

**The human capital of political parties**  
**An analysis of Belgian central party offices**

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## ABSTRACT

*Empirical studies on the professionalization of parties often suffer from a lack of data. However, this analysis of Belgian parties' human capital is based on reliable data derived from annual financial statements and covers a sixteen-year period (1999 to 2014). Five hypotheses addressing increasing professionalization and inter-party differences concerning staff size were tested empirically. While the temporal evolution was investigated through a descriptive analysis, a multivariate regression model was set up to explain differences between political parties' human capital. The descriptive analysis shows that Belgian parties have not grown increasingly capital-intensive between 1999 and 2014. The explanatory analysis demonstrates that older, more leftist and electorally stronger parties have a more capital-intensive extra-parliamentary organization.*

**Keywords:** Party organization, Professionalization, Political finance, Party state, Partitocracy

### 1. Introduction

Scholars of party organizations label present-day political parties as capital-intensive electoral machines (Krouwel, 2012; Mair, Müller, & Plasser, 2004; Scarrow & Webb, 2013). This evolution towards electoral-professionalism has increased the importance of staff for the inner workings of party organizations (Mancini, 1999; Panebianco, 1988). Political office-holders are assisted by a variety of political aids, ranging from strategists to fundraisers and policy advisors. As a result, these unelected agents are often assumed to have a considerable impact on political decision-making. This process of professionalization has been reinforced by the dropping membership rates of political parties (Wauters, 2017). While party members could initially serve as volunteers supporting the party organization, these diminishing free labor forces were replaced by paid employees. Yet despite the relevance of the subject, research on the staff of political parties remains scarce (Webb & Kolodny, 2006).

Scholars of party politics have investigated professionalization empirically from two different angles. Large-N comparative analyses of staff numbers have addressed the quantitative aspects of professionalization, studying both longitudinal trends (Katz & Mair, 1993; Krouwel, 2012) and international differences (Poguntke, Scarrow, & Webb, 2016). Others have investigated the qualitative side of professionalization by measuring individual characteristics of staff members through survey methods (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017; Webb & Fisher, 2003). Regardless of the chosen approach, parties

have reportedly been reluctant towards sharing information about their human capital (Poguntke et al., 2016; Webb & Kolodny, 2006). In the Belgian case, however, the annual financial statements of the parties offer a unique opportunity. From these statements, data on staff levels and staff expenses for the ten biggest parties represented in the national assembly (Table 1) were selected for a sixteen-year period (1999 – 2014).

Party	Party system	Party family	Seats	Vote share
N-VA	Flemish	Conservative	33	20%
PS	Francophone	Socialist	23	12%
MR	Francophone	Liberal	20	10%
CD&V	Flemish	Christian democrat	18	12%
Open Vld	Flemish	Liberal	14	10%
Sp.a	Flemish	Socialist	13	9%
cdH	Francophone	Christian democrat	9	5%
Ecolo	Francophone	Ecologist	6	3%
Groen	Flemish	Ecologist	6	5%
Vlaams Belang	Flemish	Right wing	3	4%

Table 1: Belgian parties included in the analysis (current electoral & parliamentary weight)

As the format of these public documents is consistent and uniform, these sources provide 160 data points that are suited for a reliable comparative analysis. This enabled us to examine longitudinal trends and explore a new area of investigation: explaining the differences between parties within countries. As a result, this paper addresses two research questions:

- *RQ 1: Which trends characterize the evolution of political professionalism within Belgian parties between 1999 and 2014?*
- *RQ 2: Which factors can explain the differences in professionalism between these parties?*

The first research question will be handled through a descriptive analysis of the trends that took place during the studied period. This will be complemented by an explanatory analysis, as we investigate which factors have an impact on the differences between parties. The analysis relies on two key indicators (staff figures, staff expenses) and considers their relation with the organizational strength of parties (members, total expenditure).

The paper proceeds as follows. First, the existing literature on political professionalism will be introduced, followed by a discussion of the potential determinants of the staff size of parties. Second, the specificities of political professionalism within the Belgian context will be addressed. After focusing on our data and method, we turn towards the empirical analysis. After investigating which general trends have taken place between 1999 and 2014, our theoretical discussion is translated into an explanatory model based on electoral performance, party age, government status, ideology and party system.

## **2. Political professionalism: operationalization and determinants**

In recent decades, literature on political professionalization has gradually emerged and expanded. However, the exact meaning of the concept has been the subject of considerable discussion (Lilleker & Negrine, 2002). Professionalization has been approached from a series of different angles: from the career patterns of elected officials (Borchert, 2003; Weber, 1921) to the diffusion of campaigning practices (Gibson & Rommele, 2001; Stromback, 2009; Tenscher & Mykkanen, 2014). Others have addressed the relation between external consultants and parties (Dulio, 2006; Farrell, Kolodny, & Medvic, 2001). Yet our analysis is exclusively directed at internal employees: the non-elected staff members working inside the party organization (Karlsen, 2010). First, we address how these internal party employees relate to the larger concept of political professionalization. Second, we discuss the different determinants that might explain differences between parties' staff size and formulate corresponding hypotheses.

