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### Nationalisation of local party systems in Belgium (1976-2018)

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## Introduction

The concept of nationalisation of party systems is vastly discussed in the literature (Caramani, 2004; Jones and Mainwaring, 2003; Morgenstern et al., 2014; Mustillo and Mustillo, 2012). It was first used to assess the territorial homogeneity of the performance of national parties. More recently, multilevel approaches to politics have developed another understanding and measurement of the concept, examining how nationalised local politics truly is in terms of supply and demand (Ennser-Jedenastik and Hansen, 2013; Kjaer and Elklit, 2010a; Steyvers and Heyerick, 2017). This article builds on these approaches and conceives nationalisation of the local party system as the extent to which the local party systems mirror the national party system. This article examines the degree of nationalisation of the local party systems in Belgium since 1976. It investigates the effect of two types of factors on this degree of nationalisation. First, it considers the impact of structural features of a municipality, approached mainly through the municipality's size. Second, and this constitutes a significant contribution to the literature, it analyses the impact of conjunctural factors related to the parties' electoral performances at the previous national election. By doing so, we argue that the nationalisation of the political 'offer' in municipal elections is conditioned by the parties' reaction to the broader electoral context.

Our research innovates in several ways. First, using the index of nationalisation developed by Kjaer and Elklit (2010a), we assess the evolution of local party system nationalisation in Belgium since the 1970s. While many studies on local party system nationalisation rely on cross-sectional studies, few use cross-temporal designs (but see for instance Aars and Ringkjøb, 2005; Ennser-Jedenastik and Hansen, 2013; Kjaer and Elklit, 2010b). However, the very notion of nationalisation requires the study of a *process* of transformation over time. Second, the article discusses and investigates both structural and contextual explanations for the variation of nationalisation across space and time. Our empirical results highlight the positive effect of a municipality's size on local party system nationalisation, thus confirming previous studies. More crucially, the analysis uncovers the impact of conjunctural factors linked to parties' performances in the local districts at the previous national election: where parliamentary parties have performed weakly at the previous national election, nationalisation of the local party offer increases. Interestingly, the analysis demonstrates that

this relationship is stronger in the biggest municipalities, showing an interaction effect between conjunctural and structural factors. Moreover, our findings indicate that significant variation remains across *regions*. This opens up avenues for future research regarding the potential effects of institutional factors and the ‘freezing’ of political cultures across subnational party systems.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we present the literature, main arguments, and hypotheses. Second, we discuss the data and methods. Third, we present our case study, Belgium. Fourth, we describe the main findings. A final section discusses the main findings.

### **1. The determinants of nationalisation of local party systems**

Nationalisation is a key concept in the multi-level approach to party systems (Steyvers and Heyerick, 2017, p. 511). It covers various meanings. In the influential work by Caramani (2004), nationalisation refers to the territorial distribution of national parties’ electoral offer and success (i.e., the *demand* side). Hence, nationalisation concerns the national actors’ performance throughout the different constituencies of a given polity, which may vary depending on economic, institutional, or party-related factors (Bochsler et al., 2016; Caramani, 2004; Jones and Mainwaring, 2003; Lago and Lago-Peñas, 2016; Lago and Montero, 2014).

In the literature on local politics, the concept of nationalisation takes a rather different meaning, [that is, ‘the degree to which the local party system resembles the national party system at one point in time’ \(Ennsler-Jedenastik and Hansen, 2013, p. 779; see also Kjaer and Elklit, 2010b\)](#). This approach is rooted in Rokkan’s seminal work (1966), which discusses the nationalisation of the local party system through the concept of ‘politicisation’. ‘Politicisation’ describes a dynamic process through which the local party system increasingly resembles the national political system, as a result of national politics increasingly taking over local dynamics. This process would closely follow that of modernisation and national integration. Societal modernisation occurring notably through industrialisation would trigger conflicts between different segments of the municipality’s community. In turn, these conflicts would materialise into an increase in support for national parties competing on the structural cleavages. Gradually, national parties would become better suited to organising electoral competition in

localities, at the expense of traditional local notables. A similar argument has been defended by Hjellum (1967) and by Ashford (1975). This historical and structural approach has suggested an almost deterministic relationship between societal modernisation and *politicisation* or *nationalisation* of local party systems. [But while](#) Rokkan's theory [helped](#) to understand party system formation from the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the 1960s-70s, [Rokkan's idea of the inexorable nationalisation of local party systems has been put into question by scholars](#) looking at local party systems in recent decades (in Austria see Ennsner-Jedenastik and Hansen, 2013; in Belgium see Dodeigne et al., 2019, Steyvers and Heyerick, 2017; in Denmark see Kjaer and Elklit, 2010a, 2010b; in Norway see Aars and Ringkjøb, 2008, 2005; in the United Kingdom see Copus et al., 2008).

