

DECLINE OF MAINSTREAM PARTIES

PARTY RESPONSES AFTER ELECTORAL LOSS IN FLANDERS

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Jasmien Luypaert

Jasmien.Luypaert@ugent.be

Abstract

During the last few decades, mainstream parties have faced a strong electoral decline. Mainstream parties responded on this change in electoral outcome with party change. In this paper, two categories of responses were studied in a dichotomic framework of mainstream- and niche party competition. First, organizational changes were examined as changes in the organizations' decision-making structure. This was measured through a document analysis of the mainstream parties' statutory rules. Second, programmatic changes were examined as a change in policy position and salience of the niche parties' main issue in the mainstream parties' manifestos. Data of the Comparative Manifesto Project were used. I examined the responses of the three Flemish mainstream parties (SP,CVP and PVV/VLD) during the 1990s. All three mainstream parties responded on the change in electoral outcome with both programmatic and organizational change. However, programmatic change was implemented more than organizational change. Furthermore, there was variation in the direction of change between the three mainstream parties. This research has important implications for the analysis of multiparty competition and the party change literature

Keywords: [mainstream party, niche party, electoral loss, organizational change, programmatic change]

Introduction

Mainstream parties in Western Europe are facing significant electoral losses (figure 1). Since 1950, the combined average vote share of 12 West-European mainstream parties declined with 23,5 percent points. Despite this declining trend, the extent of the descent differs each decade. It slowly started in the 1960s, with 1,6 percent points. In the 1990s, it reached a strong decline with 7 percent points. In the most recent decade, this descent is the strongest present with 9 percent points and the mainstream parties are at their lowest level in history with 58% of the vote share. In the 1950s, they still reached 83,5% (Luypaert, 2019). Whereas mainstream parties were long electoral dominant players, they are now facing strong competition of niche parties. In this paper, mainstream parties are parties that focus merely on socio-economic issues, compete to one another in historical existing lines of political division and treat a broad range of issues.

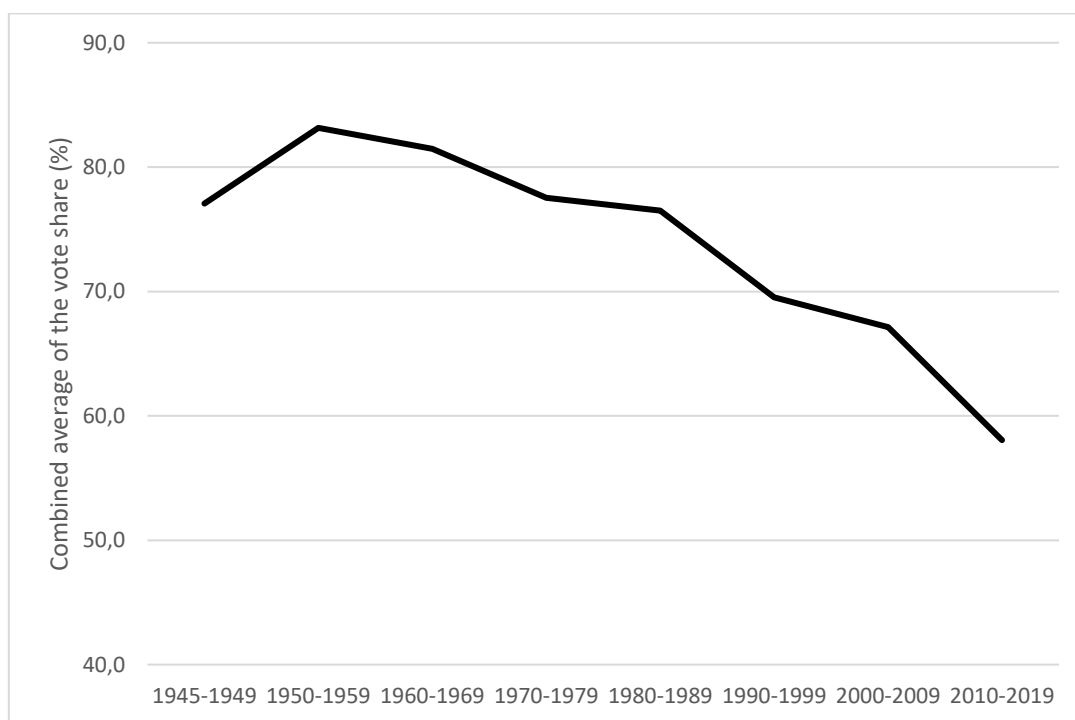


Figure 1 Decline of the combined average of the vote share of West European mainstream parties (Luypaert, 2019).

The factors causing this decline have been widely studied before. There has first been a change in party competition, where policy issues replace long-established societal cleavages (Hobolt & de Vries, 2015). Second, there has been a changing party system since the 1960s. Parties have transitioned towards a catch-all party and centripetal electoral competition occurred (Panebianco, 1988). Competition between parties is less about ideological differences, but through perception, imago and charisma of political leaders (Krouwel, 2003). Additionally, or maybe because of these changes, electoral volatility has increased (Harmel & Janda, 1994). Remarkably, the integrated study of mainstream parties' responses to this declining trend is insufficiently studied before. This is perhaps due to the recent drastic changes in electoral outcomes. 20 years ago, both Mair (1999) and Meguid (2002) have stated that the decline of mainstream parties was under control and predicted that mainstream parties would remain dominant. However, this decline in electoral vote share was never as strong as before. Furthermore, mainstream parties do not remain dominant in this decade. Both in Belgium, Germany as the Netherlands, radical right parties are in the top three of parties that obtained most of the electoral vote share in the recent elections. In Flanders, the first two positions are occupied by two niche parties: N-VA and Vlaams Belang. Electoral circumstances affect society since politics and its environment are continuously in interaction with each other (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016). Growing electoral instability can be expected to cause growing instability for society as the formation and maintenance of stable coalitions become more difficult. As a consequence, it becomes more difficult to find consensus regarding policy problems (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016). Therefore it is crucial to examine to what degree parties counter this growing instability (Panebianco, 1988). Both Panebianco (1988) and Janda (1990) have argued that parties will implement changes when they face strong electoral loss. However, I am aware that electoral losses is not a sufficient explanation for party change. A change of dominant faction, a leadership change or differing party goals may be other explanations for party change (Harmel & Janda, 1994). This paper focus nevertheless on party reforms as mainstream party responses to their electoral losses. I will focus on two types of responses given by mainstream parties: programmatic and organizational change. Both responses are examined in comparison with the organizational and programmatic positions of the niche parties during

the 1990s in Flanders. This paper aims to answer the following four research questions: RQ₁: Which programmatic responses did the Flemish mainstream parties implement? RQ₂: Which organizational responses did the Flemish mainstream parties implement? RQ₃: Which of these two responses were implemented the most? RQ₄: When were the most responses implemented by each mainstream party?

