Beyond numbers: ideological motivations in local coalition formation in Belgium

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Abstract

Choosing coalition partners is not only about size. According to several coalition theories, it also revolves around policy. However, how do these policy-seeking motives relate to the local level where the role of ideology is extremely contested? In this paper, we test whether policy drives coalition formation following two local elections in 30 municipalities in Flanders, Belgium. We expect potential coalitions are more likely to form, the smaller the positional distance between the coalition partners and the higher the tangentiality of the parties' issue emphasis is.

INTRODUCTION

Choosing coalition partners is not only a matter of winning a majority of parliamentary seats, either together with a minimum number of parties needed, or with the smallest necessary surplus of seats above the majority (Riker, 1962; Von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1944). According to several coalition theories, it also revolves around policy (Axelrod, 1970; De Swaan, 1973). However, how do these policy-seeking motives relate to the local level where the role of ideology is extremely contested (Anzia, 2021)? On the one hand, local politics is often conceived as largely outside the political (i.e., partisan) sphere and considered as being merely factual and harmonic (Oliver et al., 2012). Instead of a clash between fundamental world views and large ideological differences municipal policymaking is said to revolve around finding optimal solutions for practical problems (Nyhuis, 2017; Copus et al., 2012). On the other hand, it is expected the growing levels of party politicization and increasing autonomy for local self-government (Ladner et al., 2016, 2019, 2023) brought ideological concerns to dominate the local level. Local parties must make difficult choices in an increasing number of policy areas.

Over the last years, coalition formation processes have been increasingly studied at the local level in Europe. For example, there are empirical analyses of coalition-building processes in Belgium (Geys et al., 2006; Olislagers & Steyvers, 2015), Denmark (Serritzlew et al., 2008, 2010; Skjæveland et al., 2007), Germany (Debus & Gross, 2016; Gross, 2018, 2023; Gross & Debus, 2018), the Netherlands (Denters, 1985; Otjes, 2023; Steunenberg, 1992), Norway (Gravdahl, 1998; Martinussen, 2002), Portugal (Camões & Mendes, 2009), Sweden (Bäck, 2003, 2008a, 2008b), and the United Kingdom (Laver et al., 1987, 1998). Overall, however, the various studies show that the explanatory factors of local coalition formation are to an even greater extent country-sensitive than it is already the case at the national and regional levels. For example, while in the Netherlands the theoretical approaches regarding the 'dominant' or 'central' player have the most explanatory power (Steunenberg, 1992),

in Denmark, Germany and Sweden, both office- and policy-seeking factors play a much more crucial role (see, e.g., Bäck, 2003; Debus & Gross, 2016; Gross, 2023; Skjæveland et al., 2007).

We contribute to this literature by examining whether ideology drives coalition formation in 30 municipalities in the Flemish region of Belgium and by going beyond the focus of existing studies on local-level coalition formation in Belgium (see Geys et al., 2006; Olislagers & Steyvers, 2015). Next to office-seeking motives and contextual factors, we test the role of policy-seeking theories. First, we expect that potential coalitions are more likely to form, the smaller the ideological distance between the coalition partners is. In this way, the policies of the coalition will be closer to the parties' ideal points (Axelrod, 1970; De Swaan, 1973). Second, we hypothesize that a potential coalition is more likely to form, the higher the tangentiality of the parties' issue emphasis is. Parties that care about different issues may actually be the most compatible partners, because they are able to grant each other policy-making autonomy in the areas they consider most important (Luebbert, 1986; Dumont et al., 2024). This is the first time the relation between coalition formation and tangential preferences will be studied at the local level.

Our analysis will estimate conditional logit models of coalition building, using the government formation opportunity in a given municipality after a given election as the unit of analysis and all potential coalitions that could theoretically form as the choice alternatives (Martin & Stevenson, 2001). Based on a computational analysis of local parties' election manifestos, we assess their 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 machine learning. Therefore, we apply a state of the art RoBERTa-model that classifies the manifestos at the sentence level (Delobelle et al., 2020, 2022).

