

# **Regional elections in simultaneous campaigns. How second-order is the regional level?**

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## **Introduction**

Regional elections have often been perceived as inferior elections (Schakel & Jeffery 2013:324) that voters primarily interpret through the prism of politics at the national level (Erk & Swenden 2010). If regional and national elections are held simultaneously this would reinforce the perception that there is less at stake in regional elections (Maddens & Fabre, 2009). That is why some politicians as well as political scientists raise objections when national and regional assemblies are elected on the same day. The basic tenet of their criticism is that simultaneous elections dishonor the regional level. Regional elections are reduced to second-order elections. But to what extent is this really true?

First of all, this is an interesting socio-political question. According to some politicians and political scientists simultaneous elections would put the sub-states in the shade and leave no room for regional peculiarities. Moreover it would mean a profound weakening of democracy. In simultaneous elections, regional and national issues are constantly mixed up by politicians and voters. As a result it is difficult to hold politicians accountable for the policy decisions that they make (Maddens & Fabre, 2009).

Other scholars state that this accountability has nothing to do with the coinciding of these elections but with federalism as such. At first this seems somewhat counterintuitive because the general notion about federalism is that it increases the democratic character of policy-making. By devolving competences to a lower level, government is closer to the people and policy-makers can be more responsive to the particular preferences of the citizens (Oates 1999: 1120). In other words, federalism enhances democratic accountability. The distance between politicians and citizens is smaller which makes it easier for the latter to evaluate the political work that is done. Politicians can better explain why some policy choices are made and because of the closer relation between politicians and citizens critical comments are picked up more easily by the policy makers.

But different scholars have emphasized that democratic accountability is not unproblematic in the context of multilevel governance (Anderson 2006: 459; Downs 1999). They acknowledge that on one hand it could be expected that a federal state is conducive to accountability because decentralization brings the policy making process closer to citizens. But on the other hand, competences are often only partially decentralized in federal states which makes it difficult for voters to determine who's responsible for what (Joanis 2008). This intertwined federalism is the reason why some scholars draw the inference that as political decentralization increases, the possibility to hold governments accountable for political outcomes decreases (Anderson 2006, p. 459). If voters mix up the national and regional level we could conclude that federations suffer from a 'democratic deficit'. Because this would crowd out distinct judgments about the issues that are at stake on the different governmental levels. Democratic accountability requires transparency. If voters don't know who's responsible for what, the performance of a government cannot be effectively monitored and evaluated.

However, the hierarchical relation between national and regional elections does not only have an interesting socio-political dimension, it is also interesting because it refers to a popular topic within political science: the second-order election (SOE) model. Multi-level elections have often been studied based on this model (Reif & Schmitt 1980; Pallarés & Keating 2003; Hough & Jeffery 2003).

The core assumption of the SOE-model is that voters perceive regional elections as less important than national elections (Schakel and Dandoy 2013:p.5-6; Schakel & Jeffery 2013:324). According to SOE-model regional elections do not have their own dynamics but should be seen as a function of politics at the centre. But is the regional level really subordinate to the national level? And to what extent are the different governmental levels mixed up in a federal state?

In this article we will examine this question. Not by looking at voting behavior (Schakel & Jeffery 2013; Dandoy & Schakel 2013) or by analyzing how media report on elections (De Vreese 2003), but by analyzing the third factor that is important for the understanding of this phenomenon: the parties and politicians. The way that they communicate during election-campaigns also determines how media and voters think about the rank order of elections (Reif & Schmitt

1980:14). For example, if politicians frame regional elections as a national test, media and voters will be inclined to do so too. Thus, the analysis of how politicians communicate during campaigns may be crucial in our understanding of the election process in multi-level states. For instance, it may give us insight in the impact of politicians on the fact that regional elections are sometimes considered as 'second-order' by voters.

In order to test the second order theory/our research question we will analyze tweets of political candidates during the campaign for the 2014 regional and federal elections in Belgium. Both the elections for the parliaments of the sub-states and the national level were elected on the same day. These simultaneous campaigns provided a unique opportunity to test the rank order of the various elections (Dandoy 2013:966). Moreover, Belgium is an interesting case because, according to Downs (1999), democratic accountability has decreased due to the decentralization and the high amount of governments.

We will proceed as follows. First, we will elaborate on the rank order of elections in multi-level states. Next, we will describe the Belgian case and pay attention to the concept of simultaneous elections. Afterwards, we will highlight the used methodology. Finally, the results will be presented.

### **Rank order of elections**

When campaigns for the different governmental levels of a federal state coincide, the relation between the national and regional level can take three forms. First, of all the regional elections can be overshadowed by the national level. Secondly, the campaign at the national level can be subordinated to regional party competition. Finally, the regional and federal level can function as two separate electoral arenas.

The idea that regional elections are overshadowed by national elections is consistent with the second order election (SOE) theory. The SOE-model was developed by Reif & Schmitt (1980) and was based on the first elections for the European Parliament in 1979. Reif and Schmitt found that the electoral outcomes of the European elections were determined by domestic politics.

