

Ideological nationalization within Flemish parties. An exploratory study based on computerized coding of local party manifestos.

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Abstract

It has been stated that local politics has lost its uniqueness and is influenced strongly by national politics. Some claim that an outright nationalization of the local level is taking place. In the past, this nationalization question has often been studied based on election results or the presence/absence of local lists. In this paper, we have a look at the manifestos of local party chapters and, therefore, the ideological dimension of nationalization. Using computerized coding via Yoshikoder, we assess the issue salience in manifestos for the 2018 local elections. We study the amount of space local party chapters of 13 Flemish cities give to certain matters in their platforms. Do the branches of one party emphasize the same issues, or are there distinct differences? Is there any ideological nationalization taking place, or is national ideology subordinate to specific characteristics of a municipality? Comparing the degree of ideological nationalization, we find substantial differences between the Flemish parties.

INTRODUCTION

In the comparative political science literature, there is still considerable debate about the nature of local government. In the discussion, two contrasting notions appear. First and foremost, there is the traditional view of local politics which underlines its non-partisan character. Here, local self-government is seen as largely outside the political sphere and merely factual and harmonic. Concordance among actors to strive for the ‘technically’ best solution is the preferred mode of public decision-making (Van de Voorde, Bouteca, Schamp & Steyvers, 2018). This traditional notion is challenged by a new view on local government being partisan and ideological. According to this view, local politics is influenced strongly by national politics. It constitutes a place where wider national party battles are fought. Therefore, ideological concerns and party interests dominate local decision-making (Copus, Wingfield, Steyvers & Reynaert, 2012).

The core concept in this new view of local government is *nationalization*. Nationalization entails that the politics in different municipalities are more and more alike and local politics altogether increasingly resembles national politics. Although this is an important process that is even linked to societal modernization (Rokkan, 1966), nationalization is an understudied domain in political science. It has not attracted abundant scholarly attention. And if it had, it is predominantly concerned with the state-wide level and addresses the territorial homogeneity of *national* elections (Van de Voorde et al., 2018). In case the nationalization of *local* politics was studied, it was often analyzed based on election results or the presence/absence of local lists. Due to this emphasis on the party offer and electoral success, however, we are missing other potentially interesting aspects of nationalization. Ideology, for example, is a dimension that has often been neglected in the discussion on the nationalization of local politics (Van de Voorde et al., 2018). The ideological aspect of nationalization entails the degree of congruence between the policy preferences of a local chapter and the corresponding national party.

In case there is a full ideological nationalization of local politics, the policy platforms of local branches of the same party would be completely similar. Then, the local divisions adopt the policies designed by the central party headquarter.

With this exploratory paper, we start to close the gap in the nationalization literature. In this contribution, we study the degree of ideological nationalization within Flemish parties. We compare the policy preferences of several chapters of the same party with each other. In case they are congruent, a given party scores high on the ideological nationalization dimension. Using computerized coding via Yoshikoder, we assess the issue salience in manifestos for the 2018 local elections. We study the amount of space local party chapters of 13 Flemish cities give to certain matters in their platforms. Do the branches of one party emphasize the same issues, or are there distinct differences? Comparing the degree of ideological nationalization, we find substantial differences between the Flemish parties. Furthermore, we estimate the role of the party type. More specifically, we examine the influence of party ideology, genetic origin, and age on the extent of ideological nationalization.

Addressing the ideological dimension of nationalization constitutes a new contribution to the debate that is interesting in itself and helps to better understand nationalization as a whole. Moreover, the degree of ideological nationalization is estimated by the analysis of local party manifestos via computerized coding in Yoshikoder. To our knowledge, this is the first time automatic methods are used to study local manifestos in a Belgian context. It makes this research completely novel and innovative, both substantially and methodologically.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1. The nationalization of local politics

The core concept in this paper is the *nationalization* of politics. The basic tenet of nationalization holds that political differences are disappearing between the various geographic units of a country (Lago & Montero, 2014). In his landmark book, Caramani (2004, p. 1) described the process as representing “*a broad historical evolution toward the formation of national electorates and party systems, party organizations and campaigns, as well as issues and party programs. Through nationalization processes, the highly localized and territorialized politics (...) is replaced by national electoral alignments and oppositions. Peripheral and regional specificities disappear (...)*”.

The empirical research on nationalization is predominantly concerned with the state-wide level and addresses the territorial homogeneity of *national* elections (Van de Voorde et al., 2018). To overcome this nationalism bias, several authors have proposed a multilevel perspective enclosing the various subnational tiers (Mustillo & Mustillo, 2012). This would include taking the local level as a frame of reference, i.e. studying the nationalization of *local* politics (Van de Voorde et al., 2018). This process entails that the politics in different municipalities are more and more alike and local politics altogether increasingly resembles national politics. The non-political and technocratic mode of decision-making that characterized local politics for long would be increasingly replaced by a partisan and ideological logic (Copus et al., 2012). The local level would be losing its uniqueness.

More specifically, the nationalization of local government is largely conceived and studied as the entry of national parties in the local political arena. Nationally organized parties have established local chapters which compete in municipal elections. Hence, local party systems increasingly resemble the national party system (Rokkan, 1966; Steyvers, Reynaert, De Ceuninck & Valcke, 2008; Kjaer & Elklit, 2010). However, there are still local lists with no link to a national party on offer. They constitute a true local alternative to the chapters of the national parties (Steyvers et al., 2008; Copus et al., 2012). Their presence (or absence) is one of the ways in which the nationalization question has been studied.