Flanders is an interesting case as the mainstream parties faced one of the strongest declines in Western Europe. During the 1950s, the combined average (92,5%) of all Belgian mainstream parties was the third highest out of twelve European countries. During the most recent decade they have the third lowest combined average (52,9%). The 1990s is the second decade where mainstream parties faced the strongest electoral loss (8 percent points compared to 1980s) (Luypaert, 2019). Furthermore, in this period a “frantic search for change and renewal can be witnessed” (Deschouwer, 2004, p179). The organizational and programmatic responses of the Flemish mainstream parties are examined through a document analysis of the parties statutory regulations and party manifesto coding (CMP). The findings are that all three mainstream parties implemented both programmatic as well as organizational reforms. Programmatic changes were implemented more than organizational changes by all three parties. Nevertheless, there was variation between the mainstream parties in the amount of responses and direction of the responses. PVV implemented the most changes, followed by CVP. SP implemented the least changes.

In following section mainstream and niche parties will be conceptualized. Second, I will argue why mainstream parties would implement changes after electoral loss based on the theoretical models of Mair et al. (2004), Harmel & Janda, (1994), Janda (1990) and Panebianco (1988). Third, programmatic and organizational responses will be discussed in more detail. The paper ends with a discussion of the most important findings and their implications.

Decline of mainstream parties and responses

Conceptualization of mainstream parties

In the broadest sense, this paper examines party competition in the dichotomic view of niche and mainstream parties. Many scholars defined these two different types of parties, focusing more on the niche party concept. As a result, a negative definition will be used to define mainstream parties. Adams et al (2006) made a distinction based on party families. Niche parties are defined as all parties being member of communist, green and extreme nationalist parties. Wagner (2012) developed a framework where the number of issues handled by the parties determine whether they are a mainstream or a niche party. Niche parties will handle a small set of non-economic issues, while mainstream parties will do the opposite. In a more recent article, Meyer and Miller (2015) saw niche parties as an ideal type where the nicheness may fluctuate over time. According to these authors, different parties can have a different grade of nicheness, whereas a niche party is the party where the nicheness is strongest present. The objective of this paper is to examine mainstream parties' responses in a period of their electoral losses and niche parties' success. The definition of Meguid (2005) is the most comprehensive one as it emphasizes multiple areas. Furthermore, Meguid involves the perception of the voters. This is important as I examine the responses after electoral loss, thus after a changing political choice of voters. According to Meguid (2005), niche parties differ from mainstream parties on three areas. First, niche parties reject traditional class-based orientation of politics. Their approaching issues are beyond economic demands. Second, the issues of niche parties do not often coincide with existing lines of political division. Third, niche parties treat only a restricted set of issues. While this quantity increases in party manifestos, the perception of the voters as single issue parties still exists. They do not rely on existing broad ideological positions. Based on this negative definition of Meguid (2005), mainstream parties are parties that focus merely on socio-economic issues, compete to one another in historical existing lines of political division and treat a broad range of issues. Adapting this definition on the Flemish context between 1987-1999 three mainstream parties can be distinguished: the social democratic sp, the Christian democratic CVP, the liberal PVV/VLD and three niche parties: AGALEV, Volksunie and Vlaams Blok. The responses of

mainstream parties will be examined when the niche parties are successful. However, Volksunie will not be included in our analysis as their main political issues were decentralization and granting the regions more autonomy. These issues were already adapted by the mainstream parties as the federalization reforms had already been started in 1970 (Hooghe, 1993). This analysis focusses on the differences in responses between the three mainstream parties towards the success of niche parties. The characteristics of niche parties are discussed as a point of direction regarding the differences between mainstream parties.

Party competition and party responses

This paper focusses on party competition and the consequences for individual mainstream parties in the above mentioned dichotomic framework¹. Party competition is “*an institution in which parties strategically cooperate or contest as political actors to gain political power*” Franzmann (2011, p320). It is affected by changes in electoral markets. Three examples are structural dealignment, the increased attention of post material issues and the prominence of issue competition (Mair et al., 2004). These changes influence electoral outcome, or electoral change. We argue that this electoral change influences party reform, conform the “performance theory of party change” (Janda, 1990). This theory of party change states that “parties are more likely to change their tactics, structures, issue orientations, organizational identity, and goals under conditions of adversity than under electoral success or equilibrium” (Janda, 1990, p17). As mentioned in the introduction, one remarkable electoral change is this decline of mainstream parties. In this paper, party reforms will be studied as mainstream party responses to their electoral losses. Figure 2 is a schematic model of this theoretical outline. It is supplemented with the theory of the three phases of party change of Panebianco (1980). The first phase of Panebianco’s cycle is an environmental shock where already existed preconditions for change are catalyzed. The second phase is discrediting the old coalition which was unable to handle the crisis. It will led to a change of dominant faction. We do not discuss this in detail, because it is often seen as

¹ There are next to this dichotomic model other useful classifications for party competition. One example is the Downsian spatial theory (Downs, 1957). But given the recent gap between the vote share of mainstream parties and the vote share of niche parties, the dichotomy between the two types of parties is preferable.

an indirect source and ‘a sufficient, though not necessary, condition for party change’ (Harmel et al., 1995, p5). Third, restructuring within the party occurs. This third phase will be discussed most. It can be separated in two categories. First, the rules of internal competition are changed. One example is a revised party leader election. Second, the party goals are redefined. This can be strategic, as well as programmatic (Panebianco, 1988). As mentioned before, we focus also on this programmatic dimension of mainstream parties. In following sections, we will discuss changes in electoral outcome, party responses, programmatic and organizational change in more detailed.