Hence European elections were considered as second order elections. Because there is less at stake in secondary elections turnout is lower. In countries where voting is not compulsory citizens may not cast ballots because such elections are considered as less important. Small and new parties are more popular in secondary elections. In national elections – when more is at stake – voters prefer large established parties to small parties which are seen as a risk. Finally, parties that are in the national government tend to lose at second-order elections because the popularity of governing parties declines after a period of time. According to Reif and Schmitt (1980:8) this second orderness does not only account for European elections, but also for other elections. By-elections, “second chamber” elections, municipal or regional elections are also subordinate to the first-order elections and considered less important as well. That is why regional elections have often been studied by making use of this SOE-model (Pallarés & Keating 2003; Hough & Jeffery 2003).

Economic voting is another much used theoretical framework to study electoral behavior in multi-level environments (Erk & Swenden 2010:193). Regional electoral outcomes are seen as an appreciation of the statewide economy. For instance, if the economy is in decline, the incumbent federal parties will lose at the regional elections (Erk & Swenden 2010:193). In other words, the condition of the national – not the subnational - economy is seen as the most important factor to explain regional voting behavior.

The central tenet in the SOE-model as well as in the framework of economic voting is that the national level is more important than the regional level during election times. Based on this logic we can expect that national campaigns will overshadow regional campaigns. However, empirical research on both models shows that reality could be much more nuanced. Scholars who have worked with both models came up with mixed findings: some found that the national level dominates the regional level, some studies suggest that there is no hierarchy and other scholars turn the assumed hierarchy upside down.

Recently, scholars (Schakel & Jeffery 2013; Erk & Swenden 2010; Dandoy & Schakel 2013) have been emphasizing that the SOE-model has constraints for the study of regional elections. Large N-scale research shows that the SOE-model has only limited merits in explaining regional

election outcomes (Schakel and Jeffery 2013:338). This suggests that the regional electoral arena stands on its own and is not automatically mixed up with the national level. But the second-order model was not only empirically challenged, it was questioned on a conceptual level as well (Dandoy & Schakel 2013:8; Erk & Swenden 2010:194). In order to understand the electoral process at the regional level, it should be treated on its own terms and not as a function of national elections (Schakel & Jeffery 2013:4). The SOE-model was probably copied too outright to elections within federal states. This conceptual frame was in the first place designed to understand voting behavior at European elections but was without any further reflections translated to the relation between the national and regional elections. (Schakel & Jeffery 2013:326).

Both the empirical findings that contradict with the SOE-model and the fact that research findings may have been influenced by the way that regional elections have been approached, lead to the assumption that regional and national elections are not mixed up. This is also what some empirical studies on economic voting suggest. Some scholars show that the results of regional elections are not influenced by national, but subnational economic conditions (see Anderson 2006:451). This leads to the assumption that the regional level must be considered as a governmental level that is not subordinate to the national level, but as a level on its own.

A third group of scholars even goes a step further and states that voting in national elections can be informed by what happens at the regional level. Being in power at the regional level obtaining electoral success in subnational elections as well as subnational economic conditions may influence national politics (Swenden and Maddens 2009:8; Orth 2001 *cited in* Anderson 2006:451; Schakel and Jeffery 2013, p. 339). Especially in strong regions, in terms of the competences they have, scholars are expecting a distinct regional dynamic (Swenden and Maddens 2009:1; Schakel & Jeffery 2013:327). With regard to the Belgian case, Deschouwer (2008) observes a regionalization of national elections. That is also what Dandoy (2013) concludes after analyzing the congruence between regional and national elections in Belgium. Although his measurements show that voters vote for the same parties in regional and national elections, he does not automatically consider this as an evidence for nationalization. This congruence can also mean that national elections are regionalized.

## **Vertical simultaneity**

### *The importance of timing for the rank order*

The timing of regional elections is often mentioned as an important variable in the perceived rank order of elections. When regional and national elections are held on the same day (vertical simultaneity), the stakes in a regional election decrease (Jeffery and Hough 2006; Dandoy and Schakel 2013:283; Swenden en maddens 2009:21). But there is only limited research that explicitly focusses on simultaneous elections. Fabre and Maddens (2009) made a report on simultaneous elections in which they list the federations where simultaneous elections are held and weigh the pros and cons of vertical simultaneity. They argue that it is very exceptional that federal and sub-state elections are held simultaneously (Fabre & Maddens 2009:4). That probably explains why coinciding elections have not been studied a lot.

Vertical simultaneity is sometimes mentioned briefly in research that examines regional elections. In their large-N test of the applicability of the second-order theory on regional elections, Schakel and Jeffery (2013) for instance included 349 regional elections that were held simultaneously with national elections. They found that these coinciding elections did not conform to second-order expectations. The most extensive analysis of vertical simultaneous elections is done by Romanova (2013). She tested the principle of cyclicity of the second order election theory by looking at simultaneous elections in Belgium, France, Sweden and Ukraine. According to this principle second-order effects would be minimal when elections are held simultaneously, hence, regional electoral scores reflect national scores. As expected she found that regional and national voting are congruent when both elections are held on the same day and national elections set the tone.

Based on this literature we can expect that the regional campaign will be overshadowed by the campaign on the national level .

But according to Jeffery and Hough (2009) the level of regional authority and the existence of territorial cleavages may influence the level of independence of regional elections from the

national level. If a lot of competences devolved to the regions and voters have a higher level of identification with a region, the perceived importance of regional elections may rise. As the Belgian federation meets both conditions, we may expect that the regional and the national level can function as two separate electoral arenas or even that the campaign at the national level will be subordinate to the regional party competition.