For Flanders specifically, there are a number of arguments in favor of the nationalization¹ hypothesis. In the 1970s, a wave of municipal mergers took place, affecting almost all municipalities. We know there is a positive relationship between nationalization and municipal size (Wille & Deschouwer, 2007; Kjaer & Elklit, 2010). After all, it is easier and more rewarding for national parties to set up a local chapter in larger municipalities. When these local party branches then take part in municipal elections, they can link their name to a national list number. Since the 1970s, national parties can take up the same national list number in every municipality. This makes it easier for parties to present themselves in a homogeneous way in different municipalities (Wille & Deschouwer, 2007). Finally, the local elections are all held on one day. Therefore, parties can easily add up their electoral performance in the municipalities to a national election result. Thus, the global result of the local elections serves as a yardstick for (upcoming) national elections (Copus, 2004; Wille & Deschouwer, 2007; Steyvers et al., 2008).

There are, however, a couple of arguments that point in another direction. Wille and Deschouwer (2007) argue, for example, that the Imperiali method of seat allocation restrains the nationalization of the partisan supply. The Imperiali method, which in Belgium is only used for municipal elections, leads to a less proportional seat allocation that in turn, harms the electoral chances of smaller parties. Therefore, there is an incentive for parties to make electoral alliances. In this way, the local party systems do not resemble the national party system completely (Steyvers et al., 2008). Another argument is related to party theory. According to Katz and Mair (1995), parties are increasingly attracted to the state. Instead of representing groups of citizens, parties become the agents of government itself. They collude in order to employ state resources ensuring their own survival. This *cartelization* has an effect on central-local party relationships. While the *party in public office* becomes more important, the *party on the ground* becomes less so. Because parties are increasingly sidecars of the state, they show less interest in party members and local chapters. This loosening of the relationship between the central party headquarter and its grassroots results in more local autonomy. As a consequence, local party branches increasingly make their own choices. This new loose intraparty relationship is characterized as *stratarchical*, corresponding with the franchise party model (Carty, 2004). According to this theory, parties have different levels with each one following its own logic. Everything taken into account, local party chapters enjoy more autonomy. This theoretical understanding is more in line with the traditional view of local government (Wille & Deschouwer, 2007).

Just as in theory, the empirical evidence for the nationalization of local politics in Flanders is mixed (Wille & Deschouwer, 2007). Deschouwer (1996) and Ackaert (2006) conclude that national parties have strengthened their position, while local lists have a difficult time. However, for other aspects like ideology, party structure, and coalition formation, the influence of the central party headquarters remains limited. Steyvers and colleagues (2008) shed a more optimistic light on local lists. Although they find a strong nationalization of the local party system, local lists still play an important role in local politics, especially in small municipalities. Wille and Deschouwer (2007), in turn, argue there is no straightforward nationalization because there is no systematic increase in the number of local chapters participating in local elections. Still, Flemish parties are not present in every municipality. Furthermore, voting behavior in the local elections is substantially different from regional or national elections. Only in the long run, the evolutions in the municipal elections coincide with those in the supra-local elections. Finally, the nationalization hypothesis cannot be confirmed in voter surveys. For the 2012 municipal elections in Belgium Marien, Dassonneville and Hooghe (2015) found that voters

¹ *Nationalization* is not exactly the right word in a Belgian context where the party system is split along regional lines. In order to connect with the (international) literature, however, we still make use of this term.

invoke predominantly local aspects as determining their vote choice. For example, ‘knowing a local candidate’ is the most important consideration to vote for a certain party.

From the previous paragraphs, it is clear that the debate on the nationalization of local politics remains. However, not all sides of this debate have been addressed. The nationalization question has mostly been studied based on election results and the presence/absence of local lists. Due to this emphasis on the party offer and electoral success, we are missing other potentially interesting aspects of nationalization. Ideology, for example, is a dimension that has often been neglected in the discussion (Van de Voorde et al., 2018). In the next paragraph, we focus hereon.

2. Ideological nationalization

The ideological aspect of nationalization entails the degree of congruence between the policy preferences of a local chapter and the corresponding national party. In case there is a full ideological nationalization of local politics, the policy platforms of local branches of the same party would be completely similar. Then, the local divisions adopt the policies designed by the central party headquarter. This may include the general left-right position, the salience of certain issues, and positions in different policy areas. However, local party chapters may also have attention for specific issues and preferences in their municipality. In an election campaign, for example, a local division can emphasize a certain issue, irrespective of the national party headquarters priorities, because it is a pressing problem in the community or its constituents consider it important (Bouteca & Lefevre, 2020). This assumption is in line with the traditional notion of local government and, therefore, denounces ideological nationalization.

Whether local chapters look to their party central office or municipal characteristics for ideological guidance, is not completely clear. The literature suggests arguments for both sides. On the one hand, there are several reasons to assume that local branches are indeed ideologically nationalized. First of all, the national party and its local divisions share a common ideological background. For instance, one can assume that green politicians, both at the local and national levels, will advocate for environmental protection (Devos, Verlet & Reynaert, 2007). Second, national party headquarters help their chapters in writing manifestos. In election times, they provide them with a ‘model program’ that includes general policies in several policy areas. As draughting a manifesto is extremely time-consuming, layman local politicians might endorse spoon-fed national policy proposals (Van de Voorde et al., 2018).

The above elements support the assumption that local parties will emphasize central issues already claimed by their national. Issue ownership (Petrocik, 1996) is an important asset in times of elections as it increases the credibility of a party on certain matters. Moreover, national parties will try to avoid corrosion of their issue ownership by local party branches who formulate diverging policies. Indeed, according to the franchise party model (Carty, 2004, p. 13), parties increasingly behave as stratarchically organized entities. The central headquarter is responsible for the overall party brand, whereas local branches exploit it in their electoral campaign. Although Carty acknowledges that divergent manifestos are possible within the framework of the franchise party, he states that the decision-making on the main programmatic issues is, for the most part, a central matter because it ensures: “ (...) *that the party is providing a consistent message to its supporters and the electorate*”.