At [the](#) descriptive level, scholars have acknowledged the contemporaneous persistence of *localness* in local party systems (Reiser and Holtmann, 2008): a substantial proportion of local candidates and parties do not belong to the national party system. In other words, some actors are purely local phenomena. Non-partisan or 'independent' local lists (Reiser and Holtmann, 2008) remain a distinctive feature of local politics in Western European countries, notably in Belgium (Deschouwer, 2009; Reiser, 2008). In some countries, recent trends even display an increased *localisation* of local party systems (see for instance Otjes, 2018 in the Netherlands), while in others scholars point to over-time fluctuations at the aggregate level (see for instance Aars and Ringkjøb, 2005 in Norway). These findings somehow contradict Rokkan's linear prediction of nationalisation and call for further investigation.

At [the](#) theoretical level, these studies have brought amendments to Rokkan's seminal theory of politicisation by developing alternative explanatory theories of cross-municipalities and over-time variations. Regarding cross-municipality variations, scholars have tested the impact of municipality size, district magnitude, or size of the municipal council (Ennsner-Jedenastik and Hansen, 2013; Kjaer and Elklit, 2010a; Steyvers and Heyerick, 2017). Empirical findings point to a positive effect of municipality size on the degree of nationalisation, but the impact of district magnitude or size of the municipal council is less clear. Steyvers and Heyerick (2017) find that district magnitude decreases the degree of nationalisation of local party systems, while Kjaer and Elklit (2010a) find a negative effect on nationalisation in the *electoral* arena, but a positive effect in the *parliamentary* arena. Recently, Dodeigne et al. (2019) also

uncovered a significant link between the electoral success of national lists and the level of socio-economic inequalities in the municipality; hence, their findings are in line with Rokkan's *structural* approach but suggest cross-municipality variations rather than an overriding trend towards nationalisation.

In order to understand over-time variation, institutional explanations have been proposed. Examining nationalisation of local party systems in Denmark between 1966 and 2005, Kjaer and Elklit (2010b) show significant increases of nationalisation in local party systems in Denmark (1970 and 2005 elections) as a result of major reforms in the organisation of local governments, namely the merging of municipalities and the increase of municipalities' size. Yet, in that case, institutional change has affected the characteristics of municipalities (i.e., size). Examining the supply of non-partisan or independent local lists in Norway between 1937 and 2003, Aars and Ringkjøb (2005) point out the effects of electoral reforms: they show that the costs for presenting non-partisan lists increased (e.g. increase in the number of voters' signatures or written recommendations needed), and significantly impacted the degree of local party system nationalisation in return.

Overall, the nationalisation trend over time is not linear, but rather fluctuates between elections. Moreover, cross-sectional differences are significant within and across political systems. If existing studies point to the influence of structural and institutional explanations for these variations, few of them have included contextual or conjunctural factors related to the global electoral context. In the following section, we propose innovative hypotheses in that regard. We first build on existing findings related to the effect of a municipality's characteristics, then we suggest how electoral contexts can provide additional explanations, by moderating or enhancing nationalisation of local party systems<sup>1</sup>.

## **2. Hypotheses**

Our first hypothesis relates to the effect of a municipality's size. Among the reviewed literature (see above), this characteristic appears among the most significant and relatively uncontested. From a structural point of view, larger and more populated municipalities provide better grounds for competition for national parties aligned along the socio-economic cleavages. More populous localities are more heterogeneous in terms of populations, leading

to more complex cleavage structures (Dahl and Tufte, 1973; Dodeigne et al., 2019). From a more institutional point of view, large municipalities have larger municipal councils, which would provide an 'electoral arena more open to accommodating the full array of national political forces' (Steyvers and Heyerick, 2017, p. 529, referring to Geys, 2006). By contrast, the on-going presence of non-partisan lists or independent local candidates would be seen more frequently in smaller municipalities; local lists tend to be better suited to this type of environment. Besides, according to Copus and Erlingsson (2012), the non-partisan character of local politics is more appealing in smaller municipalities – with lower partisan conflictual interests – where local lists are seen as 'natural born loudspeakers' of consensual, non-ideological, and pragmatic politics (Holtmann, 2008, 14). Empirical research has shown that non-partisan local lists run more frequently and perform better in smaller municipalities (Ennser-Jedenastik and Hansen, 2013; Kjaer and Elklit, 2010a; Steyvers and Heyerick, 2017; Dodeigne et al., 2019). We thus expect that:

**H1.** the larger the municipality, the higher the degree of nationalisation of the local party systems.

In our second hypothesis, we complementarily consider the degree of nationalisation of local party systems as a response to the electoral context. As 'the main drivers of nationalisation' (Ennser-Jedenastik and Hansen, 2013, 782), national parliamentary parties are likely to be sensitive to the local electoral context when they decide whether or not to present candidates in a local race, to form pre-electoral alliances with other lists or to compete under a local label (Bol and Teuber, 2013). Party strategies are supposedly designed to capitalise on the benefits – or escape the costs – of global conjunctural electoral factors such as party tides (Bol and Teuber, 2013) or the second-order election nature of subnational elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; [Schakel and Jeffery 2013](#)). By evaluating electoral performances of their party at national elections prior to the local elections in a given municipality, parliamentary actors draw inferences on the current nature of the electoral demand by voters.