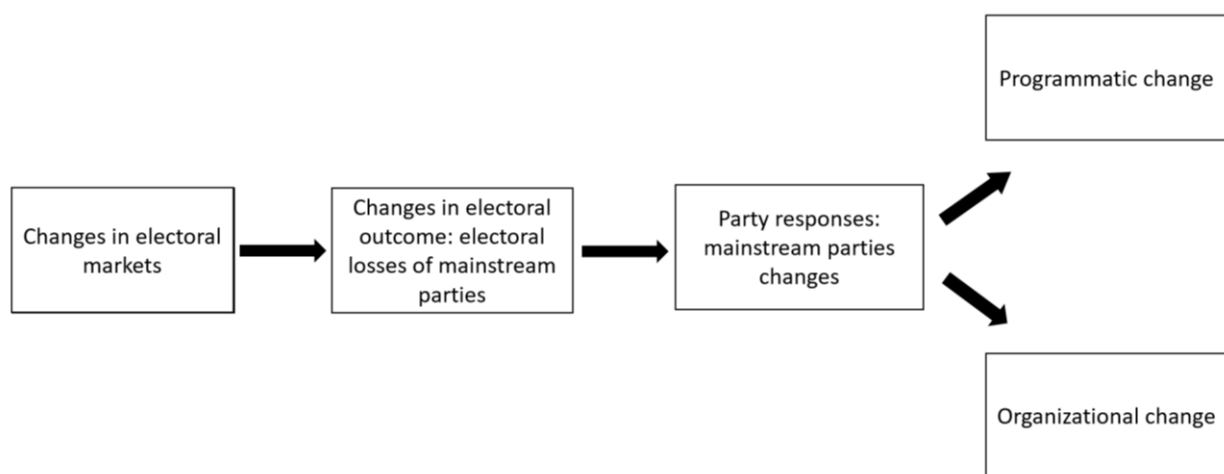


Figure 2 Schematic overview party change after electoral loss, based on Mair et al (2004), Janda (1990) & Panebianco (1988).

a. Changes in electoral outcomes

Previous mentioned changes in electoral markets affects electoral outcome. As discussed in the introduction, mainstream parties have faced strong electoral losses in the 1990s. This electoral defeat is often seen as “the mother of party change” (Janda, 1990). Parties need often an environmental shock for party change to happen since they are by nature conservative (Panebianco, 1988). Political parties are seen as conservative organizations that are opposed against change for three reasons. First, the political movements of parties are constrained with their identified issue positions. Second, their social appeals are constrained with their dependence on the support of certain social groups. Third, change threatens the organizational cohesion of parties, which are built on delicate power bases (Janda, 1990). As a consequence, they only implement

changes when there is a strong environmental pressure, like electoral defeat (Panebianco, 1988; Harmel & Janda, 1994). As mentioned in the introduction, other factors may also explain party change. Examples are the coalition of the willingness, leadership change and differing party goals (Harmel & Janda, 1994). Following the performance theory of party change, “the poorer the party’s performance, the greater the pressure for party change” (Janda, 1990, p9). Regarding this overview, we expect that the bigger the electoral losses are, the more of these changes parties will implement. Conform the electoral results of the parties during the 1990s (table 1), we expect following hypotheses:

H₄

SP and CVP will implement more changes in the period of 1991-1995 compared to the period of 1995-1999.
PVV/VLD will implement fewer changes than SP and CVP.

Table 1: electoral results

Year	SP	CVP	PVV/VLD	AGALEV	VB
1987	14,9	19,5	11,6	4,5	1,9
1991	12	16,8	12	4,9	6,6
1995	12,6	17,2	13,2	4,4	7,8
1999	9,6	14,1	14,3	7	9,9

b. Party change as response

Party change is a change coming directly from a group decision (Harmel & Janda, 1994). To distinguish it from any alternation, the change must be in direct control of the party. Examples are changes in party rules, structures, policies and tactics. The dominant coalition makes these changes under pressure from others inside the party or it may be a new dominant coalition with a new confirmation. They can be distinguished in this way from any alternation (Harmel & Janda, 1994).

Mair, Müller and Plassers (2004) also give five² possible party change categories as responses which parties can give to this electoral change. First, there may be strategic responses towards the voters. They may rethink their electoral target groups whereby old target groups are replaced by new ones, can add new party groups of voters or they can intensify their ties to their core voter group. The repoliticization of women's issues in the 1970s is one example of this response. Second, there also may be a strategic response towards their competing parties. Parties can reconsider which their targeting opponents or their allies are. Third, parties may seek for institutional change in the country where they operate. They may manipulate their electoral system and change the rules of the game. However, this change is often only possible when there is a multi-party consensus. One example may be to increase the electoral threshold. Fourth, there may be organizational responses where internal power distribution is rearranged (Panebianco, 1988). Examples are new procedures of leadership selection and candidate selection. As last option, parties may respond with programmatic, ideological and policy oriented responses. They can reposition themselves on issues in their manifestos (Mair et al, 2004). These last two responses (programmatic and organizational change) will be discussed in more detail. Furthermore, we will look at which of these two responses the different mainstream parties gave to their electoral decline.

Programmatic change

Programmatic change may be seen as a remedy for electoral loss since electoral support and backing of the party activists are based on these programmatic stances (Adams et al, 2006; Spoon, 2009 & Aldrich, 1983). By changing them, parties are able to respond to changes in electoral markets. Furthermore, mainstream parties are more likely to change their political program in line with public opinion shifts (Adams et al, 2006). Spoon, Hobolt and De Vries (2014) studied the issue mobilization of green issues in particular. Their findings

² The authors give also the possibility of a non-response. Parties may choose not to respond to electoral change, this may simply be because they have other goals. One possible division is between policy seeking and vote seeking goals (Somer-Topcu, 2009). However, as we work within the performance theory of party change (Janda, 1990), we do not examine this response.

are that green issues will be more mobilized if there is electoral opportunity for the opponent parties and if the ecological parties form an electoral threat for the opponent parties. By this means, there can be expected that the winning niche parties of the previous elections have an impact on the program of mainstream parties. Therefore, a comparison of the programmatic change of mainstream parties towards the niche parties is valuable. A first **hypothesis** in this regard is that mainstream parties will converge to the winning competitor in terms of policy positions at election $t+1$, when they faced the most electoral loss in election t (van Spanje, 2010). Despite its electoral gains, PVV/VLD may implement changes as this party may have other party goals.

H₁:

The policy position of SP and CVP will be more converged with the niche parties' in 1995 as in 1999.

The policy positions of PVV/VLD will show fewer convergence with the niche parties'.