On the other hand, several factors imply little local-national congruence. First, local government in Flanders and elsewhere has distinct tasks and competences to deal with municipal-specific issues. Evidently, all governmental levels share similar problems, but each municipality has its own specific

problems. Local branches will underline certain issues dominant in their commune, that do not necessarily match national tendencies. Second and already mentioned in the introduction, some interpretations even conceive local politics as less ideological altogether. In these, local self-government is seen as largely outside the political sphere and merely factual and harmonic. Concordance among actors to strive for the 'technically' best solution is the preferred mode of public decision-making. The non-political (i.e. non-partisan) conception of local politics is enhanced by the relatively small scale of the local polity, which reduces the potential role of parties as aggregators of various interests and stresses the importance of personal relations (Copus et al., 2012). This leads Ackaert (2006, p. 113) to the conclusion that in Belgium local politics is first and foremost a matter for local politicians (Van de Voorde et al., 2018).

In order to draw a conclusion on ideological nationalization, the existing research should tell us something more. However, empirical studies on the matter are scarce. For Flanders specifically, we have a couple of elite survey data which point in the direction of local-national congruence. Deschouwer (1996), for example, studied ideological nationalization in local politics among key representatives of local party divisions. He asked them to position their own chapter on a left-right scale. Overall, there was little variation in the position of the branches of the same party. Several years later, Devos, Verlet and Reynaert (2007) found similar results. When asked about the left-right position and salience of twenty policy-related issues, local representatives of the same party gave answers that are more or less in line with each other. The congruence in issue salience was also addressed by Buelens, Dumont, Rihoux, and Heyndels (2008). They found that chapters put forward the same issues as their national party. Moreover, the results of all these elite survey studies were confirmed by local party manifesto research. Assessing the congruence between local platforms and the corresponding national model program, Van de Voorde and colleagues (2018) found striking similarities and, thus, a strong ideological nationalization of local politics. However, a recent study calls this straightforward conclusion into question. Analyzing voters' perceptions in the 2018 local elections, Bouteuca and Lefevre (2020) found local variation in parties' issue ownership.

3. The party perspective

Up to now, we only wondered whether there is a general trend towards ideological nationalization. However, this supposed general trend can conceal differences between political parties. In some parties, ideological congruence between the national and local level can be considered important, while in others, local chapters have more leeway. Deschouwer (1996), for instance, found for the 1994 local elections that the Greens and the far-right had a very consistent message across the Flemish municipalities. The chapters of the Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, and Regionalists, on the contrary, showed a less congruent ideological profile.

Therefore, we may assume that the level of ideological nationalization is not equal in every party in Flanders. In order to explain variation, the party type could matter. More specifically, we hypothesize that the ideological position, the genetic origin, and the party age influence the degree of ideological congruence. Building on the pioneering work of Van de Voorde and his colleagues (2018), we elaborate on a number of hypotheses.

According to some scholars (Enyedi & Linek, 2008), rightist parties are more hierarchically organized than leftist parties. Based on their more individualistic ideology right-wing parties emphasize party leadership: party elites are in control and organized forms of member participation are more limited

compared to left-wing parties. Therefore, we expect that local chapters of rightist national parties have less programmatic freedom compared to leftist local chapters.

H1a: Rightist parties show a higher degree of ideological nationalization than leftist parties

However, all parties, including the right, have completed a transformation towards more intra-party democracy and member participation. Moreover, Van de Voorde and colleagues (2018) found that Flemish parties on the right showed less ideological nationalization than leftist parties. Therefore, we are forced to come up with an opposite hypothesis as well:

H1b: Rightist parties show a lower degree of ideological nationalization than leftist parties

The genetic origin of a party could also determine the extent of ideological nationalization. In this sense, parties that were originally founded as mass parties can be considered highly centralized because their national headquarters were the most important agent in the party organization. This could also entail the rather strict coordination of local party branches by the central party (Carty, 2004). Although the era of mass parties lies far behind us, Gunther and Diamond (2003, p. 174) assert that the “*founding context*’ can leave a lasting imprint on the basic nature of the party’s organization for decades to come”. As a result, we hypothesize the following:

H2: Mass parties show a higher degree of ideological nationalization than other parties

Finally, we expect to find a difference between new parties and established parties. The younger a party is, the less organizational power it has. In contrast to established parties, new parties still have to build a viable infrastructure (Mair, 1999). Although party age is an important factor that affects the level of party organization, the era in which they were founded (from the 1960s onwards) and ideology play a role too. New parties are often ‘thinner’ organizations than established parties because they emerged in a context of mass communication which made it possible to communicate directly with voters instead of via the party apparatus (Gunther & Diamond, 2003). Moreover, many new parties disapprove of strong hierarchical steering and choose a more democratic form of organization (Bolleyer, 2012, p. 322). This less developed organization with an emphasis on democratic party organization leaves more room for local autonomy.

H3a: Traditional parties show a higher degree of ideological nationalization than new parties

However, in traditional parties, the local chapters are also long-established party components. Some of them go a long way back. Over the years, these strong traditional party divisions have built the capacity to formulate their own platform. They have previous manifestos to rely on, are strongly embedded in their local community, and often have experience in governing the municipality. This makes them more open to issues that are unique to their locality. In contrast, the chapters of new parties have few resources which make them depend on their national party headquarter. Hence, these chapters rely heavily on ideological guidance from the upper level of their party (Gross & Jankowski, 2020).