We argue that weak electoral performances at the national level might be perceived as an 'electoral threat' by national parliamentary parties, with the potential to contest their dominance both in the local and the national electoral arenas. When national parties collectively show glimpses of weakness, this might also signal to potential newcomers that

there is a possibility to successfully enter the electoral arena (Cox, 1997; Tavits, 2006). Weak performances of traditional parliamentary parties might signal to outsiders that there is a realistic chance of electoral success for emerging non-national parties (Forsythe et al., 1993; Lago, 2008). Thus, when national parliamentary parties fear to lose ground to newcomers and outsiders, they will react to this ‘threat’ by re-investing at the local level (organisationally through re-invigorating local branches, and electorally by re-affirming their national label in local contests – here, we test the latter strategy). In that way, national parliamentary parties would use local contests to ‘monopolise the political market and marginalise independent non-partisan competitors’ (Ennser-Jedenastik and Hansen, 2013, 782). Our hypothesis thus posits a link between parliamentary parties’ performances at the previous national election in a municipality and their *presence* in the subsequent local contest. While some national party leaderships enforce an electoral offer as a response to a state-wide strategy (e.g. the regionalist N-VA since 2012 or the Christian Democrats (cdH) in 2018), other strategies reflect the decisions of the leaders of local party branches defending their local grounds. Irrespective of the degree of vertical autonomy of the party organisation, the key driver of the causal mechanism remains: local branches of national parliamentary parties react according to the electoral threats caused by newcomers and outsiders. Overall, the degree of nationalisation should be greater as a result of the increased presence of parliamentary parties reacting to the success of alternative lists.

However, we do not expect parliamentary parties to react to such electoral threats in the same way in each municipality. Implementing party strategies is costly, and some electoral threats may appear more disturbing to national parties than others. We expect that national parliamentary parties will be more reactive to the electoral context where the stakes are high for them in terms of political (and economic) power, but also due to more symbolic considerations, related to higher visibility and public attention. Hence, in the bigger municipalities, parliamentary parties’ weaker results in previous elections are more likely to spill over into other tiers of government. This effect is furthermore reinforced by the structure of opportunities for party organisation in larger municipalities. In the latter, local party organisations have more extensive organisational capacity and resources (e.g. in terms of political staff and money) to respond to an electoral threat. By contrast, in the smaller municipalities, this electoral threat is not only less damaging for parliamentary parties but it

is harder to stem the electoral success of local lists. Smaller municipalities offer the most suitable structure of opportunities to succeed: party cleavages are active less often, candidate recruitment is accelerated with shorter lists of candidates, and campaign effectiveness is facilitated by “friends and neighbours” effects. This leads us to the formulation of the following hypotheses:

**H2a:** When national parliamentary parties’ electoral dominance is weaker in prior national elections in the territory of a municipality, the degree of nationalisation of local party systems is higher.

**H2b:** The effects of national parliamentary parties’ electoral dominance on the degree of nationalisation of the local party systems is stronger in bigger municipalities.

### **3. The Belgian political systems and local elections**

This article analyses local elections in Belgium, between 1976 and 2018, namely across eight electoral cycles (1976, 1982, 1988, 1994, 2000, 2006, 2012, and 2018). We used 1976 as the starting year of reference for heuristic reasons: official election results are only available from 1976 onwards<sup>ii</sup>. In Belgium, municipal elections are held simultaneously across the territory every six years. They are not synchronised with other elections (regional, federal, European), except provincial elections. Local elections are based on a proportional system with semi-open lists<sup>iii</sup>. The number of seats in each municipality is proportional to the size of the municipality. Elections are held on one single district that corresponds to the geographical limits of the municipality (except for the city of Antwerp, where the municipality district is divided into nine sub-districts).

Belgium is a federal country divided into three regions (Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels-Capital) and three linguistic communities: Dutch-speaking, French-speaking, and German-speaking (the latter representing less than 1% of the total population located in the East of Wallonia). As in other European countries, administrative reforms have strongly diminished the number of municipalities in Belgium after World War II from over 2600 municipalities to currently 581 municipalities: 19 in Brussels, 300 in Flanders, and 262 in Wallonia. This number has been extremely stable since 1977. The only modification took place on the eve of the 2018 elections when 15 Flemish municipalities merged to form 7 new municipalities.