### ***2.1. Party staff and the concept of professionalization***

Concerning internal party employees, the process of professionalization contains two separate evolutions. First, it entails a quantitative shift towards increasing numbers staff members. This evolution has been interpreted as a transition from labour-intensive to capital-intensive forms of party organization (Farrell & Webb, 2000). Whereas volunteers and party activists played a vital role within labour-intensive organizations, today's capital-intensive party organizations increasingly rely on paid employees instead. This quantitative dimension of professionalization has typically been operationalized through staff numbers. This indicator has been used to illustrate shifting balances between the different faces of parties (Katz & Mair, 1993), map the increase of staff members through time (Farrell & Webb, 2000; Krouwel, 2012) and compare staff levels between different Western democracies (Poguntke et al., 2016).

Second, the professionalization of party employees implies a qualitative shift towards a different kind of staff with more developed skills and education. This evolution has been interpreted as transition from bureaucrats towards better educated professionals with higher levels of expertise (Panebianco, 1988). In contrast to bureaucrats, Panebianco envisioned professionals to have a higher economic status, have a better education, to serve as an expert within the organization and to be more independent from political leadership. From this point of view, the process of increasing professionalism (cf. professionalization) is about a specific type of political employee becoming more central to the functioning of parties (Webb and Kolodny, 2006). Today, this distinction can best be interpreted as a division between administrative, bureaucratic positions and strategical, professional job descriptions involving political expertise (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017). This qualitative dimension of professionalization addresses the individual characteristics of employees and has been analyzed through survey data from one (Webb & Fisher, 2003) or several parties (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017).

This paper focuses exclusively on the quantitative aspects of party employees. The available staff data do not contain information on the individual characteristics of employees: such data are hard to obtain, even elementary data on staff size are often lacking. We acknowledge that staff size is only a robust indicator of political professionalism as whole. Therefore, instead of equating staff size to professionalism in general, the analysis will rely on more specific terminology from here on by referring to *capital intensity* and the *human capital* of parties when applying staff data as an empirical indicator.

### ***2.1. Understanding and explaining capital intensity***

How can this quantitative dimension of professionalization be explained understood? In this section, we address the existing theoretical assumptions about the evolution of parties' human capital (temporal variation) and the differences between parties (spatial variation). The discussion will borrow from existing literature (both theoretical and empirical) in setting up the causal mechanisms that underpin the 5 hypotheses guiding the empirical analysis. As no unified scheme of interpretation exists for professionalization (even less so for the quantitative dimension), causal argumentations have been constructed through combination of literature on professionalization and party politics at large.

The assumption of increasing capital-intensity the most recurring theme in existing literature. This organizational evolution is a common thread in influential publications on party transformation (Krouwel, 2006): caused by catchallization (Kirchheimer, 1966; Panebianco, 1988) and accelerated by cartelization (Katz & Mair, 1995) and the rise of business-firm parties (Hopkin & Paolucci, 1999). Hence, growing capital-intensity embodies the central claim of professionalization and has received most

empirical attention within this field of research. Longitudinal comparative analyses have established an almost universal growth of both central and public office staff in European democracies since the 1950's (Farrell & Webb, 2000; Katz & Mair, 1993; Krouwel, 2012). However, such long term data on the Belgian case are absent. Belgian parties likely underwent a similar process, especially after the move towards cartelization after 1989. As the earliest data points in the dataset only date back to 1999, this notable shift will probably not be observable in the analysis. Nonetheless, we anticipate that the persistence of generous public funding has stimulated parties to further develop capital-intensive organizations within this shorter time span.

***H1: Belgian political parties have grown more capital-intensive between 1999 and 2014.***

Based on an international-comparative study, Poguntke et al. (2016) established that systemic effects are best at explaining variation in staff figures. Their empirical analysis has indicated that differences between European nations are more distinctive than those between party families. Several elements might explain this. First, these systemic differences could be attributed to political finance regimes, as some nations might subsidize their political parties more generously than others. Second, international patterns might be connected to institutional characteristics (e.g. the electoral, political or media system), since they determine the structure of interparty competition. Such a hypothesis shows parallels to how Farrell (1996) theorized about differences in campaign professionalization: he expects the phenomenon to be the greatest in presidential and majoritarian systems with high popular access to a commercialized media market. Third, the observed national uniformity could also be linked to contagion effects within party systems, with parties copying each other's behavior or organizational structure. Similarly, existing models of party change (in casu: professionalization) argue that parties will adapt to innovations of others when they are perceived as a competitive advantage (Appleton & Ward, 1997; Harmel & Janda, 1994; Panebianco, 1988; Wilson, 1980).

As Belgium counts two separate party systems (Flemish and Francophone), party systemic effects might have created two distinct environments for party organizations (De Winter, Swyngedouw, & Dumont, 2006). As the institutional environment (electoral system, political finance regime) is similar, the analysis can single out the impact of party systems. Hence, Belgium parties provide a specific opportunity for testing the potential impact of party-systemic effects. Based on the country effects demonstrated in earlier research (Poguntke et al., 2016), we anticipate a different level of capital intensity for each party system.