We start with an overview of the literature on coalition theories and the role of policy in local coalition formation and, subsequently, outline the hypotheses. In the following sections, we introduce the Flemish context and elaborate on the methods. The results and conclusion parts have yet to be written. Based on a new set of cases, this study will provide essential and novel insights into the relevance of ideology in local politics, in particular, and coalition formation in general.

COALITION THEORIES: *OFFICE* AND *POLICY*

Growing fragmentation of party systems across polities and levels of government make coalitions increasingly necessary. Power sharing between at least two parties is the outcome of many elections in Europe today. This has also led to a significant focus within political science on the dynamics of government coalitions. The central question in many studies is which coalitions are more likely to form. Scholars examine the patterns in the choice for partners. Therein, they mostly assume political parties are rational actors, searching to maximize utility by gaining office (De Winter & Dumont, 2006). The first school of coalition theories stated this utility is mainly conceived as the share of offices in government (Riker, 1962; Von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1944). Coalitions have a higher chance to form, if they command a majority in the legislature, i.e., the *winning* proposition. A minority cabinet reaping all the benefits of office would not be tolerated by the majority opposition (De Winter & Dumont, 2006). Of the winning coalitions, parties should prefer *minimal winning* coalitions that do not comprise surplus parties with whom they must share executive portfolios. For similar reasons, parties would also strive for minimal winning coalitions that have a minimum number of seats and the smallest number of parties.

Although the size-related propositions greatly reduced the set of rational outcomes, the overall performance of office-seeking theories remains weak (Martin & Stevenson, 2001, 2010). Consequently, political scientists also investigated the role of

policy in the choice for coalition partners. They predict coalitions that not only fulfil the criteria of office-seeking theories, but also have the smallest ideological distance on relevant policy dimensions, such as the left-right scale (De Winter & Dumont, 2006). Particular propositions are the *minimal range* and *minimal connected winning* theory (Leiserson, 1966; De Swaan, 1973; Axelrod, 1970). The former assumes that the *minimal winning* coalition with the smallest ideological range between the parties will form. The latter proposition is similar yet more strict – here, only parties ideologically adjacent to each other on the relevant policy dimension form coalitions.

The theories about ideological compactness are empirically supported by much of the literature (De Winter & Dumont, 2006), but do not cover the entire role of policy in coalition formation. First, the *minimal range* and *minimal connected winning* theories assume parties only care about *positions*. However, *issue salience* – the relative attention for policy areas – is an equally important dimension of parties' ideology (Stokes, 1963; Budge & Farlie, 1983). By prioritising a particular set of issues, parties try to establish their own distinctive brand. They can claim ownership over these issues through a long-standing emphasis or demonstrated competence (Petrocik, 1996; Dumont et al., 2024). It is likely parties will want to maintain this asset when they enter a coalition government. This is empirically supported for government formations and portfolio allocations in Western and Eastern European democracies at the national level (Krauss & Klüver, 2023). Second, the traditional policy-related theories presuppose a coalition agreement is a *compromise* between several parties, i.e., a weighted average of the coalition parties' positions on every relevant issue. Thus, parties' preferences are compatible if they are ideologically *close*.

However, it is also possible a coalition's policy program is the result of *logrolling*, i.e., parties exchanging issues they emphasize most and on which they can pursue their own policies. Luebbert (1986) and Dumont and his colleagues (2024) put forward this approach. They claim parties prioritising *different* issues may be a great fit for one another: "(…) if parties rank the policy issues they care about in a

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diametrically opposed way – their preferences are tangential – then a simple solution to the coalition formation problem may exist: the parties simply grant each other policy-making autonomy in the issue areas they, and they alone, care about by dividing the ministerial portfolios that match those issue areas accordingly" (Dumont et al., 2024, p. 62). This strategy would avoid parties to make painful compromises in the policy areas they care most about.