The federalisation of the country started in 1970 and occurred through six state reforms (1970, 1980, 1988-89, 2001, 2011) that gradually increased the power and autonomy of the regions and communities. The political offer varies across the different regions of the country. Since the 1970s, the national party system is split around a linguistic divide. There are virtually no national parties covering the entire territory, but there are two autonomous 'regional' party systems (Billiet et al., 2006; Brack and Pilet, 2010; De Winter et al., 2006). Brussels is the only region where Flemish-speaking and French-speaking parties compete in the same districts, although Flemish voters represent quite a small proportion of the electorate in the 19 municipalities. Cartels and alliances between Flemish- and French-speaking parties and candidates are thus frequent at the local level in the capital region.

The appendix presents all national/regional parties that are included: the Christian-democrats (*CD&V* and *cdH*), Socialists (*sp.a* and *PS*) and Liberals (*Open VLD* and *MR*), constituting the three traditional 'pillar' parties; regionalist parties, including the *N-VA* (Flemish regionalists, and its predecessors); and *DéFI* (defending the interests of the Francophones) which performs relatively well in Brussels but remains relatively weak in the Walloon region; the populist radical right parties (*Vlaams Belang*, *Parti Populaire*); and the radical left (*PvdA* and *PTB*); and smaller parties that have emerged and disappeared over the period of analysis.

At the local level, these parties are well-entrenched, especially those of the 'traditional' political families (Socialists, Christian-Democrats, and Liberals). Nevertheless, Belgium is also one of the countries presenting the highest presence and success of local lists (Reiser, 2008, p. 288). This seems to be the case particularly in Wallonia: Dodeigne et al. (2019) estimate that in 2012, the number of lists using a local or a mixed label was higher than that of lists using a 'protected' national party label and number, whereas Steyvers and Heyerick (2010) estimate that around 70% of the electoral offer in Flemish municipalities was national.

## **4. Data and method**

### ***4.1 The index of nationalisation***

To measure the degree of localised vs. nationalised nature of the local party systems, we use Kjaer and Elklit's index of nationalisation (Kjaer and Elklit, 2010a, pp. 433–434). The index is

based on local parties' connection to national parties, primarily through a 'nominal approach' of list labels (Kjaer and Elklit, 2010a; Steyvers and Heyerick, 2017). The label that parties use in local contests reveals a great deal about their organisational connection to national parties as well as about their willingness to appear as a purely local or as a national actor (for instance, through the use of a protected name, abbreviation, or list number).

Kjaer and Elklit's index considers the number of national parties and of local parties running in the municipality. It basically divides the number of national parties running in the municipality by the 'potential number of parties running in a municipality, if all parties registered for participation in parliamentary elections were also running in the municipality' (Kjaer and Elklit, 2010a, p. 433). It distinguishes between three categories of lists or parties: local parties running in the local election, national parties running in the local election, and national parties *not* running in the local election. The indicator reflects, therefore, two dimensions of the electoral offer: (1) the presence of local lists, and (2) the absence of national actors. In order to identify parties belonging to the national party system, we use the protected party labels. The index is created as follows:

- (a) number of local parties running at the local election
- (b) number of national parties running at the local election
- (c) number of national parties registered for the previous parliamentary election
- (d) a + c. potential number of parties running at the local election, if all parties registered for participation in the previous parliamentary elections were also running in the municipality.

The index of nationalisation is then calculated for each municipality as the proportion of national parties running over the sum of the number of local lists and the potential number of national parties running at the local election, thus:

$$\text{Index of local party system nationalisation} = b/d.$$

The index ranges from 0 to 1, with 1 representing a fully nationalised local party system (i.e., each registered national parliamentary party presents a list and no local party runs), 0 for a fully localised local party system (only local parties are running). The index is calculated in the

parliamentary arena (i.e., by counting only the number of parties represented in the municipal council, thereby excluding parties that do not succeed in passing the minimal threshold of obtaining one seat in a municipality)<sup>iv</sup>.

In terms of operationalisation, local branches of national parties ('indicator b') are identified by the official region-wide party number attributed at election time. Electoral legislation stipulates that political parties represented in parliamentary assemblies may request to forbid the use of some names while they are attributed a specific list number. Despite these limitations, local lists have much freedom for choosing their names, contributing to the observed large diversity in the names on the lists. For the 2006, 2012, and 2018 municipal elections we directly rely on these numbers to identify local branches of national parties. For the 1976-2000 period, data provided by the Federal Public Service of Home Affairs does not provide the list number associated with lists' electoral results. We thus relied on the list's official party name through nominal identification<sup>v</sup>. For the number of national parties registered for the previous parliamentary election ('indicator c'), all information is published by the Federal Public Service of Home Affairs. The table in the appendix presents the number and name of all parliamentary parties per region and for the different elections.