There are two categories of programmatic responses parties can give to changes in electoral markets: change in salience and a change in policy position (Mair et al, 2004). Parties may differ in the attention they give to an issue, which is the salience approach (Dolezal et al, 2014). They can also move their position on the various competition dimensions, which is a change in policy position (Mair et al., 2004). Niche party success causes both for a change in salience of the niche party's issue as the policy position regarding the issue (Abou-Chadi, 2014, Meguid, 2005). Abou-Chadi (2014) already examined how the ecological and radical right parties differs in their impact. His results are that the success of radical right will cause an increase in emphasizes of the multiculturalism issue, while the success of ecological parties will cause a decrease in salience of environmental protection. Abou-Chadi (2014) focusses mainly on differences between the impact of both niche parties. This paper will focus more on the differences between the mainstream parties' responses. Both policy position as salience will be examined.

In terms of policy positions of the party, parties may also follow the demand and supply side in politics. One approach may be to work on Downs' one-dimensional left-right scale on the socio-economic cleavage (Downs, 1957). However, regarding the dichotomy of niche- and mainstream parties, other issues need to be examined instead of only the classic socio-economic issues. As a consequence, party competition in a multidimensional spatial continuum and the particular issues of niche parties will be examined. Looking at the supply side, voters will vote at the ideology of the party closest to these issues (Abou-Chadi, 2014). As mentioned above, niche party success causes both for a change in salience of the niche party's issue as the policy position towards the issue (Abou-Chadi, 2014). Following Meguid (2005) her Modified Spatial theory, mainstream parties may react to the issues presented by niche parties in three ways. They can choose to handle an **accommodative**, an **adversial** or a **dismissive strategy**. In the first case, when a party addresses a new (or niche) issue, other parties can copy this policy position. This accommodative strategy is an ideal type, as mainstream parties may converge more towards a niche party, while not being completely converged. With the second strategy, parties will handle an opposite policy position as the new party. Handling a dismissive strategy, the established parties will choose to ignore the issue. But mainstream parties also may choose to emphasize "hot issues" more (Mair et al, 2004), which is not mentioned by Meguid (2005). Both strategies refer to the saliency of an issue. The above mentioned remark on the accommodative strategy as an ideal type also accounts for the other three strategies. In this paper, the direction towards the niche party will be handled. There will be looked at which of these four strategies mainstream parties applied in their response towards niche parties' success. The adversial and accommodative strategy are handled together, as they both refer to the policy position taken. Convergence is in Meguid's terminology an accommodative strategy. The policy position of mainstream parties will stand closer to these of niche parties regarding the niche party's issue. Divergence, on the other hand, is what Meguid calls an adversial strategy. As mentioned above, one of the research questions is: "Which programmatic responses did the Flemish mainstream parties implement?" Both a change in policy position and salience of mainstream parties regarding the niche parties' main issues will be examined.

However, not every mainstream party will respond in the same way to the electoral success of niche parties. Three factors (see figure 3) explain variation in the mainstream parties' strategy towards niche parties: the previous explained electoral decline at the previous election, the ideology of the mainstream party itself and the ideology of the niche party (Abou-Chadi, 2014). The two remaining factors of variation will be handled together in the next section.

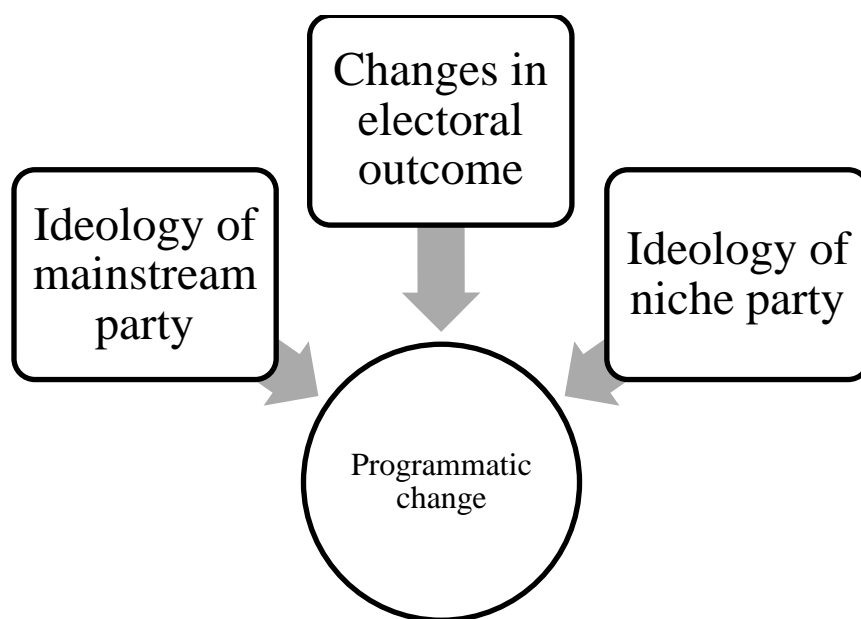


Figure 3 Variation factors in programmatic change, based on Abou-Chadi (2014)

The willingness to change their program depends on the ideology of the mainstream party itself. From a political marketing perspective, parties want to stay congruent to their history. They will try to maintain the balance between attracting new segments and keeping their traditional core voters (Lilleker & Lees-Marshment, 2005). For this reason, they will emphasize the issue and converge more to the winning niche party a competitor closest to their own ideology and history on the spatial continuum (Abou-Chadi, 2014). SP, as a center-left party, will be more influenced by AGALEV, while PVV/VLD, as a moderate-right party will be more influenced by Vlaams Blok.

H₄:

Sp will more converge towards AGALEV (ecological party) on ecological issues.

Sp will emphasize ecological issues more than multiculturalism issues.

PVV/VLD will converge more towards Vlaams Blok (radical right) on multiculturalism issues.

PVV/VLD will emphasize multiculturalism issues more than environmental issues.

c. **Organizational change**

Parties may respond to changes in electoral markets with an internal change, focusing on the party's organization. Together with the programmatic changes, the organizational changes of the Flemish mainstream parties in 1990 will be examined. As Panebianco (1988) noticed, every organization undergoes a constant amount of changes. To avoid that any alteration can be considered as a change, it is crucial to define organizational change. According to Panebianco (1988), fundamental alterations are central,

“which change the organization's authority structure, i.e. its organizational order. (...) It modifies relations among the organization's internal groups, altering the distribution of control over incentives and restructuring vertical power games (the elite-follower exchanges), and thus horizontal power games (the elite-elite exchanges) as well.” (Panebianco, 1988, p 243).