***H2: Flemish and Francophone parties have different levels of capital intensity.***

Socialist and Christian democratic parties have the highest recorded levels of human capital in existing empirical studies (Krouwel, 2012; Poguntke et al., 2016). This contemporary observation aligns perfectly with the seminal work on professionalization by Panebianco (1988), who conceived the electoral-professional party model as the successor of mass parties from socialist and Christian democratic traditions. As noted by Krouwel (2012), it is no coincidence that these party families have been at the center of European governments and party politics for many years. As both families originated as political forces before many their present competitors, we argue that the age of parties might have a decisive impact on their human capital. The underlying idea is that party age serves as a proxy for institutionalization, with older parties having a larger, more developed organizational infrastructure. Time has enabled them to capture and accumulate more resources than their competitors. Furthermore, their continuing experience with government creates a persistent demand for expertise in political marketing and policy-making. Therefore, we expect the age of parties to have a positive effect on their human capital.

***H3: Older parties have a more capital-intensive organization than younger parties.***

However, the capital intensity of socialist and Christian democratic parties could also be linked to their ideological profile. Both traditions were born out of historical movements reflecting the mass membership party. This organizational ideal type puts great emphasis on a strong extra-parliamentary party organization. Hence, this 'contagion from the left' (Duverger, 1964) fostered well-developed central party offices supported by both volunteers and bureaucrats. Up until today, this grassroots philosophy is echoed by newer movements on the left that put a stress on *basisdemokratie* or participative democracy. Furthermore, Smulders (2016) observed that leftist parties generally spend a significantly higher share of their resources on staff. We follow this train of thought for our fourth hypothesis.

***H4: Left-oriented parties have a more capital-intensive organization than parties on the right.***

We argue that the differences between the human capital parties are intrinsically connected to the relative size or strength of parties. Resources are of vital importance for sustaining a capital-intensive central office with a large number of staff. Since parties are generally subsidized on the basis of their electoral strength (Ohman, 2012), party strength should have a decisive impact on the availability of resources for party organizations that depend heavily on state funding, such as the Belgian cases (Van

Biezen & Kopecký, 2014). Moreover, stronger parties can probably rely on a larger sum of membership fees and donations. As political parties might employ staff in proportion to the resources available to them, this determinant could certainly have an effect on the human capital of parties. As a result, our fifth and final hypothesis addresses the effect of party strength.

***H5: Parties with strong electoral support are more capital-intensive than parties with less electoral support.***

### **3. Political professionalism at Belgian party headquarters**

Due to its generous public funding and partitocratic features, Belgium is a particularly interesting case for investigating staff at central party offices. As these headquarters concentrate a tremendous amount of resources and power, we consider Belgium a ‘most likely’ case for professionalized central offices.

From a comparative perspective, Belgian parties have an exceptionally high financial dependence state funding. Reportedly, more than 80% of the financial backbone of party organizations consists of public resources, be it directly or indirectly (Maddens, Smulders, Wolfs, & Weekers, 2017; Van Biezen & Kopecký, 2014). Parties receive these public funds from a variety of sources.<sup>1</sup> A first form of indirect subsidies was introduced in the beginning of the 1970s, providing allowances to the party groups in parliament. In 1989, the Belgian law on party finance introduced direct subsidies to political parties, marking a definitive shift towards cartelization (Katz & Mair, 1995). Consequently, these direct subsidies were substantially increased in 1993 to compensate for the ban on corporate donations. Furthermore, this process was facilitated by the growing regionalization of institutions within the Belgian political structure. Both the national and regional levels of government are now tapped for direct and indirect public resources. Not surprisingly, this elaborated political finance structure has created exceptionally high levels of financial dependence. As a result, Belgium exemplifies cartelized state-party linkages in European democracies (Table 2).

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<sup>1</sup> For a more elaborate discussion on the evolution of the Belgian party finance system, see Weekers and Maddens (2009).

Dependence	Nations
> 80%	Belgium (85%), Italy (82%), Spain (80 – 95%)
> 70%	Slovakia (80%), Poland (80%), Luxembourg (75%), Denmark (75%), Norway (75%), Portugal (70 – 90%), Sweden (70 – 80%), Serbia (70 – 80%), Finland (70 – 80%), Croatia (70 – 80%)
> 60%	Slovenia (70%), Ireland (70%), Czech Republic (65 – 90%), Iceland (60 – 90%), Greece (60 – 90%)
> 50%	Hungary (60%), France (60%), Lithuania (52%)
< 50%	Netherlands (35 – 50%), Germany (30 – 40%)

Table 2: Financial dependence in Europe (2007-2011); (Van Biezen & Kopecký, 2014)

Belgian political professionalism is also shaped by the dominance of parties in the decision-making process. The country is considered a textbook example of *partitocracy*: extra-parliamentary party organizations are key institutions harboring the dominant party leaders and their supporting staff (De Winter & Dumont, 2006; Deschouwer, 2012). The distribution of direct and indirect sources of public funding reflects this situation. Not only do the parties receive direct financial support from the state, (parts of) the allowances of parliamentary party groups are transferred to parties' central offices (De Winter & Dumont, 2000; Van Bunder, 1993). The allocation of staff shows similar patterns. Although policy experts are often paid through parliamentary resources, they are integrated into study centers at party headquarters (Pattyn, Van Hecke, Brans, & Libeer, 2014; Pattyn, Van Hecke, Pirlot, Rihoux, & Brans, 2017). Moreover, these policy experts play a significant role in maintaining the dominance of the central party leadership over the parliamentary face of the party (De Winter & Dumont, 2006).