The index computed in this research allows [assessing](#) the degree to which the local party system mirrors the national party system in terms of political offer, and more crucially, it allows [analysing](#) nationalisation across municipalities and over time. The index, therefore, reflects a party's *strategy* of whether or not to appear under its national label. We acknowledge that the set of lists falling into the non-national category is quite heterogeneous, and in fact hides many national parties 'in disguise' – that is, lists that look like local or independent phenomena but which in fact are well-connected to national party organisations (in terms of candidates, staff, and campaign resources). Our index might thus underestimate actual levels of local party system nationalisation. However, distinguishing local lists from local branches of national parties 'in disguise' requires time-consuming qualitative coding for each list. While those efforts have been produced for recent studies via official information on party websites, press coverage, and interviews with list leaders (Steyvers et al., 2008; Steyvers and Heyerick, 2010; Dandoy et al., 2013; Dodeigne et al., 2019, 2020), such an endeavour is

virtually impossible for older elections where data availability is extremely limited. Therefore, such limitations call caution in interpreting the empirical results.

#### **4.2. Independent and control variables**

To test our hypotheses, we include size of the municipality in terms of population, and the share of votes of parliamentary and local party lists in former national elections. First, municipality size varies greatly, from 82 up to 549,146 inhabitants (mean: 17,611 and standard deviation: 30,026). Because of the large number of small to medium-size municipalities, the variable is strongly right skewed. The variable was thus log-transformed to tend towards normal distribution of residuals in the OLS models.

Second, we estimate the parliamentary parties' electoral dominance for the latest official results available before the local elections – we thus view the national elections as a sort of 'mid-term election' between two local elections (every six years). Because our dependent variable is an aggregate indicator at the municipal level, our indicator of parliamentary parties' electoral dominance cannot distinguish [between](#) individual parliamentary [parties' electoral performances](#). Instead, our indicator of parliamentary party dominance presents the global electoral success of parliamentary parties, i.e., the aggregate share of votes of parliamentary parties. For that goal, we use the official results of national elections at the closest territorial level available, namely the electoral *cantons*. Electoral cantons are mere administrative entities – typically made of three or four municipalities – and entitled to carry out voting tasks of the electoral process. In total, the official national results for 29,963 lists were collected from 1974 until 2014.

Unsurprisingly, in the Belgian “particratie”, parliamentary [parties attract](#) on average 96.4 percent of the total vote share in the electoral cantons. This electoral dominance might appear almost monopolistic for a non-Belgian audience. However, such an indicator remains meaningful for two reasons. On the one hand, at the national level, new party entries in the national parliamentary arena are extremely rare. [The](#) traditional party families [were extremely](#) powerful during [most of](#) our period of analysis. [The](#) 2019 national elections [were remarkable in that regard: for the first time in Belgian political history](#), the three traditional party families (Socialists, Liberals, and Christian Democrats) lost the majority of seats in the

Chamber. In other words, electoral threats are not observed as dramatic drifts in the Belgian party system, but through the incremental electoral decline of traditional political forces. At the symbolic level, progress of non-parliamentary parties above the electoral threshold of 5 percent is itself seen with the seriousness of an electoral threat. This is precisely what our indicator of party dominance captures.

On the other hand, our indicator presents some interesting variance: the lowest vote share being 43 percent and the highest being 100 percent. In the Belgian strong proportional electoral system, a few percentages lost to non-traditional parliamentary parties can be extremely costly in terms of office or policy-seeking strategies. A party losing its leadership position due to a few swing votes also loses its – informal – right of initiative for the coalition-building process. Overall, each percentage of vote matters, even as small as a few points of difference between parties. [Note that](#) because the proportion of votes obtained by other lists is significantly skewed to the left, we also log-transformed this variable.

## 5. Analysis

### 5.1. Descriptive analysis

The descriptive statistics of the index of nationalisation of local party systems across regions and over time are presented in Figure 1. Each boxplot presents the distribution of the index within each region for the eight local elections that took place in Belgium (from top to bottom: black boxplots for [Flanders](#), grey boxplots for [Brussels](#), and white boxplots for [Wallonia](#)).

#### [FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 1 [displays](#) two main results. First, the degree of nationalisation is relatively low in Belgium according to comparative standards. While Ennser-Jedenastik and Hansen (2013) found a score above 0.44 in all but three Austrian Länder for the 1989-2013 period, Wallonia presents a lower degree of nationalisation (average score index of 0.19 – lowest score being 0.13 in 2000) followed closely by Brussels (average of 0.26 – lowest score being 0.19 in 1994). In this respect, Flanders is almost the exception in Belgium with an average score (0.44) identical to most Austrian Länder. In fact, 5 out of 8 Flemish local elections present a score

above 0.40, whereas the lowest score (0.29) remains greater than the largest Walloon score observed since 1976. There are thus statistical differences observed across Belgian regions ( $p < .001$ ).