POLICY IN LOCAL COALITION FORMATION

Coalition theories were mostly developed and tested on multi-party cabinets on the national level (Martin & Stevenson, 2001, 2010). In the past few years, however, coalition theories are also applied to study municipal executives. The scholarly literature on coalition politics at the local level developed alongside the literature on coalition politics at the regional level. Facing the same methodological and data-related problems as the research on regional government formation (e.g., the lack of data on subnational parties' policy positions), studying local-level coalition politics nevertheless has been considered as having one big advantage: the much larger number of observations while keeping institutional and political-cultural variables constant (Downs, 1998, p. 37; Giannetti & Benoit, 2009, p. 4).

Using the local level as a testing ground increases the number of cases for analysis substantially. Most local government systems comprise several hundred units, while the number of comparable nations is rather limited. By exploring a new universe of cases, we also avoid the circularity problem in which coalition theories are tested on the instances on which they were developed. Second, taking a local approach yields many cases within a single institutional setting at the same point in time. As institutional constraints considerably impact government formation, it is difficult to compare coalition theories' performance across countries. Studying local coalition formation within one polity means that time and the rules structuring the bargaining

process can be held constant (Skjæveland, Serritzlew & Blom-Hansen, 2007; De Winter & Dumont, 2006).

These advantages led to several empirical studies into government formation on the local level. Regarding office-seeking theories, *size* appears to drive coalition formation to some extent in some polities. In Sweden (Bäck, 2003), Germany (Debus & Gross, 2016; Gross & Debus, 2018) and Belgium (Olislagers, 2013), local coalitions are more likely to form if they are *winning*, *minimal winning* and comprise the *minimum number of parties*. However, research in these countries did not support the *minimum winning* or *minimum seats* proposition. In the UK, even the *winning* condition did not hold in many municipalities (Laver, Rallings & Thrasher, 1987). Moreover, the total explanatory power of the office-seeking theories in these studies remained rather weak. Hence, a combination with policy considerations was put forward.

Whether policy matters is potentially even more interesting to test at the municipal level, because the role of ideology in local politics is extremely contested. Traditionally, local politics was conceived as largely outside the political (i.e., partisan) sphere and considered as being merely factual and harmonic (Oliver et al., 2012). As opposed to national politics, local government is constrained in terms of functions, autonomy, and revenue. Municipalities have therefore fewer policy options (Peterson, 1981). Moreover, the local level is characterized by a distinctive set of competences, namely the provision of 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"* (Warshaw, 2019; Anzia, 2021; Cann, 2018; Copus et al., 2012; Oliver et al., 2012; Schleicher, 2007).

Nevertheless, in the past few years many studies have challenged this traditional notion of local politics being non-political and introduced a new view on local politics as being also driven by local actors' ideological preferences (Anzia, 2021).

Here, it is argued political actors must make ideological decisions on the local level (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., 2023). Moreover, local politics is strongly influenced by national politics and often constitutes a place where wider national party battles are fought (Aars & Ringkjøb, 2005; Copus et al., 2012). Policy-seeking national parties entered the local political arena by the establishment of local branches that compete in municipal elections. Consequently, local authorities – and thus local parties - must 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 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 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 general, many studies underpin the new view of local politics being ideological (Nyhuis, 2017; Gross & Jankowski, 2020; Otjes, 2023; Warshaw, 2019). Coalition studies in particular also conclude that parties' policy preferences – or more precisely, ideological proximity – matter at the local level. Research shows that general left-right positions are a significant driver of municipal coalition formation in Sweden (Bäck, 2003), Denmark (Skjæveland et al., 2007) Germany (Debus & Gross, 2016; Gross, 2023) and the UK (Laver et al., 1998). Local parties do not only aim to maximize their share of offices, but also want policy coherence. The policies of the coalition should be

as close as possible to their ideal preferences. In this paper we will test this claim for the first time in the Flemish region of Belgium. We formulate the following hypothesis:

H1: Potential coalitions are more likely to form, the smaller the ideological distance between local parties on the left-right dimension.