Analyzing the staff size of central party offices is relevant for several reasons. First, staff growth has not exclusively affected the ascendant *party in public office* (Katz & Mair, 1993, 2003). Long term analysis of staffing patterns in European democracies has indicated the transformation of central offices into professional campaign vehicles (Krouwel, 2012). Moreover, central offices still fulfill more classic functions of considerable importance such as the coordination between the branches of the party, candidate recruitment and membership administration. In addition to that, parties have direct control over their extra-parliamentary organization. Hence, staff size of central offices is the outcome of organizational choices and preferences. This area for agency is virtually non-existent in parliamentary offices: the amount of supporting staff is a direct product of their representational

weight. As we aim to explain differences between parties, this paper aims to identify the factors that can explain these organizational preferences.

#### **4. Data and method**

While studies on party staff generally suffer from a lack of data, our analysis is built upon reliable data on staff levels and staff expenses originating from the official financial statements of the Belgian political parties. Since 1989, all parties represented in the Belgian federal Parliament are required to submit a yearly report on their finances, including revenues, expenses and assets. As a result, detailed data on the financial situation of Belgian political parties is available for a period of more than 25 years. However, only since 1999 these financial reports are comparable between parties and over time. In 1999, the legislator determined a fixed list of party units for which finances had to be included in the financial statements (e.g. study centers, regional or provincial branches), while previously parties could freely decide on which units to include (Maddens et al., 2017). Moreover, party staff figures are only part of the statements from 1999 onwards.<sup>2</sup> Since 2015, however, revised legislation applies, as a result of which staff figures are currently no longer mentioned in the financial statements. As a result, data on staff levels and staff expenses is comparable for a sixteen-year period (1999-2014). In this study, we examine the ten parties which had to file an annual report during this complete time period.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the hypotheses formulated above will be tested through a combination of descriptive and explanatory quantitative analysis of a dataset containing 160 individual observations.

To investigate whether the theoretical expectations correspond to these cases, four indicators were derived from the available data. As these key indicators are derived from a source with a consistent format, we argue that they offer the best achievable data on the presence of human capital at Belgium's main parties. First, there is staff size containing all employees who are directly on the party payroll. These staff members often include personnel working at the party headquarters, study center and regional branches. Please note that staff members funded through indirect public resources (e.g. parliamentary or cabinet funding) are not included, neither are external consultants. Our second indicator is staff expenses, which represents the total amount of financial resources dedicated to staff

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<sup>2</sup> These staff figures only include the staff members on the payroll of the party, i.e. party staff employed and paid for by the party itself. These figures do not include staff members provided and paid for by the different Parliaments (e.g. MPs' personal staff and party group staff) and external consultants.

<sup>3</sup> These parties are Agalev/Groen!/Groen, CVP/CD&V, Ecolo, PRL/MR, PS, PSC/cdH, SP/Sp.a(-spirit), Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang, VLD/Open Vld and VU/N-VA.

on the party payroll. This indicator mirrors staff size: the same employees are included in this variable, while others are not counted. While staff size illustrates how much full time equivalents (from now on FTE) are employed through party means, staff expenses demonstrate how much a party spent on human capital in a given year.

Table 3: Description and operationalization of quantitative indicators for human capital of parties

	<b>Description</b>	<b>Operationalization</b>
<b>Staff size</b>	Degree of human capital intensity, measured by the absolute number of employees.	Number of full-time equivalents (FTE's) on party payroll.
<b>Staff expenses</b>	Degree of human capital intensity, measured by the absolute amount of financial resources dedicated to staff.	Financial resources spent on staff by party (expressed in €).
<b>Staff/Members</b>	The organizational balance between paid collaborators and volunteers.	Staff size divided by number of party members, multiplied by thousand.
<b>Share of staff expenses</b>	The percentage of financial resources spent on human capital.	Staff expenses divided by total expenses.

Although most of our analysis will focus on our core indicators, two extra variables were calculated to support our analysis. To complement staff size, staff was weighted in relation to membership using a staff-member ratio. In concreto, we calculated the number of employees for every thousand party members. Membership data for this indicator were derived from the MAPP project (van Haute, 2014). The interpretation of this indicator is connected to the evolution from labor-intensive to capital-intensive party organization. The higher the value of a party on this indicator, the further it is supposed to be removed from the ideal type of the mass membership party. From this point of view, the staff-member ratio, measures the distance between a party organization and its supposed social roots. As a result, this balance offers clues about the equilibrium (or lack thereof) between the day-to-day functioning of a party and its supporting members. While the staff-member ratio clarifies an additional aspect of the organizational side of human capital, we also rely on an extra indicator to interpret the financial side to party staff. The share of staff expenses identifies the percentage of financial resources

that are spent on staff by a given party. These values shed a light on the importance of the staff body for parties, regardless of the size of resources – allowing us to compare large and small parties.