Second, we find hardly any evidence of a time effect. In line with recent works revising Rokkan's seminal argument and showing the persistence of 'localness' in local party systems, we observe no incremental processes towards fully nationalised local party systems. On the one hand, the largest Flemish scores are relatively far from a scenario of full nationalisation of local party systems (average of 0.44 on a scale from 0 to 1). Furthermore, while a time effect is noticeable, it is not a linear one. Instead, two 'plateaus' are observed: after the 2000s, each Flemish election year presents higher average scores (7 to 12 points) than during the 1976-1994 period. In contrast, not only do Wallonia and Brussels present weak nationalisation scores, but there is no uniform trend over time in those regions. Index scores go up and down from one election to the other. For instance, Brussels municipalities experienced a decline of index scores in 1988 and 1994, then an increase in the 2000s before encountering a decline in 2012 and going up again in 2018.

Overall, students of nationalisation would better characterise the Belgian case as made of 'three separated worlds'. Flanders is a region where local elections are more extensively dominated by a competition between local branches of national political parties and produces rather homogenous local party systems across its territory. This trend has been reinforced since 2000. Conversely, Wallonia is a good example of a region where the structure of competition is dominated by a localist tradition. In between, the Brussels region seems to embrace both 'worlds' depending on the time period of analysis.

The differences across regions are not that surprising for those familiar with Belgian local politics. The rationales for the very distinct time effects are, however, more puzzling. In Flanders, the 2000 elections present a turning point in Flemish politics. One possible explanation may lie in the nature of the Flemish party system which – in spite of its high degree of fragmentation – tended to stabilise in the post-2000 period. On a more technical level, since most parliamentary parties compete in local elections (up to 7), the individual influence of parties is more limited. That is to say, the absence of one party will have a rather limited effect

on the broader index (because each individual party represents about 14 percent). Although not intuitive, the Flemish fragmented party system thus contributes to a more consistent nationalisation of local party systems over time. In comparison, the absence of a single Walloon party in a local election impacts as much as 25 percent of the index in a given municipality. As the index is much more sensitive to this type of ‘medium-size’ party system, the national parties’ choice (not) to present local lists causes much greater discrepancies over time. As an example, the strategic choice of the new parliamentary radical-left party (PTB) to mostly present lists in a few strategic suburbs of the ‘red belt’ (see Paulis and François, 2020) clearly undermines nationalisation scores in 2018. Likewise, the decision of the established Christian-Democratic party (cdH) to ‘open-up’ its local lists to civil society in many municipalities decreased nationalisation scores. Overall, these regional differences in nationalisation reflect parties’ capacity and strategic choices to be – homogeneously – present in municipalities in the different regions.

## **5.2. Multivariate analysis**

This section aims to assess how variance in the index scores – across regions and over time – can be explained by the structural determinants of municipalities’ characteristics as well as by the conjunctural electoral dominance of parliamentary parties. For that purpose, we developed a multivariate linear regression predicting the influence of a municipality’s population and parliamentary electoral dominance on the index scores. Considering the structure of the data (4,383 municipalities nested in three regions and eight elections), we specified a multilevel linear regression with a varying-intercept (i.e., the average score of the index score) according to 24 units of election year-region (e.g. Flanders-1976, Flanders-2018, Wallonia-1976, Wallonia-2018, etc.).

The null-model shows a considerable amount of variance at the electoral year-region level (26%). This implies that the use of multilevel techniques is instructive, even in the absence of specific electoral year-region level theoretical assumptions. In the regression equation below,  $\beta_{0j}$  is the intercept,  $\beta_{1j}$  and  $\beta_{2j}$  are the regression slope for our two main explanatory variables

$$\text{Index of nationalisation}_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j} \text{Log Population}_{ij} + \beta_{2j} \text{log. of non-parliamentary parties' share of vote}_{ij} + \beta_{4j} \text{Region}_j + \beta_{5j} \text{Election Year}_j + \varepsilon_{ij} + \delta_j$$

of interest (municipality size and parliamentary electoral dominance),  $\beta_3$  is the regression slope for region, and  $\varepsilon_{ij}$  and  $\delta_j$  the usual residual error terms. The subscript  $j$  is for the nested structure per election year-region ( $j = 1...j\delta$ ) and the subscript  $i$  is for municipality ( $i = 1...nj$ ).

Model 1 in Table 1 includes the explanatory level-1 testing of our two hypotheses, namely municipality's log of population (H1), and the parliamentary parties' electoral dominance in former national elections (H2a). In addition, level-2 control variables cover the election years and the region. Model 2 adds an interactive effect between the log of population and parliamentary parties' electoral dominance (H2b). In both models, our two hypotheses are verified. The effects of municipality size are strong and statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). In Model 1, *ceteris paribus*<sup>vi</sup>, we observe that a municipality with a population size of 6453 inhabitants (log population = 8.774, the first quartile) presents a score of the index of about 0.39; a municipality with a population size of 18638.79 inhabitants (log population = 9.833, the third quartile) presents a score of the index of about 0.48. At the extreme values, the smallest and largest municipalities present index scores of 0 and 0.78, respectively.