In this paper, organizational changes are changes in organizational decision-making structures. Adapting new rules regarding the organizational decision-making structures can influence power games and provides a change in the organization's authority structure. To see if the mainstream parties' internal organizational decision-making structure changes, there will be looked at the vertical power distribution of the party. It indicates the degree of freedom of choice for the leadership of the party. If the vertical integration is high, the party leadership will be dominated on issues like centralization of power, new methods of candidate selection and new methods of candidate selection (Panebianco, 1988; Schumacher & Giger, 2018). When a party has a decentralized policy decision making process, it means that authority is transferred from the party leader(s) or the intra-parliamentary group towards extra-parliamentary groups, including members and vice

versa (Strom, 1990). Mainstream parties may be responding to the change in electoral markets with new methods of candidate selection. They can open their selection process towards a more inclusive or exclusive form. Following Rahat and Hazan (2001), there are five possibilities of whom the selectorate consists. The most inclusive selectorate is the electorate of the mainstream party, the most exclusive is when one, non-selected party leader chooses which candidate stands on the candidate list (see figure 4).



Figure 4 Party selectorates, Rahat and Hazan, 2001, p301.

Third, there may be a change in the party leaders selectorate. Cross & Blais (2012) finds that electoral loss partly explains this reform. The selection of the party leader can be through the head of the party or through elections (Wauters, 2009). The change can be more inclusive or more exclusive. Following Kenig (2009), there are six possible party leader selectorates. The most inclusive is the party's electorate, the most exclusive is letting the party leader choose by one individual (see figure 5).

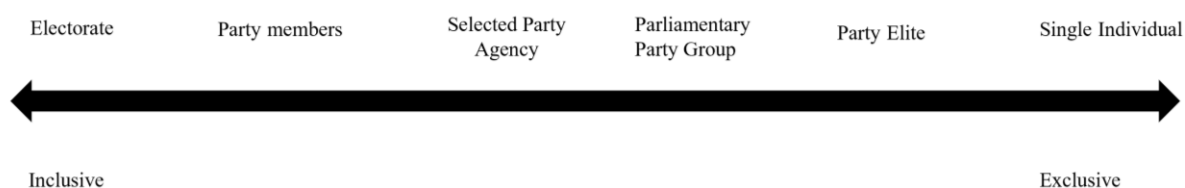


Figure 5 Party leader selectorate. Source: Kenig (2009)

This vertical power distribution in internal decision-making process can be presented on a continuum, with one extreme activist-based party and the other extreme leadership-dominated party. In activist-based parties, activists will dictate policy formulation, candidate selection and leadership selection and vice versa

(Schumacher, de Vries & Vis, 2013). On this continuum, the position of both niche parties differs. The nationalist parties (as Vlaams Blok) are seen as highly leadership-dominated, while ecological parties like AGALEV are more activist-based. One research question is: “Which organizational responses did the Flemish mainstream parties implement?”. This will be examined through a change of position on the activist-based or leadership-dominated continuum. However, the elections in 1990s are often seen as protest voting elections where many votes were given out of protest and dissatisfaction with the existing political system (Maddens & Hajnal, 2001). We expect that none of the mainstream parties will move towards a leadership-dominated model. Instead, mainstream parties will try to bridge the gap between citizen and politics with implementing a more inclusive form of decision-making structure.

H₂

All three mainstream parties will converge more towards an activist-based party.

There will be variation to the extent in which mainstream parties will develop towards a more activist-based party. As mentioned above, political parties are conservative organizations and consists of delicate power bases (Janda, 1990). Parties will try to balance between keeping their organizational cohesion and implementing change. Therefore, the original position of the mainstream parties explains the variation between them. The three mainstream parties families are located in the center close to each other. In this center, social democratic parties are more activist-based because they have stronger formal ties with activist groups and they try to include these activist groups in their decision-making processes. Christian democratic parties are the most leadership-dominated of the three mainstream parties, followed by the liberals (Schumacher, Vis & de Vries, 2013).

H₂:

SP will converge the most towards an activist-based party.

CVP will converge the least towards an activist-based party.

In the next section, there will be examined if there is a change in organizational decision-making structure and to which direction this change goes. We do this by examining the mainstream parties organizational position on the centralization of power, new methods of candidate selection and new methods of leader selection.

Data, methods and operationalization

One research question is which of the two types of responses the Flemish mainstream parties adapted the most in the 1990s. To answer this, we first have to map if the mainstream parties implemented these responses. We do a document analysis of the party statutory of the Flemish mainstream parties to examine organizational change. The programmatic changes are measured through the manifestos of the Flemish mainstream parties during the multiple campaigns at the general elections in the 1990s. We use data of the Comparative Manifesto project, which is a project that codes party manifestos in 42 countries. The CMP is the most complete dataset and measures policy positions and salience of almost every party in all the elections after 1945. These policy positions are developed from a content analysis of parties' electoral manifestos (CMP, Manifesto Project Database). It is based on the coding of quasi-sentences following 56 issue categories (Abou-Chadi, 2014). The data on each issue represents the percentage of the total amount of statements compromised by each issue category. In this way, the data is standardized with regard to the manifesto length (Kim & Fording, 2003). The dataset is appropriate for this study because it measures both the salience as the policy positions. Furthermore, the operationalization of programmatic and organizational change will be discussed in more detail.

Programmatic change

The policy positions and the salience of the three mainstream parties on the niche parties' main issue are studied in comparison with the policy position of the niche party on its main issue during the three general Belgian elections in 1990s. We examine three mainstream parties and two niche parties on two niche issues.