## **5. Descriptive analysis**

In this section, we first explore the aggregate staff levels and staff expenses of the ten parties included in our dataset. As it can be expected, however, that substantial differences exist between the parties, we subsequently also make a more in-depth assessment of the parties separately.

### ***5.1. General trends: rising professionalism?***

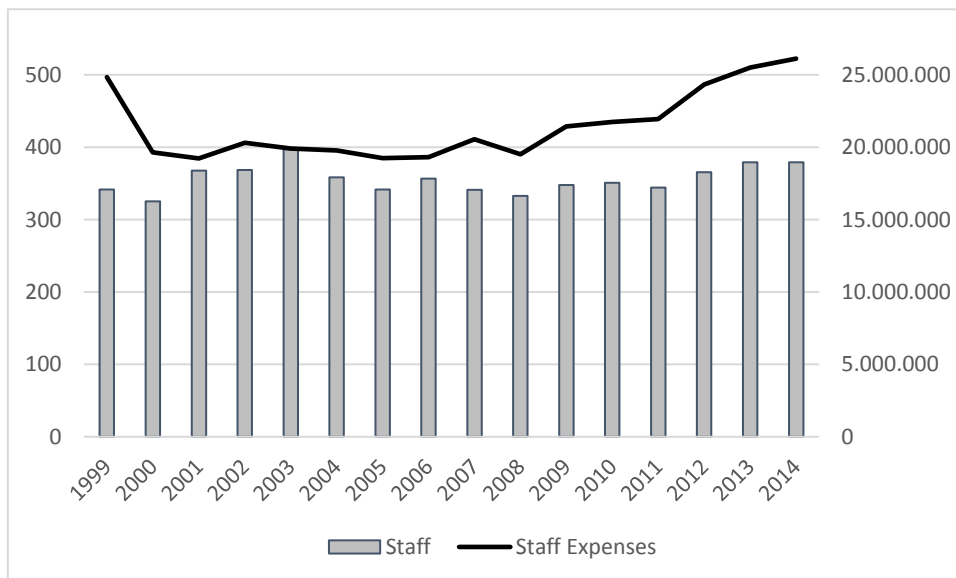
How has political professionalism evolved in Belgium between 1999 and 2014? As political scientists often consider professionalism to be ever increasing, we start our empirical analysis by testing this basic assumption. Potential trends were analyzed along four indicators related to political professionalism. All values should be interpreted as aggregates representing the sum of all ten parties included in our analysis. As illustrated by the staff numbers (Table 4), the total amount of Belgian party staff remained relatively stable. The sum of political collaborators directly employed by Belgian parties fluctuated between 325 and 379, showing no clear overall trend of increase or decrease. These staff size data do not support our first hypothesis, as we anticipated that Belgian parties would have grown more capital-intensive between 1999 and 2014.

However, staff expenses (our second key indicator) did undergo considerable evolution. Intuitively, one would expect the evolution of staff expenses to follow the same pattern as staff figures. Although this parallel holds for the period between 2000 and 2008, staff costs start to break away from staff figures in 2009 and keep increasing. This decoupling between staff and staff expenses is illustrated in Figure 1. As the share of staff expenses suggests, parties were not necessarily compelled to dig deeper into their pockets. They constantly spent 25 to 30 % of their expenses to personnel. An analysis of the party-specific evolutions in staff expenses (not shown here) illustrated that the lion share of this trend was caused by evolutions within a single party (PS). Therefore, we argue that the increase in staff expenses should not be considered a general trend.

Table 4: Staff numbers, number of members, staff expenses (indexed) and share of staff expenses; aggregate numbers for all ten parties, 1999-2014.

	<i>Staff</i>	<i>Members</i>	<i>Staff Expenses</i>	<i>Share of Staff Expenses (%)</i>
<b>1999</b>	341	462.404	24.833.644	28
<b>2000</b>	325	455.392	19.637.274	29
<b>2001</b>	368	427.214	19.223.781	24
<b>2002</b>	368	405.026	20.302.476	25
<b>2003</b>	397	396.560	19.900.646	20
<b>2004</b>	358	390.422	19.773.401	22
<b>2005</b>	342	401.884	19.240.901	25
<b>2006</b>	357	411.141	19.298.687	21
<b>2007</b>	341	381.377	20.543.344	22
<b>2008</b>	332	374.359	19.506.120	23
<b>2009</b>	348	364.524	21.440.035	23
<b>2010</b>	351	368.480	21.732.297	23
<b>2011</b>	344	373.234	21.947.863	27
<b>2012</b>	365	382.752	24.320.665	27
<b>2013</b>	379	378.317	25.496.246	31
<b>2014</b>	379	380.817	26.116.082	28

Figure 1: Staff numbers (left axis) and staff expenses (indexed, right axis), aggregate numbers for all ten parties, 1999-2014.



## ***5.2. Exploring interparty differences***

A party-specific analysis offers a more in-depth assessment of the human capital of Belgian parties. It enables to register differences of capital intensity between parties and illustrates how specific parties evolved between 1999 and 2014. We first examine the balance between the 10 parties, followed up by description of how they evolved throughout the studied period.