H3b: Traditional parties show a lower degree of ideological nationalization than new parties

The operationalization of this threefold division between parties is rather straightforward. In line with previous academic scholars, we regard the Greens (Groen), the Social Democrats (Vooruit), and the radical left (PVDA) as leftist parties. The Christian Democrats (CD&V), Liberals (Open VLD), Regionalists (N-VA), and the radical right (Vlaams Belang), on the other hand, are considered rightist. This dichotomy is confirmed by both content analyses of the national party manifestos by the *Manifesto Project Database* and subjective self-placement scales of members (van Haute et al., 2012). Referring

to the continuing impact of the founding context, only the Social Democrats can be classified as a true mass party. This extra-parliamentary party was set up in 1885 to represent the interest of all blue-collar workers and to recruit as many as possible. Separating traditional and new parties, however, is based on their age. The Belgian party system, and both regional ones, were long dominated by three 'pillar' parties: the Liberal Party, the Christian-Democratic Party, and the Socialist Party. All three consistently shared political power at the end of the 19th century and during the complete 20th century. Only later on new parties began to emerge, starting with the Regionalist Party, the Greens, and the extreme rightists. None of them, however, were able to recreate the immense pillarized party structure of the three traditional parties (Van de Voorde et al., 2018).

DATA AND METHODS

There are several ways in which we can assess the degree of ideological nationalization and, thus, verify the aforementioned hypotheses. Ideology can indeed be measured via different methods (for an oversight of all these methods see e.g. Bouteuca, 2011). For this paper, we choose to make use of election manifestos. Estimating party positions with the help of manifestos is a longstanding tradition within political science (e.g. Klingemann et al., 2006), but has only scarcely been used in local politics (Van de Voorde et al., 2018). Nevertheless, manifestos are considered a very useful source (see e.g. MARPOR). Manifestos are highly comparable because they are written at the same time and can be used for longitudinal research. They can also be regarded as the official position of the entire party (Bouteuca, 2011, pp. 123-133). Moreover, the analysis of manifestos has considerable advantages over survey research. Most of the existing studies in Flanders make use of surveys, asking experts or local party elites to estimate the positions of local chapters. This method, however, has some serious drawbacks. Expert surveys are expensive and - more fundamental - probably less reliable in a local-level context. Even for experts and local political actors, it is impossible to provide accurate information on the policy positions of every local party that might compete for seats in local councils (Gross & Jankowski, 2020, p. 78). Furthermore, the policy preferences of local party elites might not be the same as those of their local sections. They do not necessarily articulate the position of the whole party (Bouteuca, 2011, pp. 123-133).

Thus, we make the choice to analyze the manifestos of local party chapters. More specifically, our aim is to compare the policy preferences of several chapters of the same party with each other. In case they are congruent, a given party scores high on the ideological nationalization dimension. In order to study this, we have to make clear choices in the research design. First, we only focus on issue salience. We will analyze the relative attention local party chapters give to certain policy-related issues in their manifestos. Thus, positions will not be addressed. Although identifying those positions could be beneficial (Janda et al., 1995), we are convinced that those insights would only have a marginal added value for our specific research question and would exceed the exploratory character of this paper. In theory, local branches could contradict the central headquarters but they do all share a common ideological baseline. We can, therefore, expect that policy positions will not fundamentally diverge (Van de Voorde et al., 2018).

Second, we select the manifestos of the parties that participated in the 2018 local elections in 13 Flemish cities. The 13 localities under study constitute the group of cities the Flemish Government regards as '*centrumsteden*', i.e. municipalities that have a relatively high number of inhabitants with reference to their area and, consequently, exert a lot of central functions in terms of employment, healthcare, education and leisure for these areas. Approximately a quarter of the total Flemish population lives in one of these 13 cities (Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur, 2021). Concerning the

selection of manifestos, we obviously only take the platforms of the chapters of national parties into consideration. Next to the local lists we also exclude local alliances between two or more national parties (the sp.a-Groen list in Ghent for example), because their manifestos cannot be assigned to one party. However, lists that participated in the elections with a local name, but have an undeniable link to a national party in terms of political personnel and ideology (the social democratic Stadsljst in Ostend for example) are included in the analysis. Selecting along with all these criteria, we will examine 72 manifestos in total.

Third, we will code the manifestos with the help of the computer. Although there has been some criticism about computational text analysis (e.g. Bruinsma & Gemenis, 2019), the technique is considered promising (Slapin & Proksch, 2008) and was used for numerous publications (for an oversight see Bruinsma & Gemenis, 2019). Computerized coding has several advantages. First, and crucial for this study, it is necessary to use the huge amount of manifestos available at the local level. Hand-coding of party programs is simply too labor-intensive (Van de Voorde et al., 2018). By using an automatic quantitative content analysis technique, however, the hundreds of pages with policy proposals can easily be reduced to quantitative data. Second, manifestos are written in a similar tone and style, which makes them particularly suitable for computational analysis as this technique sometimes relies on the assumption of a similar text-generating process (Gross & Jankowski, 2020). Finally, one of the strengths of computerized coding is its objectiveness. Manual coding, on the contrary, demands 'human' interpretation which makes it inherently more subjective and susceptible to errors.

Despite all these pluses, only very recently scholars have started to code local manifestos with the use of the computer (Gross & Jankowski, 2020; Otjes, 2021; see the *Local Manifesto Project*). In this paper, we want to make a new contribution. In order to assess the degree of ideological nationalization within Flemish parties, we will analyze the election manifestos of local chapters by using Yoshikoder. Yoshikoder is an open-source multilingual content analysis program developed by Will Lowe (Yoshikoder, 2021). It allows researchers to predetermine categories and patterns of words of research interests, and then examine how these keywords distribute in the documents under examination. Researchers need to form a priori knowledge and categorization of the keywords, which they think can validly gauge the kinds of dimensions they wish to detect in the studied texts (Chen, 2011). This is done by composing a dictionary.