The first niche party is the radical right Vlaams Blok where multiculturalism is their main issue. As mentioned above, CMP-data measures both the salience as the positions of parties on a issue. Both are measured in a different way. On an issue, parties can emphasize a positive or negative stance. These different stances on the issue are seen as paired nature. Issue salience is the sum of both (Abou-Chadi, 2014). For the issue on multiculturalism, this will be multiculturalism (pos) + multiculturalism (neg), coded by CMP as:

$$\text{Multiculturalism(salience)} = \text{per607} + \text{per608}$$

I use the same measuring method as Kim and Fording (2003), which also used the paired nature of the manifesto data. However, in order to develop a measure of policy positions that is independent of salience, the share of a positive category must be subtracted from the share of a negative category. To obtain net policy position, this difference must be divided with the total percentage of statements regarding this issue (the salience). A parties' policy position will range from -1 to 1, where a larger score indicates larger support of the party towards more rightist policies towards the issue.

$$\text{Multiculturalism(position)}: (\text{per608} - \text{per607}) / (\text{per608} + \text{per607}).$$

The second examined niche party is the Flemish ecological party, AGALEV. Their main issue is environmental protection (per501). To measure the salience and policy positions we need both a "positive" and a "negative" category. However, "environmental protection" does not have a natural pair. I will follow

the operationalization of Abou-Chadi (2014) and use 'productivity' (per410) as the negative stance. Productivity is used as an opposite of environmental protection, as proponents of industrial productivity and economic growth 'can be regarded as opposed to a focus on a pollution-free environment and more sustainable growth' (Abou-Chadi, 2014, p425). Policy positions and salience on the theme of environmental protection are measured through the following formula:

Environmental protection (salience): $\text{per501} + \text{per410}$

Environmental protection (position): $(\text{per501} - \text{per410}) / (\text{per501} + \text{per410})$.

The policy positions and salience of the three mainstream parties will be compared to each other on the niche parties' main issues. However, the CMP data shows some shortcomings on niche party issue coding and was earlier criticized by some scholars (Krouwel, 1999; Budge & Klingemann, 2001). It is often seen as counter intuitive and against political reality. Extremist parties can be presented more moderately than they actually are (Krouwel, 1999; Budge & Klingemann, 2001). According to Budge and Klingemann (2001), the cause of this deviation is that extreme parties presents themselves more moderately in their manifestos as they hope to reach a broader electorate. The data of AGALEV and Vlaams Blok also showed this shortcoming. As a consequence, the policy positions of both parties are not included in the analysis. The policy positions of mainstream parties will be examined each election year (1991, 1995, 1999). 1987 will be studied in the following graphics as a referring point where no change occurred.

Organizational change

As mentioned above, organizational change will be examined through a document analysis of the party statutory rules. Changes towards an activist-based or leadership-dominated party will be examined based on three categories: centralization, candidate selection and leadership selection.

A party that implement decentralized changes will move closer towards the activist-based party model. When a party has a decentralized policy decision making process, it means that authority is transferred from the party leader(s) or the intra-parliamentary group towards extra-parliamentary groups, including members, and vice versa (Strom, 1990, pp 577-579). (De)centralization is measured through the proportion of these two inside the parties key decision-making organ, mostly called '*partijbureau*'³.

Centralization of power=

$$\frac{((\text{party leader(s) and MP's}) - (\text{extra-parliamentary individuals}))}{((\text{party leader(s) and MP's}) + (\text{extra-parliamentary individuals}))}.$$

To operationalize new methods of candidate selection, I follow the continuum of Rahat and Hazan (2001) (figure 4). Parties who are more activist-based will have a more inclusive method of candidate selection and vice versa. New methods of leader selection will also be examined by looking at changes in the selectorate. The most inclusive and closest to the activist-based model is letting the electorate choose for the party leader. The most exclusive form and closest to the leadership-dominated model is when a single individual appoints the party leader (Kenig, 2009) (figure 5).

We examine four elections, starting with the general election of 1987. This point is seen as “point zero”, as comparing point. In order to examine changes, we first have to know what a “neutral” situation is. Furthermore, we must pay attention that every election year mentioned in tables and graphics refers to the period right before the election.

³ This party organ is responsible for the actual political statements and guidelines. They gather mostly one time a week.

Results

Our model started with the assumption that mainstream parties react to electoral losses with party change. Together, the mainstream parties implemented 39 programmatic and organizational responses in the 1990s (figure 6). CVP had the most changes in 1995 while SP and PVV/VLD had the most changes in 1999. Overall, the party that implemented the most changes was PVV/VLD. In figure 6 the multiple reactions of the mainstream parties are listed for each selection. “0” means no change has occurred compared to the previous election. For policy position, + means convergence, ++ means strong convergence, - divergence and - - strong divergence. Regarding issue salience, (+)+ means (strong) increase and vice versa. Regarding the organizational change, + (+) means moving towards an activist-based party (more inclusive) and (-)- towards a leadership-dominated party. + means more decentralization and more inclusive candidate/leadership selections and vice versa. Figure 6 shows that mainstream parties reacted differently on their electoral losses. In following sections this variety between mainstream parties will be explained more in detail.

			SP			CVP			PVV/VLD		
			'91	'95	'99	'91	'95	'99	'91	'95	'99
PROGRAMMATIC CHANGE	Ecological	Position	++	+	-	-	--	++	-	++	--
		Salience	-	-	+	-	-	+	-	-	-
	Multicultural	Position	--	o	++	o	+	+	++	o	-
		Salience	o	-	--	++	+	--	--	++	++
ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE	Decentrali- zation		o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
	Candidate selection		o	o	o	o	++	o	o	++	--
	Leader selection		o	o	++	o	++	o	o	++	--

Figure 6 Schematic overview mainstream parties' responses

Regarding specific programmatic change, all mainstream parties implemented each election a programmatic response. There is variation between the mainstream parties in these responses. All mainstream parties reacted each election on the ecological party's success. In figure 7, the more the position is towards -1, the more environmental protective the mainstream parties position is on ecological issues. When a mainstream parties' position is close to 1, this mainstream party is more in favor of economic production and growth. Confirming my hypothesis, SP converged the most with AGALEV. In 1995, there was also complete convergence with VLD and AGALEV, but in 1999 VLD diverged more towards the center. CVP diverged from AGALEV in 1991 and 1995, but converged hefty in 1999. This also is found in salience (figure 8). The salience of environmental issues decreases every election, but in 1999, CVP and SP had an increase. SP always emphasized ecological issues the most of all mainstream parties. In figure 9, the policy positions of the mainstream parties is showed. When the mainstream parties' policy position is 1, the party is completely converged with Vlaams Blok and is negative towards multiculturalism. PVV/VLD converged two elections completely with Vlaams Blok. It also emphasized this issue the most (except in 1991). CVP seems less reactive towards the success of Vlaams Blok. In 1991, SP had a remarkable divergence to the opposite stance of multiculturalism, while in 1999, it converged towards the center. With exception of 1991, PVV/VLD emphasized the issue the most of all mainstream parties (figure 10).