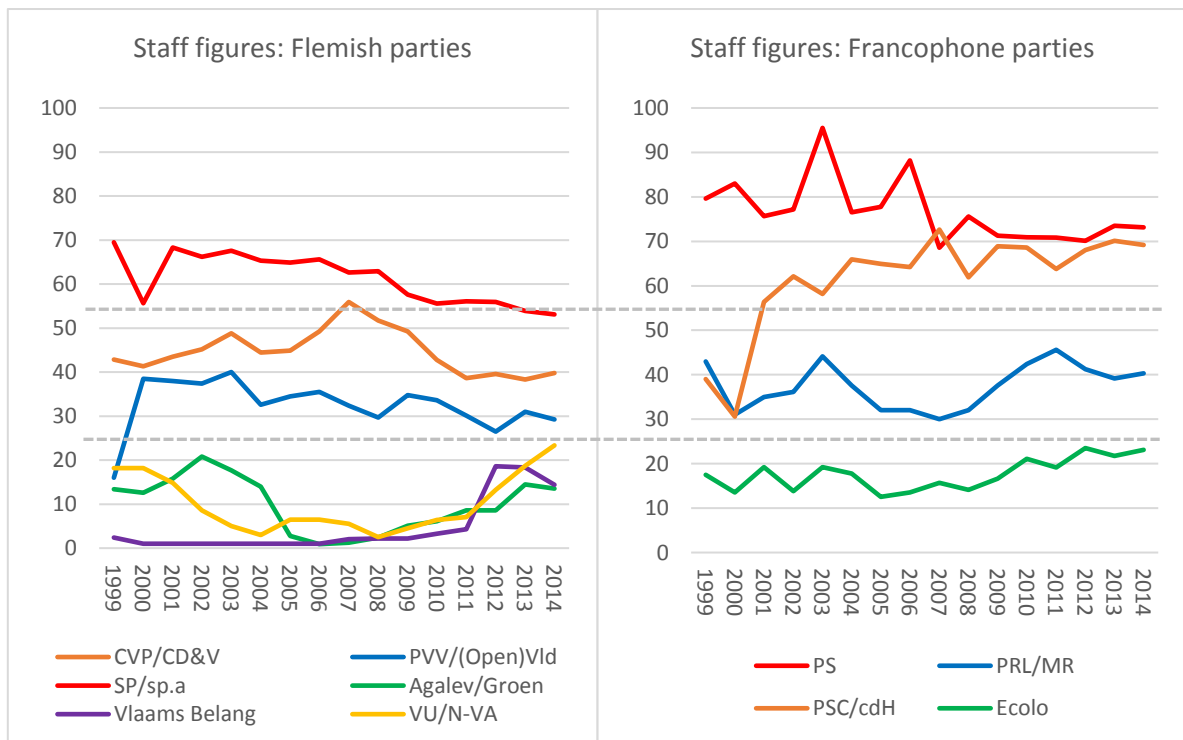
Interparty differences demonstrate a wide range of variation. As we observe the party averages for the period 1999-2014 for our key variables in Table 5, differences are generally quite large. Comparing the average staff size of Vlaams Belang (4,67 FTE) with PS (76,71 FTE), it is evident that the inner workings of these party organizations must bear little resemblance. The trimodal distribution of this variable suggests three more or less separated categories of parties. The first category, consisting of cdH and the socialist party family, employs the largest amount staff. The middle category harbors CD&V and the liberal party family, while the green party family, N-VA and Vlaams Belang have the smallest bodies of staff. Not surprisingly, these patterns largely correspond to differences between parties concerning staff expenses. Again, the category of 'big spenders' consists of socialists and Christian democrats, headed by PS. In the middle category, the liberal parties are joined by cdH and Ecolo. Groen, N-VA and Vlaams Belang spend the smallest amount of resources on staff.

Turning our attention towards evolutions between 1999 and 2014, we observe that most of these interparty differences are consistent through time (Figure 2). However, some parties did take on new positions. CdH changed gear in 2001, joining the socialist party family in the upper category. N-VA followed a similar strategy following its landslide victory in 2010. The party headed towards joining the liberal party family and CD&V in the middle category. Ecolo is characterized by a slow but steady growth of staff infrastructure. PS is a peculiar case: although the party retained a stable staff level, it invested quite heavily in staff remuneration after 2010 (supra). Sp.a carried out a gradual downsizing operation after 2001.

Table 5: Staff numbers, number of members, number of FTEs per 1000 members, staff expenses (indexed), share of staff expenses and cost per FTE (indexed), averages for all ten parties, 1999-2014.