Now, we apply this to our research into the issue salience of local party manifestos. As a first step in drawing a dictionary (see Appendix), we have to predetermine categories of issues. Here, we rely on the coding scheme of Van de Voorde and his colleagues (2018). They made a scheme that contains 19 categories that were constructed deductively based on local government competences. Except for some minor changes, we take it over completely. In a second step, we assign keywords to the categories. We choose words that reflect the category substantially and at the same time cannot be linked to other categories. Thus, words that can be assigned to two or more categories are excluded. In order to select the keywords, we read a varied sample of manifestos in depth. More specifically, we looked at the programs of sp.a Brugge, the sp.a-Groen alliance in Ghent, CD&V Roeselare, the Liberals in Kortrijk, N-VA Antwerpen, Vlaams Belang Leuven and PVDA Hasselt. Reading these manifestos makes us familiar with the vocabulary that is typical for a certain policy domain. For each issue, we select a number of relevant words. The total amount of selected words is not equal for each category, however. For example, the issue '*political management*' counts five words, while 40 terms represent '*local economy*'. This implies that the issue salience results cannot be interpreted in *absolute* terms because the selected number of words exerts a strong influence on these results. This is not problematic, however, because we are only interested in parties' issue salience *relative* to each other.

In the last step, we make the manifestos ready for computational analysis. The parts of the programs that have no direct link with local policy (tables of contents, information on election candidates, policy proposals for the provincial elections, attachments) are scrapped. Introductions are kept, however.

RESULTS

1. Issue salience in the local party manifestos of 2018

For each category in the dictionary, Yoshikoder counts the keywords in relation to the whole text. This gives us proportions for each manifesto. In this first section of the results, we have a look at the relative attention for the issues in the 2018 programs. In Table 1 we present the proportions for the issue categories for each party. The party numbers constitute the averages of the proportions of each individual chapter. Taking account of issue ownership theories (Walgrave & De Swert, 2007), the results are largely unsurprising. Of all parties, the Greens focus the most on the environment and climate issues, while the radical right Vlaams Belang is the number one on safety and integration. The far-left PVDA, in turn, places the most emphasis on social affairs and housing in comparison to the other parties. These rather straightforward results give face validity to our dictionary. It indicates it is effective in assessing the issue salience of local manifestos.

Category	N-VA <i>(regionalist)</i>	Vlaams Belang <i>(radical right)</i>	CD&V <i>(Christian democrat)</i>	Open VLD <i>(liberal)</i>	Vooruit <i>(social democrat)</i>	Groen <i>(green)</i>	PVDA <i>(radical left)</i>
Political management	0,001	0,002	0,001	0,001	0,001	0,001	0,001
Culture, tourism, leisure & events	0,007	0,007	0,009	0,007	0,006	0,007	0,003
Diversity & integration	0,005	0,009	0,003	0,002	0,003	0,003	0,004
Finances	0,002	0,004	0,001	0,002	0,001	0,002	0,002
Service provision	0,004	0,002	0,003	0,004	0,003	0,003	0,004
Family	0,001	0,001	0,002	0,001	0,001	0,001	0,002
Youth	0,007	0,004	0,007	0,006	0,007	0,007	0,007
Local economy	0,009	0,011	0,010	0,011	0,008	0,009	0,006
Environment & climate	0,006	0,004	0,006	0,007	0,010	0,013	0,010
Traffic & mobility	0,011	0,012	0,012	0,016	0,012	0,011	0,011
Education	0,004	0,004	0,005	0,005	0,006	0,005	0,005
Infrastructure	0,003	0,003	0,003	0,004	0,003	0,003	0,002
Elderly	0,002	0,002	0,002	0,001	0,002	0,001	0,001
Democratic participation	0,001	0,001	0,001	0,001	0,001	0,002	0,002
Social affairs	0,009	0,010	0,009	0,007	0,010	0,009	0,012
Sports	0,004	0,001	0,004	0,004	0,002	0,002	0,002

Safety	0,012	0,016	0,008	0,008	0,006	0,006	0,005
Housing	0,006	0,009	0,006	0,005	0,009	0,006	0,012

2. Ideological nationalization: comparing the parties

Now, we come to the core of the research results: the degree of ideological nationalization within Flemish parties. In order to make a comparison between the parties and, thus, verify the hypotheses we calculate standard deviations (SD). First, we calculate the SD of the proportions per category. Thus, for each issue, we estimate the distribution of the values for all party manifestos. In this way, we obtain 18 SDs. We do this again, but now by party (instead of all parties together). Subsequently, we compare the standard deviations of the individual parties with the general ones. In case the party SD is smaller than the general SD, the local party manifestos are very congruent for that specific issue. When the party SD is larger than the general SD, the issue salience of chapters platforms diverges. Hence, this comparison between standard deviations displays the degree of ideological nationalization.

In Table 2 we present the analysis. For each issue and each party, we determine whether the SD of the individual party is smaller (marked in green), larger (marked in red), or equal to (white) the general SD. In order to increase the readability of the table, we multiplied all SDs by a hundred.

Issue category	General	N-VA <i>(regionalist)</i>	Vlaams Belang <i>(radical right)</i>	CD&V <i>(Christian democrat)</i>	Open VLD <i>(liberal)</i>	Vooruit <i>(social democrat)</i>	Groen <i>(green)</i>	PVDA <i>(radical left)</i>
Political management	0,11	0,12	0,11	0,10	0,16	0,07	0,06	0,12
Culture, tourism, leisure & events	0,35	0,23	0,38	0,29	0,32	0,25	0,23	0,14
Diversity & integration	0,23	0,16	0,26	0,13	0,09	0,11	0,15	0,13
Finances	0,12	0,10	0,20	0,10	0,11	0,06	0,07	0,03
Service provision	0,12	0,11	0,09	0,12	0,07	0,11	0,07	0,08
Family	0,08	0,07	0,07	0,06	0,05	0,11	0,04	0,12
Youth	0,29	0,26	0,08	0,30	0,21	0,28	0,23	0,32
Local economy	0,35	0,26	0,30	0,29	0,27	0,25	0,13	0,11
Environment & climate	0,46	0,16	0,33	0,23	0,14	0,54	0,39	0,53
Traffic & mobility	0,46	0,33	0,43	0,40	0,66	0,49	0,22	0,48
Education	0,22	0,14	0,18	0,18	0,24	0,16	0,20	0,29
Infrastructure	0,13	0,07	0,21	0,13	0,11	0,15	0,11	0,04
Elderly	0,11	0,04	0,17	0,09	0,07	0,08	0,05	0,08
Democratic participation	0,10	0,06	0,06	0,09	0,07	0,05	0,05	0,03
Social affairs	0,33	0,27	0,37	0,17	0,19	0,37	0,19	0,14
Sports	0,18	0,16	0,07	0,11	0,28	0,13	0,09	0,09