### *Vertical simultaneity in the Belgian case*

Belgium is an interesting case to study the impact of vertical simultaneity because it is one of the rare cases where it has occurred several times. In 1995, 1999 and 2014 regional elections coincided with federal elections. Up to date, this co-occurrence was arbitrary and not because the law imposed vertical simultaneity. In this paragraph we will give an outline of the Belgian case and focus on the aspect of vertical simultaneity. In order to understand the relation between national and subnational elections an overview of the complex institutional design is needed.

The Belgian federation consists of a federal level and six sub-states. There are two different types of sub-states, regions and communities. This asymmetric construction was the result of two distinct drivers of regionalism. The leading Flemish politicians insisted on more cultural autonomy which resulted in three language communities, Flemish-, French- and German-speaking. These communities do not follow a strictly territorial logic because the French as well as the Flemish community are both competent in the 19 communities of the Brussels area. In contrast, the Flemish, Walloon and Brussels region have a strictly territorial nature. The creation of these regions complied with the Walloon demands for autonomy in socio-economic matters (Swenden & Jans 2006:880).

The competences of the regions and communities are in line with their historical roots. The communities have powers for matters relating to language and the individual: culture (theatre, libraries, audiovisual media...), sports, education, aspects of health policy (curative and preventive medicine) and assistance to persons (protection of youth, social welfare, child support, aid to families, immigrant assistant services, care of the elderly, ...). The competences of the regions are connected with their territory and relate to the economy in the broadest sense. The regions



decide on employment policy, environment, agriculture, offshore fishing, regional economic policy, scientific research, foreign trade, town and country planning, tourism, public works, transport (except Belgian Railways), energy, water policy, housing and some fiscal policies (a part of the income tax, inheritance tax, estate tax, tax cuts for target groups and traffic tax).

The federal authorities have the residual powers. They decide on everything that does not explicitly fall under the communities and the regions. The main federal competencies are defence, justice, police, foreign affairs, social security and the important laws in social security (unemployment, pensions, health insurance, except child support), substantial parts of public health, public debt, nuclear energy, state-owned companies (Post office and Belgian railways), prices and incomes policy, monetary policy and the bulk of fiscal policy.

The sub-states and the federal level have exclusive competences. This means that only they are able to legislate and adopt binding acts in the fields that they have powers. There is no hierarchy between the norms, but not all policy domains are homogeneously assigned to a governmental level. Which makes it a very complex situation.

This complexity also accounts for the subnational elections in Belgium. Not all of the subnational parliaments are directly elected. The parliament of the French-speaking community consists of 19 French-speaking MPs from the Brussels parliament and all of the French-speaking MPs from the Walloon parliament. The parliaments of the Flemish community and Flemish region were merged into one Flemish parliament which means that there are no separate elections for both assemblies. This means that elections occur only in four of the six subnational entities: Flanders, the German-speaking community and the Walloon and Brussels regions (Dandoy 2013: 53).

The first direct subnational elections were held relatively recent. Of course the parliament of the German-speaking community was already directly elected in 1974, four years after the first step in the Belgian devolution process. However, because only 0,7 percent of the total Belgian electorate lives in the German Community, it is considered as politically irrelevant (Dandoy 2013:47). The next subnational level that got a directly elected assembly was the Brussels Region in 1989. But the historic turning point when it comes to subnational elections is 1995. In that

year direct elections were held for the first time in the largest regions of the country: Wallonia and Flanders.

In 1995, federal and subnational elections immediately coincided. Because (except for 1995) subnational elections would always be held simultaneously with the European elections, the federal and sub-state elections coincided again in 1999. Normally it would take until 2019 before both elections were held simultaneously, but because the federal parliament was dissolved one year before the anticipated ending of the federal legislature in 2010, sub-state and federal elections were already held on the same day again in 2014.

Normally both elections will coincide again in 2019 because the federal legislature was extended from four to five years in 2014. Thus from now on the federal MPs stay in place for the same time as the MPs of the subnational parliaments. But unlike the regional assemblies, the federal parliament can still be dissolved before the end of the legislature in case of a severe political crisis. Especially because of the linguistic problems between Francophones and Flemish politicians decided to secure an exit strategy. Early elections are seen as the ultimate solution in case that the Belgian decision-making process gets paralyzed. This is different for the subnational level where a new coalition must be found within the same parliament in case of an irresolvable governmental conflict.

The possibility of a shorter federal legislature implies that vertical simultaneity is not guaranteed in 2019. However, there are several political parties that want to impose it legally. The coalition partners of the government Di Rupo I (2010-2014) decided to change the Constitution in this sense, although they were divided on the issue. The result is an extremely complicated decision.

Vertical simultaneity is written down in the Constitution, but the amendment of this Article 65 still needs to be ratified with a special majority (i.e. 2/3 of the federal parliament and 1/2 of each language group). If this amendment finds enough support, regional and national elections will always coincide. In order to guarantee such vertical simultaneity, institutional high-tech was needed. Especially because the federal parliament can be dissolved before the end of the five year legislature. In that case, elections will be organized in order to choose a parliament for the rest of the five year legislature. For instance, if the federal parliament is dissolved in 2018 then

elections will be held for a parliamentary session of one year. Together with the approval of coinciding national and subnational elections, the sub-states would get the competence to decide on the duration of the legislature of their parliaments and the election date. This would mean that the sub-states can choose to deviate from the coinciding elections.