	<i>Staff</i>	<i>Members</i>	<i>Staff Expenses</i>	<i>Share of Staff Expenses (%)</i>
<b>PS</b>	77	87.773	4.952.229	36
<b>PSC/cdH</b>	62	21.314	2.115.268	32
<b>SP/Sp.a</b>	61	58.571	3.005.902	30
<b>CVP/CD&amp;V<sup>4</sup></b>	44	80.008	3.047.131	28
<b>PRL/MR</b>	37	30.732	2.203.032	22
<b>VLD/Open Vld</b>	32	70.313	2.151.246	26
<b>Ecolo</b>	18	4.637	2.061.626	33
<b>Agalev/Groen!/Groen</b>	10	5.888	819.779	19
<b>VU/N-VA</b>	10	18.671	776.727	19
<b>Vlaams Blok/Belang</b>	5	19.213	312.650	4

Figure 2: Staff figures, Flemish parties and Francophone parties separately, 1999-2014.



<sup>4</sup> For the financial indicators, no party-specific data for CD&V and N-VA exist for 2007 and 2008. These parties submitted a combined annual account during this two-year period, since they formed an electoral cartel.

## 6. Explanatory analysis

To perform an explanatory analysis on the apparent differences between parties, a multivariate regression model was constructed with staff size as the dependent variable (expressed in number of FTE's). To test the four hypotheses directed at inter-party differences, the theoretical arguments we developed earlier were translated into independent variables: party system, party age, ideology and party strength. Party system was operationalized with a dummy variable, with the Flemish party system corresponding to the value of 1. The age of parties was applied as the amount of years since the founding of their extra-parliamentary organizations. For the traditional party families (socialist, Christian democrat and liberal), 1946 was used as a the point for the development of current party organizations. Ideological orientation was applied via the left-right scale of the Chapel Hill dataset (Bakker et al., 2015; Polk et al., 2017). Party strength was measured as a parties' share of the vote during the most recent election, either at the federal or regional level. As a complement, an additional variable was created to capture the dynamic impact electoral victory or loss. Hence, electoral performance measure the percentage of votes won or lost during the most recent election, either at the federal or regional level. In addition to these variables, the model controls for government status (in government = 1) and the specifics of election times (election year = 1). As the number of observations is limited (N=160), the simplicity of the model was consciously guarded. The number of independent variables was restricted to 7, resulting about 22 observations for each independent variable.

The model demonstrates significant effects for party age, party strength, ideology and electoral performance (Table 6) . The relationship between party age and staff size is positive: one year of party development translates into 0,86 FTE. The impact of party strength is similar: one percentage of the vote corresponds to 1,1 FTE. In contrast, electoral performance shows a negative effect: electoral progress of one percentage lowers staff size with 1,11 FTE. The same goes for ideology, staff size decreases with 4,22 FTE's for each unit on the left-right scale. All four effects are significant on the 0,001 level. With an adjusted r square of 0,78, the model account for 78% percent of the variance in staff size for our observations.

Table 6: Explaining staff size (Multivariate regression analysis, N=160)

Variable	Unstand. Coeff.	S.E.	Stand. Coeff.
Party system	-3.6	2.26	-0.07
Party age	0.86***	0.08	0.56
Ideology	-4.22***	0.45	-0.4
Party strength	1.10***	0.15	0.37
Electoral performance	-1.11***	0.21	-0.21
Government status	-2.84	2.59	-0.05
Election year	-0.22	1.88	-0.004
Constant	-0.33	3.93	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.78		

Note: \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

With the exception of the anticipated effect of party system, all hypotheses are supported by the explanatory model. Although Flemish parties do have less staff members, the difference with Francophone parties is not significant. As a result, hypothesis 1 is rejected. The anticipated effects of party age, ideology and party strength meet the expectations: older, more left-oriented and electorally stronger parties employ a significantly larger amount of staff members.

The analysis suggests that party age, ideological orientation and electoral strength have a considerable impact on the staff infrastructure of Belgian extra-parliamentary party organizations. In this section, we discuss the implications of these effects and reflect on what our observations can (and cannot) teach us about political professionalism at large. As stated earlier, the analysis aimed at specific aspects of professionalism: quantitative indicators for internal employees paid by the party payroll. Hence, the analysis does not include external consultants or employees paid by public institutions, nor does it cover address the kind of employees (bureaucrats vs. professionals) that were counted. These were conscious choices for delineating the empirical focus and operationalizing variables and results should be interpreted accordingly.

Our analysis demonstrates the long-lasting inheritance of the mass party model: older, left-oriented parties are more capital-intensive. Yet the process of professionalization is often assumed to be disadvantageous to this organizational model. The distribution of staff and resources within parties is a key component of the well-known cartelization thesis. It has been utilized as an indicator for both the negligence of the party on the ground and the ascendancy of the party in public office (Katz, 2002; Katz & Mair, 1993, 2003). However, the extra-parliamentary organization is of course the most obvious target for professionalization for parties adhering to the mass membership model. Older parties still have the highest membership figures compared to others (Table 5). Furthermore, maintaining a party

on the ground with elaborate membership structures and subunits simply requires organizational staff. These observations corroborate with existing empirical research: left-oriented parties reportedly spend more on organization and less on campaigning compared to parties on the right (Smulders, 2016). This might imply that more market-oriented parties on the right represent a different type of professionalism, relying more on external consultants. Such differences cannot be covered through an analysis of the internal professionalism of central offices. In the same vein, our observations offer no clues on the qualitative aspects of staff members (e.g. skill level) in older, left-oriented parties.