Safety	0,41	0,32	0,46	0,26	0,34	0,10	0,15	0,15
Housing	0,38	0,18	0,49	0,18	0,15	0,34	0,18	0,41

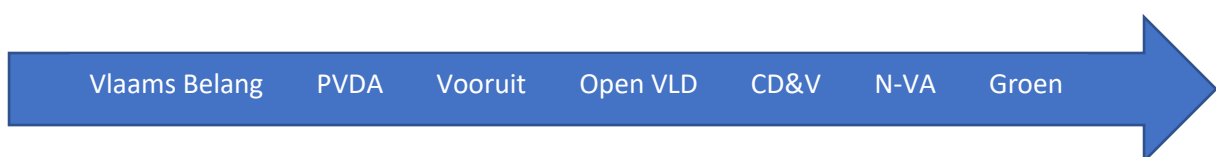
Taking a first glance at the table, it becomes immediately clear there are substantial differences between the parties. While the Greens show – how could it not be – a complete green pattern, the far-right Vlaams Belang colors most red with its eight overruns of the general standard deviation. Another preliminary conclusion we can draw is that there is no direct link between the comparison of the SDs and the issues. For example, it is not the case that the party manifestos show more mutual congruence for issues to which they devote relatively more attention.

Before we can draw final conclusions we perform a number of checks on the results. First, we have a critical look at the findings for the Liberals and Social Democrats. Under their tag are a number of lists that participated in the elections with a local name. We chose to include their manifestos in the analysis because these lists have an undeniable link to the party. However, one could argue that using a local brand instead of connecting with the national party is more meaningful than just a name choice. These lists could substantially diverge in terms of ideology and, consequently, distort the results. Therefore, we run the analysis again, this time without their manifestos. Our concern turns out to be unjust. We observe no substantial changes in the findings.

Second, we put the results for Vlaams Belang under examination. For the radical right party, we only possess six manifestos. The reason behind this small N is that most chapters did not write a program for the 2018 municipal elections. Instead, the party has draught a general platform for all their local sections. This platform goes beyond other parties' model programs because it is not limited to internal use. The manifesto is a publicly available document that can be found on the party's website. Using it for the seven chapters that have no further local platform could be valuable for the analysis. After all, only including the 'truly' local manifestos can encompass a selection bias. By only focusing on these we could underestimate the degree of ideological nationalization. Consequently, we conduct the research again, now with the general Vlaams Belang platform. Similar to the previous check, however, we do not discern any meaningful variation in the results. The party SD of Vlaams Belang still exceeds the general SD eight times.

Now the findings still hold after a couple of checks, we can draw conclusions. In order to determine the degree of ideological nationalization within each party, we add up the number of overruns of the general SD. The party with the least overruns is the most ideologically nationalized and vice versa. As derived from Table 2 and depicted in Figure 1, the local manifestos of Vlaams Belang show the least congruence (8 overruns). The far-right party is followed by PVDA which is weakly nationalized as well (7 overruns). The Social Democrats of Vooruit stand in third (5 overruns), while the Liberals of Open VLD are in the middle (4 overruns). In turn, the parties that are most nationalized in ideological terms, are Groen (no overruns), N-VA (1 overrun) and CD&V (1 overrun)².

Figure 1: The Flemish parties from least to most ideologically nationalized



² We consider CD&V less ideologically nationalized than N-VA, because next to the one overrun there are two party SDs that are equal to (and not less than) the general SD.

In this last section of the results we shift the focus from the party to the party type and, consequently, verify our hypotheses. The first ones concern the role of ideological position (H1a & H1b). Here, the literature was not completely clear about the direction of the relationship between parties' left/right position and ideological nationalization. Our results do not help to overcome this gap. In our research, there seems to be neither a strong positive nor a strong negative link between rightist parties and ideological nationalization. Vlaams Belang shows mutually very different local manifestos, while CD&V and N-VA are more ideologically homogenous. For the leftist parties, the conclusion is in no way different. While there is relatively little ideological nationalization within PVDA and Vooruit, Groen is the Flemish party with the most internally congruent local manifestos. Averaging the number of overruns for left-wing and right-wing parties, we could say that the right is somewhat more ideologically nationalized. But we consider this measure not valid enough. Hence, we have to reject both sub hypotheses. There is no significant link between parties' ideological position and ideological nationalization.

The second hypothesis states that parties that are founded as mass parties tend to be more ideologically nationalized (H2). Vooruit is the only Flemish party that can be classified as such. The findings seem to change the direction of the relationship. Vooruit finds itself more on the localized side of the ideological nationalization spectrum. For several issues like social affairs and environment & climate, the local branches give significantly different levels of attention. Therefore, we have to reject the hypothesis. It is crystal clear that the party is not more ideologically nationalized than other parties, even on the contrary.