This surrealistic decision-making process shows that there is a lot of disagreement on imposed vertical simultaneity in Belgium. The parties that are in favor of coinciding elections state that simultaneity is needed to cope with the inflation of elections in Belgium. Between 1999 and 2014 there were ten elections for the federal, regional or local level. As a result, parties need to campaign permanently and difficult, but important, decisions are postponed to the future. The opponents of coinciding elections draw inspiration from the SOE-model and state that the regional level will be overshadowed by the national level when elections coincide. They point to the 'democratic deficit' that arises because voters will have problems to determine which governmental level is responsible for what. Moreover, when regional elections were organized for the first time, politicians explicitly chose for different election dates in order to emancipate the regional parliaments.

### **Research focus & design**

Contrary to earlier research on the rank order of elections in multilevel states, this study focuses on politicians instead of voters or traditional media. More specifically, we focus on their communication behavior via social media. Especially during election times, these platforms provide politicians with the opportunity to communicate their agenda towards the wider public as well as the mass media. In particular, the micro-blogging platform Twitter has become an important campaigning instrument for political candidates (Kruikemeier 2014: 131). Moreover, Reif and Schmitt (1980: 13-14) argue that campaign efforts can influence the perceived order of the elections. The public is naturally focused on the elections in the first-order arena. But the attention of media and voters for the second-order arena can be attracted by emphasizing issues that are on stake at the regional level. In other words, what politicians say can influence voters perceptions on the hierarchy of elections.

In this study, we investigate politicians' Twitter messages to define whether they discuss regional and/or federal issues, hence, to what extent we encounter second-order elections. Our hypotheses are: (H1) Regional and federal elections are mixed up by candidates when elections coincide.

(H2) *Federal* and regional candidates primarily discuss *national* issues and regional regional issues are second-order.

Based on these assumptions, we aim to understand to what extent regional elections are overshadowed by the discussion of national policy issues (or vice versa). In doing so, we focus on the regional and national elections in Belgium, held the 25<sup>th</sup> of May 2014. Below, we present the data collection procedure and analytical approach towards the Twitter data.

#### *Data collection*

Data collection is based on a selection of Twitter users, from which all messages were harvested during the four-week period preceding election day. More specifically, we departed from the candidate lists, constituted per party, for both the regional (Flanders) and national elections. From these lists, we selected candidates ranked at the top of the list (i.e. the most important candidates), resulting in a total of 96 candidates, of which 59 have a Twitter account. Of these 59 candidates, 30 ran for the regional and 29 for the federal elections. Table 1 below presents an overview of the candidates in terms of their party membership and the governmental level they represent.

**Table 1** Twitter users and tweets by party and governmental level

Party membership	<i>The Flemish level</i>		<i>The Federal level</i>	
	Users	Tweets	Users	Tweets
Sp.a	4	300	3	292
CD&V	6	1266	6	1036
Open VLD	6	872	5	598
N-VA	4	614	4	395
Vlaams Belang	4	430	4	443
Groen	5	343	4	126
LDD	/	/	1	54
PvdA	1	149	2	199
<i>Total</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>3974</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>3143</i>

The table shows multiple candidates per party because there are six circumscriptions (hence, lists) for which the political parties can present candidates, both for the Flemish as well as the Federal elections. The populist liberal party LDD (“Lijst Dedecker”) only participated in the federal elections, as shown in Table 1. In addition, the small number candidates from the communist PvdA relates to the fact that this is a new party with no incumbent MPs. Only those candidates of the PvdA that had the largest chance of getting elected (according to the polls) were included in the research<sup>i</sup>.

Twitter data was captured using the open-source service *yourTwapperkeeper* (yTK), a commonly used data collection tool within social sciences (Bruns, 2012). The usernames are inserted in the tool as ‘keywords’, via which the collection of their messages is made possible. Afterwards, the datasets with Twitter messages from each of the individual users were merged and exported as one excel data file for further analysis. In total, the candidates posted 7117 messages from the 25<sup>th</sup> of April to the 25<sup>th</sup> of May (until the voting bureaus officially closed). From the 59 candidates that are on Twitter, four did not post any tweet, hence, the 7117 messages are produced by 55 Twitter users.

### *Data analysis*

We conducted a quantitative content analysis whereby both the content of the messages and the users were coded. The content analysis was preceded by a manual categorization of all Twitter messages in order to retain the messages that were suited for quantitative content analysis. For example, we excluded messages that made reference to campaigning events and activities, hence, contained no reference to policy issues. In total, 2212 of the 7117 messages were included for the quantitative content analysis.