In addition to party age and ideology, the strength of a party has a decisive impact on the capital-intensity of central offices. Not unexpectedly, the parties capturing the most votes (and public funding) construct the most elaborate staff infrastructures. For starters, the need for expertise and support by paid staff is higher, since the strongest parties are constantly at the center of the political arena. Yet more importantly, parties with a larger vote share have a greater amount of public resources (both direct and indirect) at their disposal than their smaller counterparts. This effect is clearly illustrated by the significant impact of both party strength and electoral performance in the explanatory model. The influence of party strength is clear-cut, while the negative impact of electoral performance illuminates how Belgian party organizations freely allocate the available public resources for staffing purposes. In short, the party payroll (extra-parliamentary organization) and parliamentary party group resources behave as communicating vessels. When parties make electoral progress, the additional resources of the party in public office are wielded to downsize staff costs on the party payroll. Vice versa, party payrolls become more leveraged in staff costs after electoral defeat. In doing so, Belgian party organizations appear to aim for the minimization of staff costs within their own organizations.

To sum up, this analysis demonstrates how older, left-oriented and electorally strong parties have the most capital-intensive central party offices in Belgium. Since the analysis only investigated specific aspects of professionalism (quantitative, internal, central office), this does not necessarily mean that other parties can be considered less professional. More likely, other parties embody a different type of political professionalism. The results only illustrate that newer, right-oriented and electorally weaker parties rely on less internal staff members at the central office. These other types of political professionalism might rely on more external consultants or have a smaller internal staff with higher levels of expertise. Moreover, the organizational center of gravity of these parties might rather be concentrated in the public face of the party (parliament, government). As for now, we can only speculate how these aspects of professionalism are affected by party age, ideological orientation and electoral size. Little is known about the factors that shape decisions for hiring external consultants and our knowledge about the qualitative aspects of professionalism (e.g. skill levels) remains very limited.

Future research could clarify to what extent these other dimensions of professionalism complement the capital-intensity of extra-parliamentary organizations.

## **7. Conclusion**

In this paper, we analyzed the staff levels and staff expenses of political parties in Belgium from 1999 to 2014. The central focus was on the permanent staff of parties, i.e. personnel on the party payrolls, excluding party group staff (paid for by the parliaments) and external consultants. Our data were gathered from the parties' annual financial statements. The major advantage of this approach is that these are official data that are comparable over time and between parties, given several legal obligations, while data for previous empirical studies were generally gathered by means of surveys and party contacts (Katz & Mair, 1992; Krouwel, 2012; Poguntke et al., 2016). This latter method inevitably bears a risk with regard to reliability and comparability of data, as it often allows parties to decide autonomously which staff members to include in their staff figures (such as party group staff). Therefore, the present study can offer a first systematic and reliable analysis of political party staff in Belgium.

The results illustrate that quantitative professionalism did not increase between 1999 and 2014 and identify party age, ideology, electoral strength and electoral performance as the key determinants for the human capital of Belgian central party offices. The temporal evolution of our indicators does not show a substantial process of professionalization within extra-parliamentary party organization after 1999. Although earlier empirical studies reported increasing capital-intensity from a long-term perspective (Farrell & Webb, 2002; Krouwel, 2012), Belgian parties appear to have reached a point of saturation, at least in the short term.

More importantly, this paper adds a new dimension to the empirical study of professionalization by assessing the party characteristics that explain variation in capital intensity within countries. In the Belgian case, especially older, left-oriented and electorally strong parties have elaborate staff infrastructures at their central offices. As the analysis focused on specific aspects of political professionalization (staff and financial resources spent within the extra-parliamentary organization), it seems likely that other parties might invest more in alternative forms of professionalism. For instance, these parties might rely more on external consultants, public party offices or have a smaller staff with higher skill levels. The explanatory model also illustrated how well-resourced party organizations behave in an environment with little structural inhibitions on their organizational preferences. For instance, the impact of electoral performance on human capital unveils that parties aim to externalize

the cost of their human capital by downsizing the central office when public offices can absorb additional staff. This effect cuts both ways: extra-parliamentary parties will on their turn incorporate more staff when public resources wane.

Our findings raise new questions for empirical research on professionalization. First, future research could investigate whether the same explanatory factors (party age, ideology and party strength) are at play in other nations. Second, the existing line of investigation with a focus on the quantitative aspects professionalism (amount of staff) should be complemented by research on qualitative aspects such as the characteristics of staff members (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017; Webb & Fisher, 2003). It seems unlikely that the quantitative measurements used in this paper and others (Farrell & Webb, 2000; Katz & Mair, 1993; Krouwel, 2012; Poguntke et al., 2016) are an appropriate indicator or proxy for more qualitative aspects. One might well expect the opposite to be the case, with parties developing different types of organizational professionalism.

However, the relationship between these conceptual dimensions continues to be a blind spot. Until such a complementary analysis receives empirical attention, our understanding of political professionalism will remain one-sided. With this analysis of the human capital of political parties in Belgium, we nevertheless hope to have taken a first important step in the direction of more profound and in-depth research into the importance of political party staff.

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