In addition to position-taking, we also test whether parties' issue salience explains coalition formation at the local level. Contrary to positional proximity, however, previous research regarding the role of preference tangentiality is lacking. The impact of preference tangentiality was examined with regard to the bargaining duration of government formations (Ecker & Meyer, 2020) and issue attention in coalition agreements (Klüver & Bäck, 2019), but these studies only target cases on the national level. By our knowledge, the only study regarding the composition of coalitions so far is by Dumont and his colleagues (2024) who examined the role of tangential issue preferences in the formation of national coalition governments in postwar Western Europe. They did not find the expected relationship. However, it is clear we need more research on different sets of cases. This paper is the first to investigate whether parties' issue salience drives coalition formation at the local level. We expect parties whose issue preferences do not overlap to have a higher chance of forming an executive together. Instead of making painful compromises on their primary issues, parties can opt for a logrolling strategy in which they exchange policy areas. Accordingly, our second hypothesis goes as follows:

H2: Potential coalitions are more likely to form, the higher the tangentiality of local parties' issue salience.

THE INSTITUTIONAL SETTING OF FLANDERS (BELGIUM)

The role of policy in local coalition formation will be studied in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Belgium is a federal and consociational democracy

characterised by a strong tradition of power-sharing between political parties at various levels. 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 Flanders, Belgium's largest region. Here, predominantly coalitions govern the local level, in contrast to Wallonia, where single-party executives control 62% of the municipalities (Close & Matagne, 2020).

Regarding our hypotheses on ideological motivations in local coalition formation, both the institutional setting and the role of political parties make Flanders a *most likely context*. Institutionally, local government is full parliamentary in design. Voters elect every six years - depending on municipal size - 7 up to 55 councillors in a single municipality-wide district. Seats are distributed to the parties according to the proportional representation (PR) list system. The council, in turn, chooses among its members a collective executive that includes a mayor and 2 up to 10 aldermen. The members of the executive are appointed by a formal nomination document submitted at the start of the new council term, which requires the signatures of an absolute majority of councillors (Steyvers, 2020; Warnez, 2019). The Board of Mayor and Aldermen is collegial, hence the individual members cannot make decisions on their own. However, they are assigned specific portfolios, granting them the authority to propose initiatives within their designated areas. A logrolling strategy in which every coalition party is allowed to pursue their own policies in the jurisdictions they control,

could work here. For vote-, office- and policy-seeking parties, executive mandates are highly attractive. In contrast to laymen councillors with limited influence, mayors and aldermen are part-time to full-time politicians who hold the most visible and powerful positions in local government. In this setting of strong executive dominance, policy is also primarily defined by the Board of Mayor and Aldermen (Olislagers, 2013, pp. 35-38; Verhelst et al., 2019).

The importance of policy for the executive is further reinforced by the high levels of nationalisation and party politicisation of the local party systems (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 seven major Flemish parties obtain the lion's share of votes and council seats in local elections. Independent local lists do exist, especially in small municipalities, but they are far less prevalent compared to other European polities (Gendźwiłł et al., 2022). As national party systems are organised along ideologies and societal cleavages (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967), we expect the pursuit of policy is one of local parties' main goals in coalitions. Furthermore, Flanders and its municipalities are a textbook example of *partitocracy* (Dewachter, 2003), the dominance of parties over all other political players and the complete decision-making process. This is reflected in high levels of intra-party discipline and a vigorous majority-opposition dynamic in councils (De Rynck, 2000). Since governing majorities in Flanders are expected to behave almost as a unitary actor, ideological motivations should matter for the choice of coalition partners.