In the last hypotheses, we assume the party age has an effect on the degree of ideological nationalization (H3a & H3b). Here too, the direction of the relationship put forward by the literature was ambiguous. Traditional parties could show both a higher or lower level of nationalization compared to new parties. Just as for the first hypothesis, our findings do not show a significant link at all. Figure 1 indicates there is no correlation between the party age and the degree of ideological nationalization. The parties considered as new are completely scattered over the spectrum. On the one hand, there is strong heterogeneity within Vlaams Belang and PVDA. On the other hand, Groen and N-VA show a very congruent ideological profile. The three pillarized parties, in turn, take an intermediate position. Averaging the number of overruns for traditional and new parties, we could say that the former is somewhat more ideologically nationalized. But we consider this measure not valid enough. Hence, we have to reject both sub hypotheses.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we studied the ideological nationalization of local politics, a research field that has not attracted abundant scholarly attention so far. We assessed the reciprocal congruence of local manifestos from the same party. Using computerized coding via Yoshikoder, we estimated the issue salience in programs for the 2018 local elections. We studied the amount of space local party chapters of 13 Flemish cities give to certain matters in their platforms. Did the branches of one party emphasize the same issues, or were there distinct differences? Comparing the degree of ideological nationalization, we found substantial differences between the Flemish parties, with Groen the most nationalized and Vlaams Belang the most localized party. The role of the party type, however, remains unclear. We could not determine a strong relationship between party ideology (left or right) and party age (traditional or new) on the one hand and the extent of ideological nationalization on the other hand. Hence, we cannot confirm hypotheses 1 & 3. For the influence of genetic origin, we found that

mass party Vooruit showed a lower degree of ideological nationalization than most other parties, rejecting hypothesis 2.

These findings show some similarities with the research results of Van de Voorde and his colleagues (2018). Although they made use of a different method (comparing hand-coded local manifestos and national model programs with each other in order to calculate a Relative Nationalization Score (RNS)), they come to similar conclusions regarding the extent of ideological nationalization within each Flemish party. In their article, N-VA and Groen are the most strongly nationalized in ideological terms, while Vlaams Belang is by far the most weakly nationalized. The other parties take intermediate positions, with PVDA and Open VLD in the middle of the scale and CD&V and Vooruit closer to Groen and N-VA. These findings resemble our own research results to a large extent. Only for Vooruit and PVDA did we find other, less nationalized scores. Concerning the relationship between the party type and ideological nationalization, Van de Voorde and his colleagues found only significant results for the role of party ideology (right-wing parties are less ideologically nationalized). Genetic origin and age did not influence the degree of ideological nationalization. In our paper, we did not find these relationships as well.

These findings lead us to the fundamental critique that studying ideological nationalization from the point of view of parties may not be so obvious. The explanatory power of the party type is very weak, as outlined in the previous paragraph. Therefore, future research should also look to other factors to explain ideological nationalization. Van de Voorde and his colleagues (2018) already did this in their article by not only focusing on party factors but also on the local context. The authors assumed that the ideological congruence of local chapters' manifestos not only runs along partisan lines but that the municipal political context plays a role as well. More specifically, they hypothesized that municipal size and being part of the governing majority or opposition also shape the extent of ideological nationalization of a party branch. Moreover, these presumptions were empirically confirmed. In the conclusion, Van de Voorde and his colleagues (2018) even stated that the local context performs better as an indicator of ideological nationalization than the party type. Consequently, this perspective has to be included in the new research.

Nevertheless, this paper has made a considerable contribution to the existing literature. First and already mentioned, ideological nationalization of local politics is an underdeveloped domain in political science. Existing nationalization research is predominantly concerned with the territorial homogeneity of national elections. If the local level is involved at all, the nationalization question is studied based on election results and the presence/absence of local lists. The ideological dimension was often neglected (Van de Voorde et al., 2018). With this paper, we begin to close this gap in the literature. Second, not only the substance of this paper but also the method is new. Instead of conducting surveys among local politicians, we chose to analyze election manifestos of local party chapters. Furthermore, we coded the programs with the help of the computer. The paper has shown the advantages of this method. Automatic quantitative content analysis is more objective and does not require much work. Despite these pluses, only very recently scholars have started to code local manifestos with the use of the computer (Gross & Jankowski, 2020; Otjes, 2021; see the *Local Manifesto Project*). To our knowledge, this paper is even the first to study local manifestos by means of automatic coding in a Belgian context. In this respect, this paper is highly innovative.

We are aware, however, that this study is only an exploratory exercise. We examined a limited number of manifestos and focused only on issue salience. Moreover, the analysis remained descriptive. Now that the method is tested for a first time, future research should include more manifestos to increase generalizability. A sample with municipalities varying in size instead of only cities would be a step in the right direction. To overcome the other two problems one might try other automatic quantitative

content analysis techniques than Yoshikoder. Wordscores, for example, allows to study positions as well and issues quantitative data that can be used in further statistical analyses (Lowe, 2008).