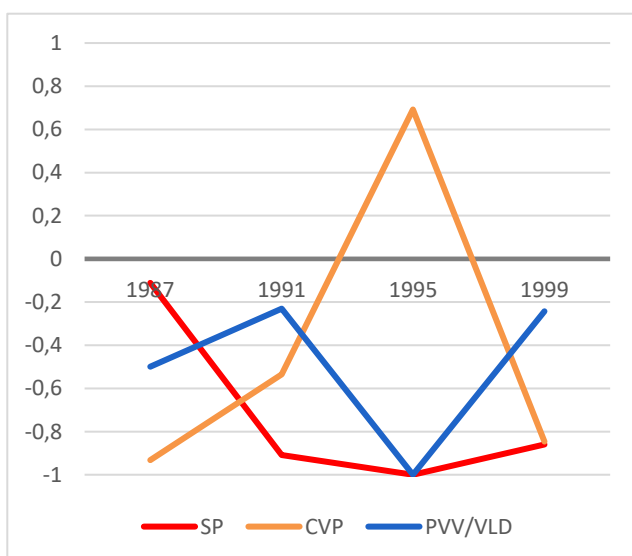


Figure 7 Policy position environmental protection

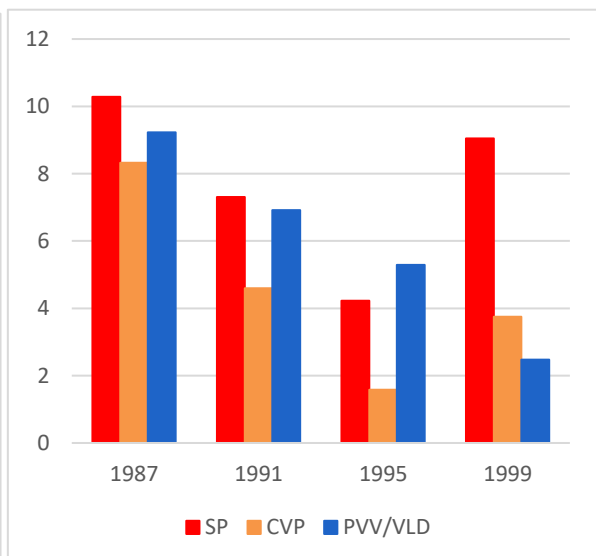


Figure 8 Salience ecological issue

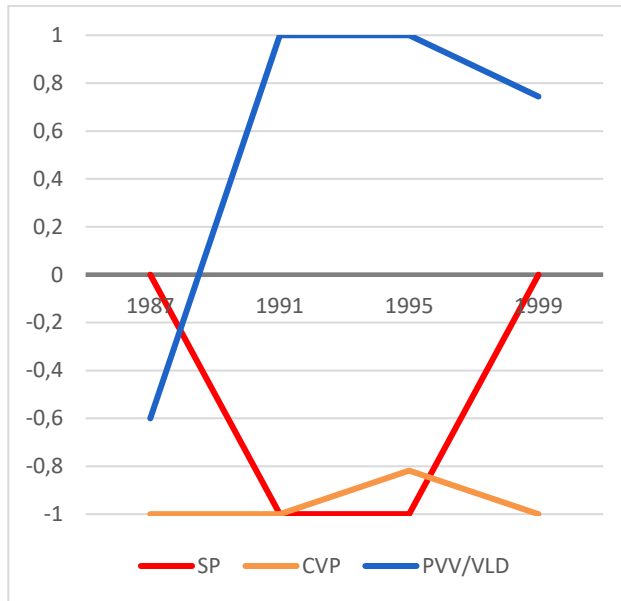


Figure 9 Policy position multiculturalism

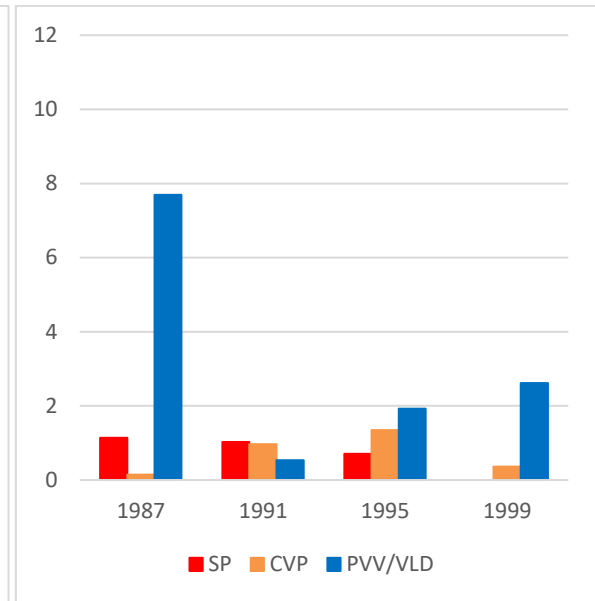


Figure 10 Salience Multiculturalism

Regarding organizational responses, the convergence towards an activist-based party was examined. Centralization, candidates selectorate and leadership selectorate were studied. In figure 12, when a mainstream party is closer to one it is more centralized governed. As for the traditional parties, CVP and PVV/VLD are slowly going to more a more centralized party (figure 12). However, they remain close to the “break-even” point where authority is equally spread. SP on the other hand is the most central governed. Only by the elections of 1999 they know a more decentralizing trend, but they still remain the most centralized party of all. Overall, we see no fundamental changes in the mainstream parties’ centralization authority structure. Furthermore, none of the mainstream parties formally changed their rules of composition of “partijbureau”. As our definition of change is that it comes directly from a group decision, we do not see these increases as a change but as an alternation. As a consequence, none of the mainstream parties implemented a change in formal rules of centralization.