The process of coalition formation in Flanders is highly informal. It is not required to appoint a *formateur* or give the lead to the largest party – although this will

change after the next local elections[1]. Contrary to the federal level – Belgium made it to the *Guiness Book of Records* after 541 days of government formation in 2010-2011 - coalition negotiations on the municipal level generally do not last long. In 91% of the formations following the 2012 local elections, parties stroke a deal within the first week after the elections (Blockmans et al., 2013). This is partly explained by the common practice of secret pre-electoral agreements between parties. Finally, it is important to mention the far-right Vlaams Belang is excluded from entering a coalition through the *cordon sanitaire* (Olislagers & Steyvers, 2015).

DATA AND OPERATIONALIZATION

The analysis will estimate conditional logit models of coalition building, using the government formation opportunity in a given municipality after a given election as the unit of analysis and all potential coalitions that could theoretically form as the choice alternatives (Martin & Stevenson, 2001).[2] Therefore, we created a dataset that comprises information on the allocations of seats in the local councils, local parties' left-right positions and issue salience, the incumbent coalition, the composition of the regional and federal governments, and finally the outcome of the local coalition formation process. For the application of office-seeking theories, we use the data on the distribution of seats in the local councils to determine how many local coalitions could have been formed and which potential local coalitions are *winning*, *minimal winning*, *minimum parties* and *minimum seats*. Furthermore, we created an additional dummy variable indicating if a potential coalition includes the largest party in the council. Although not formally enshrined, the leader of the largest party might play

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[1] After the 2024 local elections, the largest party will be granted the exclusive right for 14 days to build a new coalition.

[2] Since we are interested in *coalition* formations, we exclude the possibilities of parties obtaining a majority of council seats alone and the case in which no party at all will be part of the executive.

the role of *formateur* and hence include his or her party in the new government (Debus & Gross, 2016; Olislagers & Steyvers, 2015).

In addition, we assume parties will also take contextual factors into account when choosing coalition partners. Therefore, we first added a dummy variable indicating if a potential coalition is the incumbent one. We hypothesize the outgoing parties are more likely to coalesce again due to the lower transaction costs of forming a new government. Parties that share some experience of governing together know, at least to a certain extent, what they can expect from each other, while parties that do not share this experience are not aware of the other parties' preferences, which increases the bargaining costs (Olislagers & Steyvers, 2015; Bäck, 2003; Lupia & Strøm, 2008). This incumbency effect is well-established in the literature[3] and was also found on the local level (De Winter & Dumont, 2006; Bäck, 2003; Skjæveland et al., 2007; Olislagers & Steyvers, 2015; Debus & Gross, 2016). Second, we also included as a binary coded variable the composition of the coalitions on the regional and federal level.[4] Since local politics is significantly impacted by national politics, we expect local coalitions are more likely to form if they mirror the cabinets at higher levels. Congruent coalitions can facilitate joint decision-making and help to attract funds for and investments in the municipality (Olislagers & Steyvers, 2015).

Contrary to other studies on local coalition formation, we are not using *indirect* measures of local parties' policy preferences, such as the positions of parties at the national level (Denters, 1985; Steunenberg, 1992; Laver et al., 1998) or local elites' self-

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[3] However, the effect is only positive, if the coalition did not end prematurely (Martin & Stevenson, 2010). In Flanders, a change in the composition of local coalitions during the council tenure was rare due to the complicated procedure. If parties want to terminate the existing coalition, a majority in the council should state the municipality is "structurally ungovernable" after which the provincial governor mediates between all parties to find a way out of the gridlock. A new coalition can arise from these talks (Verhelst et al., 2019). Regarding the few cases in our dataset, we code the most recent executive that preceded the elections as the incumbent one. In 2021, the procedure for a coalition change was simplified by the introduction of a constructive vote of no confidence.