**[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]**

In line with H2a, the parliamentary parties' dominance has a positive effect on nationalisation. A greater share of votes from non-parliamentary parties in previous national elections is seen as a threat by established parties which react by reinforcing their [offer](#) at the next local elections. Finally, the region control variable proves to be an important predictor of nationalisation of local party systems. It is, however, hardly significant for one time period with the variable election year. A model without the region variable (not displayed in the table) shows that 37% of the variance is located at level-2 of our data structure. Once the region variable is included, the inter-class remaining variance drops to 15%<sup>vii</sup>. It thus confirms that regional differences remain predominant, beyond municipalities' structural characteristics as well as parliamentary parties' former electoral dominance.

In Model 2, the effects of most variables hold with the inclusion of the interactive effect between municipality size and parties' dominance. Interestingly, the sign of the variable of parliamentary parties' electoral dominance becomes negative while the interactive term is

significant. Because the latter term is positive, the results indicate that the nationalisation of local party systems increases as the share of votes for non-parliamentary parties becomes larger. It also means that the negative effects of votes for non-parliamentary parties decreases as the municipality size increases.

As stated by Brambor et al. (2006: 76), it is possible to observe statistical marginal effects that are different for substantively relevant values of the interactive variable but not for others. This information cannot be simply assessed based on the mere reading of regression tables. Their protocol permits to provide ‘substantively meaningful estimates of marginal effects and their standard errors’ (p. 81). Therefore, we implemented the procedure they developed which visualises the marginal effects across the distribution of **values of the interactive variable** (Figures 2 and 3). The histograms at the bottom of the figures display the distribution of values along the x-axis for parliamentary parties’ dominance (Figure 2) and municipality size (Figure 3). On both figures, the dotted line represents the null effect of the variable: below the line means negative effects, above the line means positive effects. The grey areas cover the 90% confidence intervals.

**[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]**

**[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]**

Figure 2 displays the marginal effects of municipality size. In line with H1, the variable municipality size always has a positive effect on nationalisation of local party systems. However, the magnitude of the effect increases when the electoral weight of the non-parliamentary parties expands. In other words, the structural effect of municipality size is the strongest when the non-parliamentary parties obtained the largest share of votes, i.e., when those parties represent a credible electoral threat to established political parties. Hence, Figure 2 shows that the effect of a municipality size on nationalisation of local party systems almost doubled between the lowest and strongest electoral weight of non-parliamentary parties.

Figure 3 presents the effects of parliamentary parties’ dominance according to municipality size. The relation between the two variables is more complex as the marginal effects of

parliamentary parties' dominance presents negative, null, and positive effects depending on the municipality size. This is visually displayed by the lines of the marginal effects crossing the dotted line representing a null effect of parties' dominance. The reading of Figure 3 is the following: in large municipalities, the effects of parliamentary parties' dominance are positive; in small municipalities the effects are negative; and in medium-size municipalities parliamentary parties' dominance has no effect (confidence intervals cross the null-effect line). In line with H2a, these results suggest that when the electoral threat is real in former (national) elections, parliamentary parties react at the next (local) elections. In other words, where the electoral dominance of parliamentary parties is contested in the latest national elections (acting as midterms elections between two local elections), parliamentary parties react and make sure to hold their electoral ground in the municipalities. As a result, parliamentary parties present local lists to counter political outsiders – currently benefiting from a favourable electoral wind – at the next local elections. In line with H2b, this behaviour is only encountered in larger municipalities where the electoral implications are potentially more damaging for parliamentary parties. The latter seem to overlook the electoral threat of local parties in the smallest municipalities; the negative spill-over effects are arguably more limited in those municipalities. By contrast, the greater attractiveness of local lists in those areas as well as their facilitated accessibility to offices results in more *localised* local party systems. As a result, in small municipalities non-parliamentary parties seem to take advantage of their electoral breakthrough in previous national elections, using them as a springboard to entrench their position in local politics. In the largest cities, our empirical results indicate that – all other things being equal – national parties not only stand their ground, but even reinforce their presence in local politics when non-parliamentary parties are more successful in previous national elections.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The nationalisation of local party systems has been increasingly discussed in electoral studies. In the 1960s, Rokkan (1966, p.251) conceived the nationalisation of local politics as an incremental – and inevitable – process of modern politics. However, far from declining, local lists remain a distinctive feature of local politics in most European countries. To better understand the variation in the nationalisation of local party systems, this research examined the political offer in all local elections between 1976 and 2018 in the three Belgian regions.

The impact of two factors was tested: first, the impact of municipalities' [population](#) size; and second, the impact of the conjunctural electoral dominance of (non-)parliamentary parties in previous national [elections](#). The analysis then [assessed](#) the interactive effect of these two variables.