For the analysis of the messages, we defined two key variables, i.e. (1) governmental level and (2) policy issue. The former variable is also applied on the Twitter users to understand similarities and differences in their utterances and their candidacy for the regional or the federal level. This variable consists of three categories, i.e. the Flemish or regional level, the federal level or a mixture of both levels. The ‘mixed’ category relates to the heterogeneous distribution of

competences in Belgium. Although the sub-states and the federal level have exclusive competences, there is overlap between both levels. For example, both governmental levels are able to legislate on the domain of health policy. If a tweet mentions 'health policy' without any further details it was assigned to the mixed category. This also accounts for the tweets that mentioned both governmental levels. After the tweet was linked to the correct governmental level, it was assigned to a thematic issue category. In total, 38 policy issue categories were defined reflecting issues such as agriculture or education. If a tweet mentioned more than one issue, it got different two or more codes.

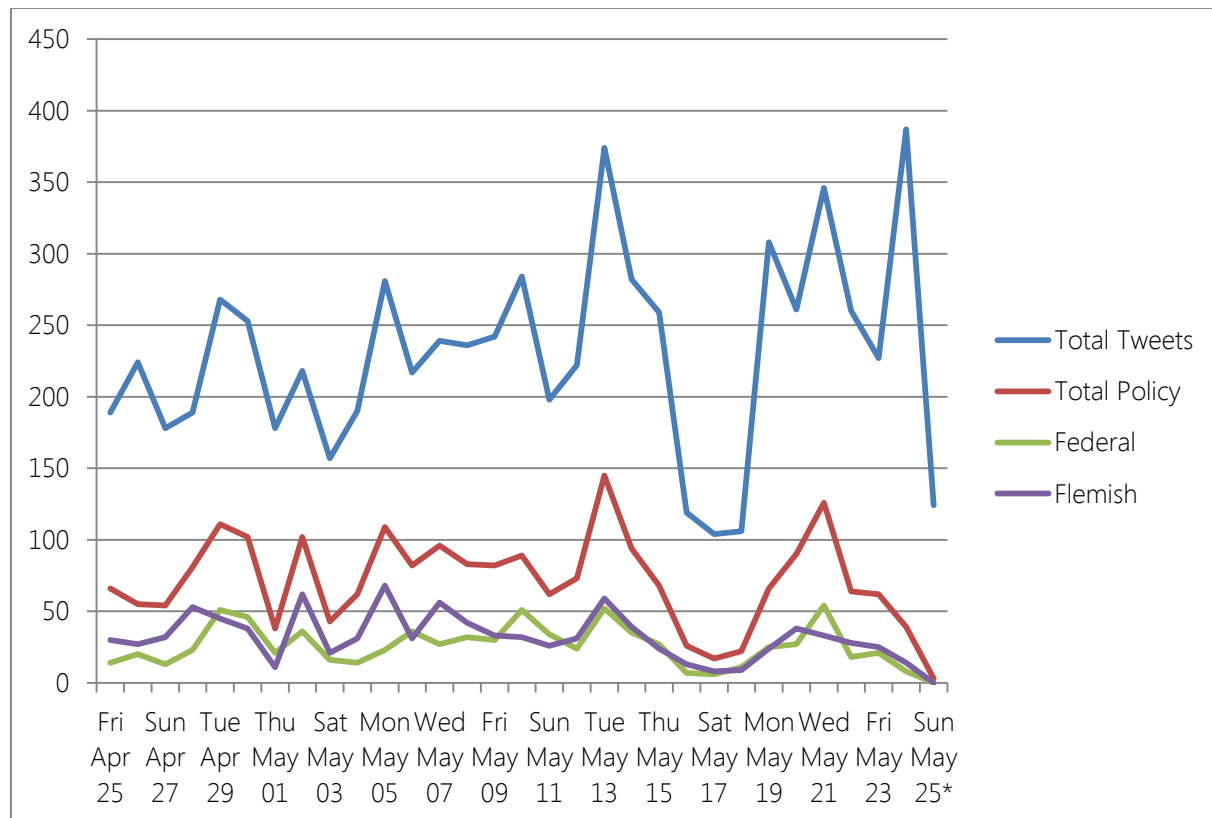
For the politicians, we coded (1) party membership, reflecting the parties presented in Table 1 and (2) the governmental level of their candidacy, consisting of two categories (i.e. Flemish or federal). In order to compare campaigning behavior of the candidates for the regional and federal level, we calculated a "Regional-Federal score" (from now: RF-score). This is necessary because the total amount of tweets varied greatly between governmental levels, parties and candidates. The most active candidate sent 195 tweets while the least active twitterers only accounted for three messages during the whole campaign. In order to cope with these large differences we used the RF-score.

The RF-score denotes the extent to which politicians talk about the federal or regional level in their tweets. This score is made up by a subtraction of the number of tweets on the federal level (TF) from the number of tweets on the regional level (TR). Subsequently, this difference is divided by the sum of tweets on the regional and federal level. The result is a score between -1 and +1. A score of +1 means that 100 percent of the tweets were about regional issues and a score of -1 means that 100 percent of the tweets were about federal issues.

$$RFscore = \frac{TR - TF}{TR + TF}$$

## Results

The discussion of the results starts with a chronological representation of the Twitter messages sent by the politicians under study, categorized by the constitutional level they represent. Overall, Figure 1 shows an increase in overall activity as well policy tweets towards election day (the 25<sup>th</sup> of May). However, in the run-up to the elections, policy related tweets drop whereas general traffic increases. We notice small drops in traffic during the weekends and on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May (i.e. Labor Day). The largest drop in Traffic is related to the death of former politician and Belgian prime minister Jean-Luc Dehaene. His death was announced the 15<sup>th</sup> of May and clearly had an impact on the election campaign.