[4] Concerning the federal government, we consider the composition of the coalition only with regard to the Flemish parties, because the francophone parties do not take part in the local elections in Flanders.

positioning of parties (Bäck, 2003). In this paper, the positions and issue salience of local party branches will be measured *directly* by making use of their election manifestos (Debus & Gross, 2016; Gross & Debus, 2018; Gross & Jankowski, 2020; Gross, 2023; Otjes, 2021, 2023). Estimating party preferences with the use of manifestos is a long-standing tradition within political science (Klingemann et al., 2006; Lehmann et al., 2022), but has only scarcely been used in local politics (Van de Voorde et al., 2018). Because of the large number of party programs available at the local level, the documents will be analysed through computational methods.

In order to extract left-right positions from the manifestos this research will make use of Wordscores (Laver et al., 2003; Lowe, 2008). The basic idea behind this method is that parties 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* (documents of which the programmatic positions are unknown) with the frequency distribution of words in *reference texts* (documents of which the positions are known) on an a-priori defined policy scale. In this study, the local manifestos are clearly the virgin texts. As reference texts, we 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' 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 for local parties' positions in Germany (Debus & Gross, 2016; Gross & Jankowski, 2020) and the Netherlands (Otjes, 2021, 2023). Once the left-right positions are

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

retrieved, we compute the veto player distance for every potential coalition, i.e., the distance between the two parties within a potential coalition that are furthest apart on the general left-right policy dimension (Tsebelis, 2002).

To measure issue salience in the local manifestos, we make use of a machine learning approach with a Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers (BERT) model. BERT models - and transformers in general - are one of the recent advancements in computational text analysis (Vaswani et al., 2017; Devlin et al., 2019). Based on pretraining and pre-coded data, this set of classifiers can allocate (parts of) unseen documents to specific categories. In doing so, BERT models do not only look at the words in the texts separately, but also take their context into account by examining words that are often used together. These models are so advanced they are even capable in distinguishing between homonyms[6]. Dictionaries and bag-of-words models of supervised machine learning, on the contrary, only rely on word frequencies to determine topic prevalence.

Based on the RoBERTa architecture, the RobBERT-model is specifically designed to classify texts in Dutch (Delobelle, Winters & Berendt, 2020, 2022). For this research, RobBERT-2023-large assigns every sentence in the local manifestos to the policy categories of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) (see Table 1). CAP is the leading coding scheme regarding issue salience and agenda-setting in comparative politics. CAP is known for high-quality human coding and, therefore, widely used for supervised classification (Block, 2024, p. 50; Hillard, Purpura & Wilkerson, 2008; Loftis & Mortensen, 2020). Its coding scheme is applicable to the local level in Flanders, as it covers the municipalities' main jurisdictions, such as Law & Crime, Transportation, Housing, Nature (including spatial planning), Social Welfare and Culture & Sport. At first sight, categories such as Foreign Affairs and Technology may appear less relevant. However, they address particular elements of local policy-making, such as

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[6] A homonym is a word that has several meanings, such as "bank".

foreign aid and town twinning, or the digitalisation of municipal services and development of smart cities, respectively. Regarding the original CAP scheme, we make two adjustments by leaving the Defence and Foreign Trade classes out and merging Domestic Commerce and Macro-economics into a new Economics & Finance class (see also Block, 2023 and Gross et al., 2023). We employ a mix of Dutch national party manifestos, Dutch coalition agreements and Dutch/Belgian state of the unions in combination with their CAP coding as finetune data (Otjes & de Natris, 2023). After the model learned this dataset, it can predict the class of every sentence. We will evaluate the predictions by comparing them with a manually coded sample of 489 sentences. Finally, we will compute the total issue salience in every party manifesto and consequently, the tangentiality of issue preferences for each potential coalition. We consider the measure originally proposed by Falcó-Gimeno (2014). For each issue, we will calculate the standard deviation of the salience scores of the parties in the given coalition. Then, we take the average of the standard deviations across all the issues.

