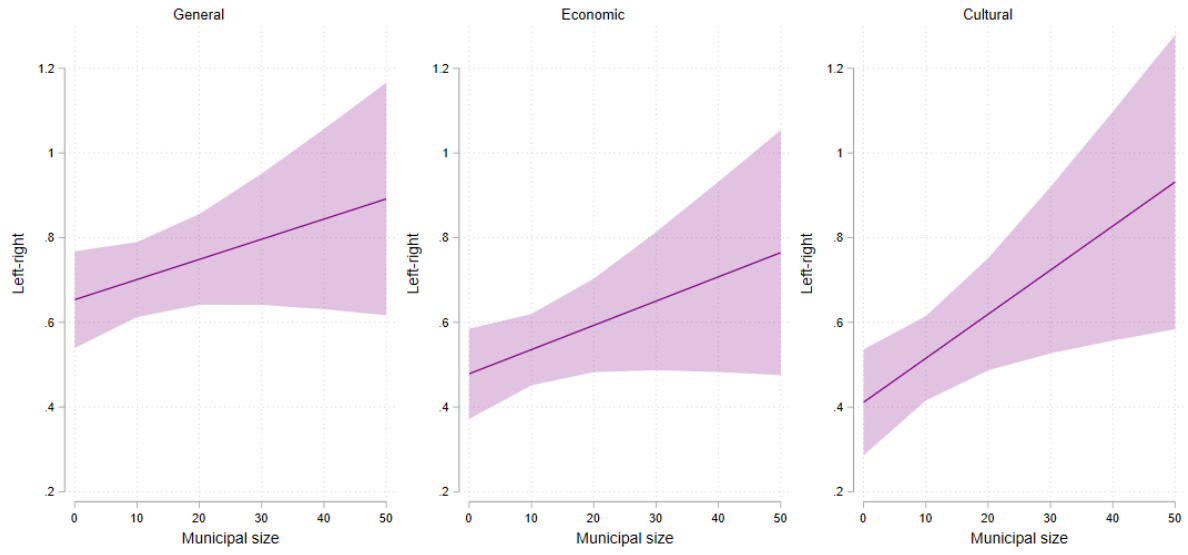
Table 4: Coefficients for linear regression between CHES/MARPOR, Wordscores and municipal size

		Dependent variable:					
		Wordscores _general	Wordscores _economic	Wordscores _cultural	Wordscores _general	Wordscores _economic	Wordscores _cultural
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
CHES							
	General	0.654***					
		(0.058)					
	Economic		0.478***				
			(0.054)				
	Cultural			0.411***			
				(0.063)			
MARPOR							
	General				0.135***		
					(0.011)		
	Economic					0.169***	
						(0.016)	
	Cultural						0.120***
							(0.012)
Size		-0.043**	-0.056***	-0.047**	-0.015	-0.014	0.006
		(0.021)	(0.020)	(0.022)	(0.010)	(0.017)	(0.010)
CHES:Size							

General	0.005					
	(0.003)					
Economic		0.006				
		(0.003)				
Cultural			0.010**			
			(0.004)			
MARPOR:Size						
General				0.0004		
				(0.001)		
Economic					0.001	
					(0.001)	
Cultural						0.001
						(0.001)
Constant	1.476***	2.172***	2.496***	5.439***	7.135***	5.202***
	(0.343)	(0.319)	(0.321)	(0.142)	(0.261)	(0.152)
Observations	257	257	257	257	257	257
R^2	0.500	0.407	0.299	0.520	0.463	0.456
Adjusted R^2	0.494	0.400	0.290	0.515	0.457	0.450
Residual Std. Error (df = 253)	1.791	1.670	1.864	1.755	1.588	1.642
F Statistic (df = 3; 253)	84.417***	57.793***	35.922***	91.474***	72.804***	70.730***

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Figure 5: Interaction effect of municipal size for CHES



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 analysed 257 local party manifestos in Flanders (Belgium), in several regards a *most likely* context. By conducting a computational text analysis with Wordscores, I estimated local parties' policy preferences on the general, economic and cultural left-right dimension. I tested whether local chapters of the same party form ideologically coherent clusters and hold similar positions to their national party. The analyses reveal that both horizontal and vertical resemblance are high. Municipal party branches are rooted in a shared political ideology with each other and their national party. Compared to independent local lists, they take more similar stances on the left-right dimensions. Hence, the local political space is structured along a left-right cleavage. 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 descriptive Wordscores estimations are especially similar to the results of Gross and Jankowski (2020) and Otjes (2023) who studied local party manifestos in Germany and the Netherlands, respectively. By applying exactly the same methodology, they also found the left-right rank order of local parties bears close resemblance to the rank order at the national level.