**Figure 1** A timeline of politicians' Twitter activity. \*Data collection the 25<sup>th</sup> of Mai until 4 P.M.

In general, policy tweets (i.e. the discussion of policy issues which can be related to the Flemish and/or the federal level) represent about one third of the politicians' Twitter activity. In addition, both the federal and the Flemish level are represented equally throughout the campaign. Below,

we account for the differences in governmental level in relation to the Twitter users and their candidacy for the Flemish or the federal level.

### *Rank order*

To what extent are federal and regional issues mixed up during simultaneous elections? The results show that almost all candidates tweet on both levels (Table 2). Only six candidates have a RF-score of +1 or -1. One of those six candidates can be considered as an absolute pure twitterer because he did not sent one message were both levels where mixed up in the same tweet. This mixed category accounts for 19,3% of all the tweets that were taken into consideration (428 of 2212 tweets). Based on the considerations above we cannot falsify hypothesis 1: regional and federal elections are indeed mixed up by the candidates when elections coincide.

But to what extent did the federal level overshadow the regional level during the Belgian elections of May 25<sup>th</sup> 2014? When we look at the amount of tweets during the last month of the campaign, we can see that the candidates that were on the head of the lists sent 983 tweets on Flemish issues and 808 tweets on federal issues. This is an average of 16,7 regional and 13,7 federal tweets per candidate. Based on these first results we could state that the campaign at the national level is subordinate to the regional level. But, as Table 2 shows, our dataset contains more candidates for the Flemish parliament than for the federal parliament. Moreover, the former were more active on Twitter during the campaign. This may lead to biased results if candidates primarily tweet on the parliamentary level they run for, which is why we analyzed the candidates for both levels separately and make use of the RF-score. Politicians primarily discuss federal issues in coinciding elections

**Table 2** Regional (R) and federal (F) tweets of the candidates for the Flemish and federal parliament (2014) and their RF-scores

Candidates Flemish parliament	R	F	RF-score	RF-score party	Candidates federal parliament	R	F	RF-score	RF-score party
Groen #1	11	5	0.38		Groen #6	4	11	-0.47	
Groen #2	59	5	0.84		Groen #7	5	3	0.25	
Groen #3	12	6	0.33		Groen #8	0	0	/	



Groen #4	10	0	1.00		Groen #9	0	0	/	-0.22
Groen #5	10	2	0.67	0.70	CD&V #7	15	35	-0,40	
CD&V #1	69	4	0.89		CD&V #8	0	10	-1.00	
CD&V #2	22	1	0.91		CD&V #9	11	29	-0,45	
CD&V #3	154	41	0.58		CD&V #10	15	13	0.07	
CD&V #4	108	14	0.77		CD&V #11	31	66	-0.36	
CD&V #5	2	5	-0.43		CD&V #12	9	9	0.00	-0.33
CD&V #6	8	7	0.07	0.67	Open VLD #7	6	15	-0.43	
Open VLD #1	19	5	0.58		Open VLD #8	4	4	0.00	
Open VLD #2	9	2	0.64		Open VLD #9	26	8	0.53	
Open VLD #3	18	6	0.50		Open VLD #10	1	2	-0.33	
Open VLD #4	0	0	/		Open VLD #11	2	4	-0.33	0.08
Open VLD #5	17	14	0.10		N-VA #5	2	2	0.00	
Open VLD #6	30	10	0.50	0,43	N-VA #6	7	33	-0.65	
N-VA #1	109	67	0.24		N-VA #7	0	14	-1.00	
N-VA #2	4	4	0.00		N-VA #8	17	36	-0.36	-0.53
N-VA #3	0	4	-1.00		Vlaams Belang #5	4	22	-0.69	
N-VA #4	2	27	-0.86	0.06	Vlaams Belang #6	7	38	-0.69	
Vlaams Belang #1	15	11	0.12		Vlaams Belang #7	0	3	-1.00	
Vlaams Belang #2	7	16	-0.39		Vlaams Belang #8	5	6	-0.09	-0.62
Vlaams Belang #3	7	6	0.08		sp.a #5	17	37	-0.37	
Vlaams Belang #4	0	4	-1.00	-0.12	sp.a #6	0	0	/	
sp.a #1	1	27	-0.93		sp.a #7	9	13	-0.18	-0.32
sp.a #2	3	9	-0.50		LDD #1	6	15	-0.43	
sp.a #3	24	9	0.45		PvdA #2	15	28	-0.30	
sp.a #4	0	0	/	-0.23	PvdA #3	10	7	0.18	-0.17
PvdA #1	28	24	0.08						
<i>Total</i>	<i>758</i>	<i>335</i>	<i>0.39</i>		<i>Total</i>	<i>228</i>	<i>463</i>	<i>-0.34</i>	

Table 2 shows that the regional candidates have an average RF-score of 0.39. Most of the candidates (21) have a positive score, which means that they mainly tweet about regional issues. One of them (Groen #4) only tweeted on regional issues and not on national issues and seven candidates have a negative score. Hence, only a minority seems to consider the national level more important than the regional level. But N-VA #3 and Vlaams Belang #4 had no attention at all for the regional parliament and only posted federal campaign messages. This also accounts for sp.a#1, apart from one tweet. One candidate sent as many national as regional tweets.