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 of this study is on coalition formations following the 2012 and 2018 local elections in 30 Flemish municipalities (see Table 2). This selection 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 we have the programs of nearly all parties and independent local lists that have gained

representation in the council are selected. If a manifesto is missing, we first make use of the local party's manifesto at the previous or consequent election or, secondarily, the nation-wide model manifesto. In Flanders, the central party headquarters help their local branches by drafting model manifestos that involve general positions on local policy areas, often combined with *best practices* from specific localities (Van de Voorde et al., 2018). We mainly use the latter for Vlaams Belang, because most local chapters of the far-right party do not write a manifesto themselves.

Table 2: Case selection

Municipality	Population	Coalition(s) 2012-2018	Coalition(s) 2018-2024
Aalst	90,931	N-VA, CD&V, sp.a; N-VA, CD&V, SD&P	N-VA, CD&V, Open Vld; N-VA, Open Vld
Aarschot	31,128	CD&V, Open Vld, sp.a	Open Vld, sp.a, N-VA
Antwerpen	542,417	N-VA, CD&V, Open Vld	N-VA, sp.a, Open Vld; N-VA, sp.a
Anzegem	15,145	CD&V-Groen-OK, Samen Eén, N-VA (manifestos missing)	Samen Eén, Inzet, N-VA
Beringen	48,328	sp.a, CD&V	CD&V, N-VA, VOLUIT
Berlare	15,482	Open Vld, sp.a	Open Vld, N-VA
Blankenberge	20,539	Open Vld, sp.a; Open Vld, N-VA	N-VA, sp.a, CD&V; Open Vld, sp.a
Bredene	18,154	sp.a, CD&V (manifestos missing)	sp.a, CD&V
Brugge	119,748	sp.a, CD&V	CD&V, sp.a, Open Vld PLUS
Deinze	45,438	CD&V, Open Vld+ (manifestos missing)	CD&V, Open Deinze
Eeklo	22,381	CD&V, sp.a-Groen, Open Vld	SMS, Open Vld, Groen; SMS, CD&V, N-VA
Genk	67,838	CD&V, ProGenk	CD&V, ProGenk
Gent	269,191	sp.a-Groen, Open Vld	sp.a-Groen, Open Vld, CD&V
Hasselt	80,786	Helemaal Hasselt, CD&V	N-VA, RoodGroen+, Open Vld
Heuvelland	7,962	Gemeentebelangen, N-VA	Gemeentebelangen (single-party government)
Koekelare	8,819	sp.a, N-VA (manifestos missing)	sp.a, Open Vld
Kortenberg	21,156	CD&V, N-VA (manifestos missing)	CD&V, Open Vld
Kortrijk	79,980	Open Vld, sp.a, N-VA	Team Burgemeester, sp.a, N-VA
Leuven	103,868	sp.a, CD&V	sp.a, Groen, CD&V
Mechelen	89,262	Vld-Groen-M+, N-VA, CD&V	Vld-Groen-M+ (single-party government)
Oostende	72,504	sp.a, Open Vld, CD&V	Open Vld, N-VA, Groen, CD&V
Roeselare	66,214	CD&V, sp.a, Groen	CD&V, sp.a, Open Vld
Schilde	20,347	N-VA, CD&V	N-VA, Open Vld

Sint-Niklaas	81,803	N-VA, sp.a-Groen	N-VA, Groen, Open Vld
Tessenderlo	19,001	sp.a-SPiL, CD&V ~~(manifestos missing)~~	sp.a-SPiL, CD&V
Tielt	20,617	N-VA-Open Vld, sp.a-Groen	CD&V, Iedereen Tielt, Groen; CD&V, Iedereen Tielt
Tongeren	32,116	Tongeren.nu, sp.a	Tongeren.nu, sp.a
Torhout	20,940	~~CD&V (single-party government)~~	CD&V, sp.a
Turnhout	47,222	N-VA, CD&V, sp.a; TIM, CD&V, sp.a, Groen	N-VA, sp.a, CD&V, Groen
Willebroek	28,248	N-VA, CD&V, ~~Open Vld~~ (manifestos missing)	N-VA, CD&V, Open Vld; N-VA, Groen, Open Vld

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