The relevance of the left-right cleavage in manifestos implies ideologically fueled competition between national parties is a mode of decision-making that is suitable for local politics. Municipal party chapters present substantially different programs which leaves voters a meaningful choice. Thus, the claim political actors commonly strive for single best solutions to local issues in the interest of the municipality at large does not hold. Parties make ideological decisions on the local level.

This study makes a significant contribution to the literature on the role of ideology in local politics. Whether the left-right dimension matters was examined in a new context and from the supply side instead of the demand side. Nevertheless, this research also has its limitations. First, the analysis was focused on the general picture at the aggregate level. It is also worthwhile to examine the individual Wordscores positions which were assigned to a local party. In doing so, I notice a limited set of local branches are ideologically very distant from their national party. Although these outliers remain the exceptions, they could tell us more about the shape of the local political space. These parties might have diverging scores because they emphasise topics that go beyond left and right, such as highly municipality-specific issues or particular places in localities. This conclusion might give some hope to the adherents of the traditional view of local politics. Second, I studied whether local parties' policy positions are organised in a left-right political space with Wordscores - a *most likely* approach - in

partitocratic Flanders - a *most likely* context. As the hypothesis is confirmed, this research can now be conducted in political systems where parties play a less important role in municipal politics, using other methods. Although Wordscores is an established and frequently used text analysis technique in political science that yields valid results (Klemmensen et al., 2007), it also has its drawbacks. Because it is based on the bag-of-words assumption, the method only considers the frequency of separate words and does not take into account context. As a consequence, texts with similar meanings, but with few overlapping words are wrongly conceived as distant. Using word embeddings that do capture context is therefore a promising new avenue in the field of text scaling (Rheault & Cochrane, 2020). Third, future research should address the critique that local chapters might share the general left-right views of their national parties, but in the end have to deal with issues that are different from national politics. If a local party makes many references to national issues in their manifesto, however, primarily making decisions about place-bound topics, then local politics is not so ideological after all (Anzia, 2021). Hence, follow-up studies should not only examine positions as such, but also on which issues positions are taken, i.e., issue salience. And even if parties emphasise local issues, research should also assess what happens with these electoral pledges after the elections. Local parties might feel the need to take diverging policy positions in their programs to distinguish themselves in front of the voters, but afterwards govern their municipalities in a less ideological manner. Future research should thus not only address the role of the left-right dimension in manifestos, but also with regard to council behaviour, coalition formation and coalition agreements. By studying these aspects, we will obtain a more profound insight into the relevance of ideology at the local level.

Next to the shape of the local political space as such, this paper also paid attention to whether it is affected by municipal size. I analysed 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. Filling this gap represents an important contribution to the literature in which hitherto small municipalities were neglected or the effect of municipal size was not explicitly examined (Oliver et al., 2012; Kumar & Stenberg, 2023). 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 is largely rejected. Municipal size does not have a linear effect on the horizontal resemblance between local branches of the same party and the vertical resemblance between local branches and their national party. Only regarding the comparison between the positional variance within small and medium-sized localities and the interaction term between CHES and municipal size on the cultural dimension, statistically significant effects are found. Hence, the dissimilarities in the political conflict within small and large municipalities are more outspoken in theory than in reality. In order to draw

more robust conclusions, future research should assess the impact of municipal size on other aspects of ideological party competition and in other political systems and contexts.

Finally, this research does not only offer a valuable addition to the literature on the role of ideology in local politics, but also a data-related contribution that goes beyond this field. Left-right positions are, first and foremost, crucial to understand local party competition; however, they are important independent variables in other domains of political science as well. Party ideology affects coalition formation (Laver et al., 1998; Bäck, 2003; Skjæveland et al., 2007), government policies (Blom-Hansen et al., 2006) and attitudes towards democratic innovations (Caluwaerts et al., 2020). For these studies, researchers usually rely on *indirect* measures of local parties' policy preferences, such as the positions of parties at the national level (Laver et al., 1998) or local elites' self-positioning of parties (Bäck, 2003). For the purpose of this article, I collected local parties' election manifestos to obtain their left-right positions *directly*. Although compiling comprehensive data sets of local manifestos is not easy (Wegschaider et al., 2022), several scholars started to examine them, very recently (Van de Voorde et al., 2018; Gross & Jankowski, 2020; Otjes, 2021, 2023; Voda & Vodová, 2024; de Natris, under review). Given the growing availability of manifestos online and the advancements in computational text analysis, these exploratory endeavors can be the first step in the making of a unique comparative data set on the manifestos and the policy preferences of local parties that can be used for several research purposes in political science.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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