The national candidates have an average RF-score of -0.34. Nineteen candidates have a negative score which means that they mainly tweeted about federal issues. Three of them only

concentrated on national politics and did not even mention the regional level once. Four candidates have a positive score but none of them only paid attention to the regional level. The national candidate who had the most attention for issues of the regional level was Open VLD #9. Finally, three national candidates mentioned both levels to the same amount.

Based on these results we cannot conclude that the regional and the national level function as two separate electoral arenas. But the regional campaign is not overshadowed by the campaign on the national level and the national level is not subordinate to the regional party competition either. Candidates for the regional parliament mainly tweet on regional issues, while national candidates prefer to tweet on federal issues. The absolute values of the average RF-scores for each level are not very high. This means that the regional and federal level are not separated when elections coincide: federal and regional candidates talk about the competences of each other's parliament. But there is no level that dominates the other. This means that hypothesis 2 is falsified.

### *Differences between parties*

We did not only look at individual politicians but also aggregated the results to the party-level. This makes it possible to compare between parties and assess to what extent the opinion of a party on coinciding elections has an impact on the extent to which parties mix up campaigns. N-VA, Vlaams Belang and CD&V are against vertical simultaneity for the reasons mentioned above (cf. *supra*, p. 10), the other parties are in favor of coinciding elections.<sup>ii</sup> The results on party-level give an interesting picture. We could expect that the parties that are against coinciding elections will try to make the difference clear between both governmental levels by minimalizing the overlap of the levels, while parties who are in favor of vertical simultaneity would have less problems with that. This expectation is confirmed if we consider the candidates for the federal parliament, but not for the regional parliament. Vlaams Belang, N-VA and CD&V have the smallest RF-scores if we look to their federal candidates. This means that they primarily focus on

the federal level. But if we look to Flemish candidates we can see that N-VA and Vlaams Belang also have a lot of attention for the federal level. This is remarkable because we were expecting that regional candidates of N-VA and Vlaams Belang would have greater attention for regional issues because they believe it is important to emphasize the difference between both levels.

As expected the federal candidates of the party Groen, which are in favor of vertical simultaneity, mix up both levels to a large extent. This contrasts with the green candidates on the Flemish level, who mainly focus on the competences of the parliament they are running for. With a RF-score of 0,70 Groen concentrates its Twitter-communication on the regional competences more than the other parties.

The socialist Sp.a mainly focuses on national issues. This is not only the case for the federal candidates but also for the candidates who run for Flemish parliament. The national political arena seems to be more important than the regional arena for the social democrats when elections coincide. However, we did not find RF-scores that are higher than -0,32. This means that the way that the national level overshadows the regional level is relatively limited, even for Sp.a.

The results show that the party's opinion on coinciding elections has no impact on the extent to which parties mix up campaigns. The differences we find between parties could also be the result of issue-ownership. According to the issue-ownership model (Petrocik, 1996), voters automatically identify parties with certain issues and regard them as being able to handle it (Petrocik, 1990:6, cited in Maddens, 1994:97). In this respect, scholars traditionally refer to conservative parties, which are most credible on tax issue according to a lot of voters. As a result of this mechanism, parties traditionally try to put the issues that they "own" high on the agenda in election campaigns. "A candidate's campaign can be understood as a 'marketing' effort: the goal is to achieve a strategic advantage by making problems which reflect owned issues the programmatic meaning of the election and the criteria by which voters make their choice." (Petrocik, 1996:828) In other words, if a party succeeds in making issues they "own" as the main theme in the elections, then this party is well on the way to achieve an electoral victory (Budge and Farlie, 1983).

There is not much (recent) empirical research about the issues that parties own. This is because issue ownership is not easy to operationalize, especially not in a multi-party system such as Belgium. Based on public opinion data of 2003-2004, Walgrave and De Swert (2007) discerned 13 issues that are owned by Flemish parties. But its relevance in 2014 is limited because issue ownership is dynamic and can change more rapidly than some scholars state (Walgrave, Lefevere and Nuytemans, 2009). Moreover the issue categories of Walgrave and De Swert (2007) do not completely correspond with the issue categories that were used for the coding of the tweets. Despite these limitations, we relied on the research of Walgrave and De Swert (2007) for the analysis.

The extent to which parties emphasized the issues they own in the tweets they sent, can be derived from Table 3. This table provides the most prominent policy issues per party. For each of the parties, themes that represent at least 50% of the total amount of messages, were included. In this respect, the table provides insight in the popularity and variety of the different policy issues per party. The two smallest parties (i.e. LDD and PvdA) are not included in the table due to the limited collection of Twitter messages for these parties.