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APPENDIX

Coding scheme

Category	Keywords
Political management	deelgemeente*, district, gemeenteraad*, raadsleden, raadslid
Culture, tourism, leisure & events	ballet*, bibliothe*, bruisen*, *camping*, carnaval*, citymarketing*, concert*, *concert, cultureel*, culturel*, cultuur*, dans*, design*, erfgoed*, *evenement*, *feest*, festival*, film*, *film, fotografie, hotel*, jeugdhostel*, kampeer*, kampeerauto*, kerstmarkt*, kunst*, mode*, monument*, musea, *museum, museum*, musical*, muziek*, ontmoetingscentr*, opera*, podium*, schilderkunst*, stadsmarketing*, tentoonstelling*, *theater*, *toerisme*, toerist*, toeristisch*, toneel*, verenigingsleven
Diversity & integration	antidiscriminatiebeleid, asielzoeker*, blinden, discriminatie*, diversiteit*, etniciteit, etnisch*, gelijkekansenbeleid, gender*, *handicap, holebi, identiteit, illegalen*, inburgering*, integratie*, islam*, levensbeschouwing*, LGBTQ, *migratie*, moskee*, Nederlands*, nieuwkomer*, normen, praktijktest*, racisme*, racistisch*, religie*, *rolstoel*, rolstoelgebruiker*, seksisme, slechtiende*, stereotiepen, stereotypen, taal, taalles*, tolk*, transbeleid, transgender*, transseksue*, verblijfspapieren, vluchteling*, vrouwen, waarden
Finances	begroting*, *belasting*, beleggen, belegging*, besparing*, budgettair*, financieel, financiële, financiën, fiscaal, fiscale, fiscaliteit, heffing*, inkomsten, investeringen, investerings*, leningen, opcentiemen, rente*, retributie*, schuldgraad, stadsbegroting, uitgaven, voorheffing
Service provision	*administratie*, ambtenaren, app*, applicatie*, bureaucratie, *communicatie*, dienstencentr*, dienstverlening, digitaal, digitale, digitalisering, formulieren, klantgericht*, klantvriendelijk*, *marketing*, loket*, ombuds*, openingsuren, *personeel*, stadsadministratie, stadsdienst*, website, wifi
Family	gezin, gezinnen, gezinsvriendelijk, kinderdagverblijf*, kinderopvang*, opvoeding*
Youth	fuij*, fuiven, jeugd*, jongere*, *kamp, kind*, kinderen, kindvriendelijk*, skate*, skating*, speelplein*, speelplek*, speelruimte*, speelstraat, speeltoestel*, speelvoorziening*, speltheek, *studenten*, tiener*
Local economy	activeren*, activering, *arbeider, *arbeiders, arbeids*, bedrijf*, bedrijven*, e-commerce, economie, *fabriek*, *handel*, handelaar*, haven*, horeca*, *industrie*, industriële*, industrieterrein*, investeerder*, job*, kmo*, landbouw*, loopba*, middenstand*, *nijverheid, ondernemen, ondernemer*, onderneming*, shop*, starters*, terrasbelasting*, tewerkstelling, vakbond*, werkgelegenheid, werkgever*, werkloosheid*, werknemer*, werkzoekende*, winkel*, *winkelen, zelfstandigen*
Environment & climate	afval*, biodivers*, bomen*, bos, bossen, circulair*, containerpark*, dieren*, diervriendelijk*, drinkwater, duurzaam, duurzame, ecologie,

	ecologisch, elektrisch*, emissiezone, *energie*, fossiele, geluidshinder, geluidsoverlast, gerecycleerd*, gesorteerd, groene, groener, hemelwater*, herbruikbaar*, hergebruik*, hernieuwbaar, hernieuwbare, huisvuil, isoleren, klimaat*, *landbouw*, lawaaihinder, lucht, luchtkwaliteit*, luchtverontreiniging, milieu*, natuur, natuurgebied, Natuurpunt, natuurvereniging*, netheid, ontharden, ontharding, park, parken, planten, platteland, proper*, recyclage*, recyclagepark, recycleren, regenwater*, resftafval*, rivier, rivieren, sluikstort*, sluikstort*, sorteer*, sorteren, stadsboerderij, statiegeld, stilte*, tuinbouw, verduurzaming, vergroen*, *vervuiling, warmtenet*, warmtepomp*, water, waterkwaliteit, wateroverlast, zonneboiler*, zonnepanelen, zwerfvuil
Traffic & mobility	auto*, autodelen, autodeler, autoluw*, bewonerskaart*, *bus*, carpool*, fiets*, file*, Lijn, luchthaven, *metro*, *mobiliteit*, NMBS, oplaadfaciliteit*, oplaadpaal, oplaadpunt*, parkeer*, *parkeren, *parking*, schoolstraat, schoolstraten, snelheidsbeperking*, *taxi*, *tram*, trein*, *verkeer, verkeers*, verkeerslicht*, vervoer*, voertuig*, voetganger*, *wagen*
Education	leerkracht*, *leerling*, leraar, leraren*, *onderwijs*, *scholen*, *school*, *student*, universiteit
Infrastructure	fietspad*, fietsnelweg*, heraangelegd, heraanleg*, *infrastructuur*, *snelweg*, stadsvernieuwing, straat*, straten*, trottoir*, voetpad*, wegdek, wegen, wegenwerken
Elderly	assistentiewoning*, dementie*, eenzaamheid, ouderen*, *rusthuis*, senioren*, thuiszorg*, vereenzaming, woonzorgcentr*,
Democratic participation	adviesorgaan, adviesraad, adviesraden, burgerbegroting*, burgerbetrokkenheid, burgercollectie*, burgerinitiatief, burgerinitiatieven, buurtinitiatie*, co-creatie, infovergadering*, inspraak*, middenveld*, openbaarheid, overlegorgaan, participatie*, referenda, referendum, wijkwerking
Social affairs	arm, *armoede*, dakloosheid*, daklozen*, eenzaamheid*, *gezondheids*, hulpverlening, leefloner*, leefloon, mantelzorg*, *nachtopvang, OCMW, opvang, *preventie*, psychiatrisch*, schuldbemiddeling, sociaal, sociale, solidariteit, thuislozen*, vereenzaming*, voedselbedeling*, welzijn*, *ziekenhuis*, *ziekenhuizen*, zorg*, zorgbehoevende*
Sports	basketbal*, *club*, *sport*, *sporthal*, *voetbal*, volleybal*, zwem*
Safety	agent, agenten, ANPR, *brandweer*, *camera*, *criminaliteit*, crimineel, criminele*, deradicalisering*, *diefstal*, drug*, fraude, GAS*, gemeenschapswacht*, gerecht, *geweld*, hangjongere*, inbraak*, *inbraken, justitie, misdaad*, *misdrijf, *misdrijven, *overlast*, *politie*, *preventie*, radicalisering*, repressie*, straathoekwerk, terreur*, *veilig*, *veiligheid*, wijkagent
Housing	architectuur, bouwen, bouwvergunning*, cohous*, huisvesting*, huisvestingsmaatschappij*, huren, huur*, huurmarkt, omgevingsvergunning, projectontwikkelaar*, *renovatie*, renoveren, verdichting, verkavelingsvergunning*, voorheffing, werfvergunning, wonen, *woning*, woon*