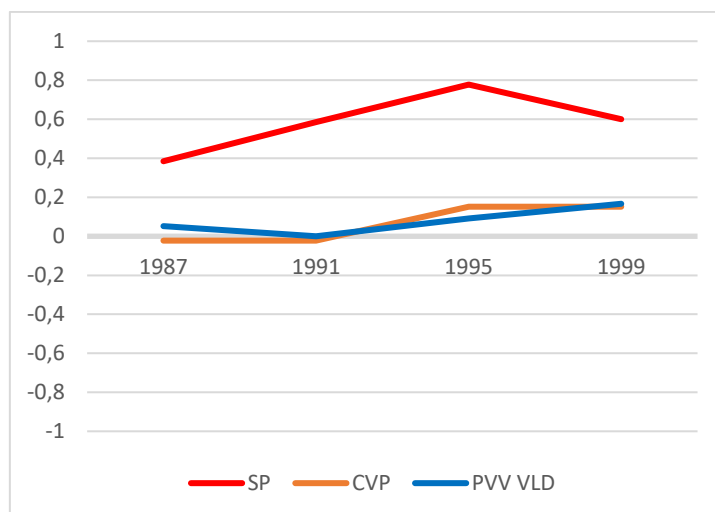


Figure 12 Centralization of power

Regarding the selectorate of candidate selection (see appendix 1) and leadership selection (see appendix 2) there is a trend in all mainstream parties towards a more inclusive form. Nevertheless there was variation in time and in the degree of inclusiveness. The candidate selectorate of SP consisted during the 1990s of a selected party agency. It did not respond on the environmental pressures with a more inclusive candidate selection selectorate. PVV/VLD and CVP on the other hand implemented more inclusive initiatives on candidate selection. PVV/VLD had the most far-reaching reforms. In their changed statutes of 1993, registered voters and party members could through pre-election compile a candidate list. These registered voters are not party members but they do have to sign the declaration of principles and can not be a member of another political party (VLD, 1993). When VLD changed their statutes in 1997, they removed the option of registered voters as there was too little interest (Wauters, 2005). Since 1994, CVP gives their party members the right to vote for the candidate lists composition in a poll (CVP, 1994). SP was the last party to change their party leader selectorate towards a more inclusive form. At the time of the general election in 1999, all party members could vote for the party president. Regarding CVP and PVV/VLD, the evolution of party leader selectorate change shows quiet the similar trends as the evolution of change in candidate selectorate. All members of CVP could vote for the party president at the time of the elections of 1995. As was the case with the opening of the candidate selectorate of VLD, a part of the electorate could also vote for

the party president in 1995. They were labeled as registered voters. However, this reform was also set back at the general elections of 1999.

Discussion and conclusion

In general, the Flemish mainstream parties adapted more programmatic changes than organizational changes in the 1990s. Out of the 39 responses, 32 were programmatic. This may be due to the structural and more fixed character of organizational structure changes. Statutory rules are not often revised, while choices regarding programmatic positions and salience have to be taken each election period. Second, mainstream parties in Flanders are more vulnerable to ecological party's success. Both on programmatic and organizational change, mainstream parties shifted more towards the position of ecological parties. A possible explanation could be that the winning elections of Vlaams Blok are often interpreted as protest voting elections whereby citizens presents a warning. Mainstream parties responded to this warning by adopting a more inclusive organization. Against my expectations, it was not SP but PVV/VLD that implemented most changes in 1990s, despite their electoral gains. One explanation may be that PVV/VLD already emphasized bridging the gap between politics and citizens. They were in favor of party change (Verhofstadt, 1992). Furthermore, they might have had other unfulfilled party goals that caused changes, like an office seeking goal (Harmel & Janda, 1994). During the 1990s, PVV/VLD was the whole time an opposition party. CVP did implement the most changes after the election they had lost the most votes (1991), which confirms my hypothesis. This is not the case for SP. This party also faced its biggest electoral loss in 1991, but implemented less changes in 1995 as it did in 1999. However, it does not completely disconfirm my hypothesis since the party was already discussing their statutory rules before the elections, but ratified them after the elections of 1995. They were already discussing change. Furthermore, it was remarkably that CVP's policy position converged hefty towards the position of AGALEV in 1999. This may be due to the period of the dioxin crisis. CVP and SP also had an increase of salience of the ecological issue in 1999, while they emphasized the issue less each election before. Regarding the convergence towards the niche parties,

mainstream parties seems to be more influenceable by the success of the niche party closest to them on the spatial continuum. It confirms my hypothesis that moderate right parties will be more reactive to the success of radical right and center-left parties will be more reactive to the success of ecological parties.

This study argues that mainstream parties responded on their strong electoral losses with organizational and programmatic reforms. These two categories of party change are examined during the Belgian general elections of the 1990s. All three Flemish mainstream parties (SP, CVP and PVV/VLD) implemented both programmatic as organizational reforms. However, programmatic responses were implemented more as organizational ones. Furthermore, there is variation in the responses of mainstream parties. SP converged more to the policy position of AGALEV, while PVV/VLD converged more to the policy position of Vlaams Blok. PVV/VLD implemented most organizational changes, while SP implemented the least. All three mainstream parties converged towards a more activist-based party model. These findings on the party change of mainstream parties have important implications for the analysis of multiparty competition and the party change literature. First, there was little earlier research on mainstream party organizational change after electoral loss. Second, there never was an integrated study of these two categories of responses in a dichotomic model of party competition before. However, further research will be needed to examine these two categories more in detail. Furthermore, strategic stances will need to be examined as a third category of mainstream party response. My results also showed that electoral loss is not a sufficient condition for mainstream parties to implement organizational and programmatic change. Further research may take into account other explanations regarding mainstream party responses, such as the impact of coalition of the willingness, leadership change and differing party goals. The scope of this research should be widened as well. By including more decades and more countries, further studies would be able to examine the impact of success of niche parties' on mainstream party's change in more detail. Other research will be needed to examine if these responses also accounts for other mainstream- and niche parties and the issues they compete.

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Appendix

1. New methods of candidate selection.

Table 3 Candidate selection

Election Year	Party	Selectorate
1987	SP	Selected party agency (Arrondissement federations)
	CVP	Selected party agency (Arrondissement federations)
	PVV	Selected party agency (Arrondissement federations)
1991	SP	-
	CVP	-
	PVV	-
1995	SP	Selected party agency (Arrondissement federations + party office)
	CVP	Party members
	VLD	Electorate – party members
1999	SP	-
	CVP	-
	VLD	Party members

Source: (Ceuleers & De Winter, 1986), Party statutory rules

2. New methods of leader selection

Table 4 Leadership selection change

Election Year	Party	Selectorate
1987	SP	Congress, consisting of: 1 delegate per 300 members Assigned by arrondissemental federations
	CVP	Congress, consisting of: 1 delegate per 50 members Assigned by local sections
	PVV	Congress, consisting of: 1 delegate per 1250 votes at the parliamentary elections and 1 delegate per 150 members Assigned by arrondissemental federations
1991	SP	-
	CVP	-
	VLD	-
1995	SP	Congress, consisting of: 1 delegate per 200 members Assigned by federations
	CVP	Congress, consisting of all members
	VLD	Congress, consisting of all members and registered voters
1999	SP	Congress, consisting of all members
	CVP	-
	VLD	-