**Table 3** Issue priorities and variety per party

<b>CD&amp;V</b>	Welfare (19%)	Mobility & transport (11%)	Tax policy (11%)	Domestic economy (9%)	Education (9%)
<b>Sp.a</b>	Social security (26%)	Mobility & transport (10%)	Environment (10%)	Employment (9%)	
<b>Open VLD</b>	Mobility & transport (18%)	Domestic economy (16%)	Tax policy (11%)	Education (9%)	
<b>N-VA</b>	Social security	Tax policy	Education	Culture, sports & recreation	

	(26%)	(14%)	(10%)	(9%)	
<b>Vlaams Belang</b>	Immigration (21%)	Homeland security (16%)	State reform (16%)		
<b>Groen</b>	Education (18%)	Mobility & transport (11%)	Welfare (10%)	Environment (9%)	Tax policy (6%)

The fact that some parties focus on the regional level (especially Groen) and others on the national level (Vlaams Belang, N-VA and Sp.a) can only be explained by issue-ownership in the case of Vlaams Belang and Sp.a. The fact that the candidates for the Flemish parliament of Vlaams Belang mainly focus on national issues instead of Flemish issues is because it is important to focus their campaign on immigration, homeland security and state reform. All these issues belong to the national level which shows that the regional campaign of Vlaams Belang is overshadowed by the national level. The same reasoning applies to the social-democratic party sp.a which has a good reputation on social security. Table 3 shows that Sp.a-candidates tweeted a lot on social security, which is mainly a national competence.

As social security is not owned by the N-VA, their relatively strong emphasis on federal issues cannot be explained by issue-ownership. This also accounts for the strong Flemish focus of Groen. Notwithstanding the fact that education is an issue that is owned by CD&V, candidates of Groen paid most attention to this Flemish competence during the campaign.

### *Incumbency past*

Finally, we elaborate on the impact of the parliamentary past of the candidates. Eight of the candidates for the Flemish parliament were MP in the federal parliament before the elections of

2014 and one federal candidate was Flemish MP before the elections<sup>iii</sup>. To what extent does this past incumbency status determine the level that candidates are tweeting on? Is it more determining than the parliament they are running for? This seems to be the case for MPs with a Flemish past, but not for MPs with a federal past. This means that we cannot state that the parliamentary past is more important than the parliament that candidates are running for.

The nineteen candidates who were member of the Flemish parliament before the elections have an RF-score of 0,47, which is clearly higher than the RF-score of the candidates for the Flemish parliament. By excluding the eight regional candidates who were in the federal parliament before the elections, hence looking only at the Flemish incumbents, the relative amount of attention for the regional parliament increases. In other words, the regional level seems to be more important for Flemish incumbents than for Flemish candidates.

This impact of the parliamentary past was not confirmed if we focus on the 27 federal incumbents. Those MPs have a RF-score of -0,34. This is exactly the same RF-score as the candidates for the federal parliament. This means that their incumbency past seems to have no impact. In other words, the federal level does not seem to be more important for federal incumbents than for federal candidates.

## **Conclusion**

This paper tested the often heard assumption that regional elections must be seen as a function of politics at the centre. This means that regional campaigns are overshadowed by national issues especially when national and regional elections coincide. This was verified by analyzing the campaign tweets of 59 Flemish politicians who run for the regional or national parliament in the simultaneous elections of 2014 in Belgium.

This article has shown that the national and regional level function as two separate electoral arena's when elections are held simultaneously. Regional and national candidates mix up both levels, but there is not one level that dominates the other. This is a very interesting result, not least because we analyzed coinciding elections. Based on earlier research (Romanova, 2013), we can assume that the congruence between campaigns that are held simultaneously is larger than

when elections are held at different moments. Hence, if the regional level is not overshadowed by the national level during coinciding elections there is a good chance that this is also not the case in separate elections which are more common in federations. Thus the study of the coinciding elections in Belgium is interesting in our understanding of the SOE-model.

Yet, we must emphasize that Belgium is a specific case. According to the Regional Authority Index (RAI) the Flemish government has a very large regional autonomy. Only the German federation is ranked higher than Belgium on the RAI (Hooghe et al., 2010). Moreover, our findings depend on messages of individual politicians with a Twitter account. This probably generates some bias because Twitter cannot be equated to the overall election campaign, which is conducted through mainstream media as well. Twitter traffic during election times is related to mainstream media events, such as televised debates (Larsson & Moe, 2012; Bruns & Burgess, 2011). In this respect, Twitter is referred to as a “backchannel” through which traditional content is distributed and discussed. For politicians in particular, the question remains to what extent and how their use of Twitter is linked to the traditional media agenda.

What does this research learn us about the alleged democratic deficit in multilevel states? If it is true that voters mix up the national and regional level, hence governments can't be held accountable for political outcomes, then politicians are probably not to blame. In their campaign tweets politicians mainly focus on the level they are running for, even when elections are held simultaneously. This begs the question if the traditional media shouldn't be held accountable for mixing up governmental levels.

Further research is needed to get a clearer picture of the way that politicians mix up governmental levels. Instead of focusing on the popular candidates that are on the head of the list it could be interesting to include candidates who are less important for the general campaign of the parties. Nonetheless we are convinced that the analysis presented here is an enrichment for the research of elections in multilevel environments.

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<sup>i</sup> This are the candidates for the federal and Flemish parliament in the constituency Antwerp and for the Flemish parliament in East-Flanders.

<sup>ii</sup> We leave out LDD and PvdA of this comparison because not enough candidates were followed or could be followed.

<sup>iii</sup> Ten of the 59 candidates that were on the list were new candidates who had never been an MP before, three candidates were MP in other parliaments than the federal or Flemish parliament.