Our findings are manifold. First, at a descriptive level, we uncovered no process towards full nationalisation over time – except to some extent in Flanders where there is clearer evolution albeit certainly not towards 'full nationalisation' and across all municipalities. Second, nationalisation of local party systems is strongly associated with the structural municipality's characteristics: the larger the municipality, the stronger the nationalisation of local party systems. Third, the electoral [context](#) matters: when non-parliamentary parties threaten the quasi-monopolistic dominance [of established parties](#) on the electoral market, [the latter](#) respond by increasing their presence in the subsequent local elections. Interestingly, this strategic response from parliamentary parties is, however, merely observed in the largest municipalities (where electoral consequences are arguably the highest). Fourth, the variance across regions remains important beyond [municipality/structural](#) and [electoral/conjunctural](#) factors. Flemish local party systems are substantially more nationalised than Walloon and Brussels local party systems. While our analysis cannot account for these regional differences, tentative explanations can be proposed.

One type of explanation pertains to the regional 'initial structural conditions' (Rokkan, 1969, [p.252](#)) that would persist over time. Wallonia, by contrast to Brussels and Flanders, has remained more rural. [According to Rokkan \(1969, p. 263\)](#), such contexts have generally favoured alliances between national parties and local leaders. Especially in municipalities that were already controlled by local barons and considered "safe local elections" (more rural areas where 'notable politics' still prevailed), a win-win strategy had often been implemented: local leaders agreed to support national parties at national elections in return for control of their 'local kingdom' [as well as policy feedbacks](#) from upper tiers of government. In more polarised municipalities where local contests were more disputed (typically more urban areas where party cleavages were activated), national parties had a greater incentive to participate directly. In this respect, the current rural areas in Wallonia would still display strong local notables showing looser connections with national parties, while the more urban

municipalities in Flanders would have developed a stronger nationalisation pattern. However, this type of explanation seems less relevant to explain the differences observed between Brussels and the other regions. Hence, more research is needed in that regard.

A second type of explanation pertains to institutional differences. Regions in Belgium have increasingly gained in constitutional autonomy on local politics through six successive state reforms over the last 50 years. Since the 2000s, regions have acquired constitutional power over the organisation of local elections – creating diverging territorial organisation of municipalities (different ways of selecting the mayor, different rules regarding gender representation on the lists, different rules regarding seat allocation, etc.). In particular, changes in rules for selecting the mayor in Wallonia (in 2006) might have induced a transformation of electoral competition at the local level, where office-seeking actors could try to form broader electoral coalitions involving a greater number of local and national actors in order to obtain the highest vote share. This could have led to a higher rate of non-national labels (e.g. ‘mayor list’ for the incumbent majority). Yet our findings do not point to tremendous changes in Wallonia from 2006 onwards. After the 2019 elections, the newly formed Flemish government announced reforms that could also influence the nationalisation of local party systems, including the direct election of the mayor, as well as the abolition of compulsory voting and voluntary municipality mergers. Future analyses should closely examine how such institutional changes may affect local political dynamics.

These future analyses should try to overcome the methodological and empirical limitations that we encountered in this research. First, our index of nationalisation, based on a nominal approach, reduces the type of list to a dichotomous choice between national and local lists, and as a consequence may hide a great variety of lists and political realities (quasi-national lists, ‘national lists-in-disguise’, alliances, etc.). Yet, given the period covered and the number of local elections considered, an in-depth qualitative approach was out-of-reach. We encourage future research to continue to reflect upon the elaboration of wide-ranging and comparative measurement tools of local party system nationalisation. Second, difficulties linked to data availability over the timespan have limited the range and scope of the independent variables that could be considered. Hence, the number of independent factors was limited to municipality size and previous electoral performances at the national level.

Besides, these electoral performances could only be collected at the cantonal level, thereby involving incongruence between the level of observation and of analysis – [although this incongruence is quite limited, given that one canton includes around three to four municipalities](#). Third, our research design mostly relied on aggregate-level relationships, looking at the degree of nationalisation of each local electoral contest. Future research should lower the level of observation to consider party-level (and eventually, candidate-level) variations. While we have discussed underlying micro-level mechanisms that we think account for the aggregate-level tendencies uncovered, more research is needed to better understand the micro-level strategic choices made by national and local leaders to invest or withdraw from the local electoral arenas.

Overall, this research should be considered as a first attempt to explore the variation of local party system nationalisation in Belgium over a long period. From these quite exploratory findings, in-depth research could be developed that would elaborate more fine-grained measurements and explanatory mechanisms regarding parties' electoral strategies in multi-layered contexts.

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<sup>i</sup> This article thus develops a *meso*-level of analysis seeking to assess the effects of aggregate contextual and conjunctural factors (such as the electoral dominance of parliamentary parties in a given municipality) on

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aggregate behaviour (the degree of nationalisation of local party systems). Our hypotheses thus reflect such meso concepts and measurements. While we do not dispute the relevance of a *micro*-level analysis, for instance, [analyzing](#) individual party lists' decisions, this is not part of our research objectives (it is rather the background empirical reality on which we construct our research goals).

<sup>ii</sup> In the early 1970s, different legislations were adopted to drastically reduce the number of Belgian municipalities from 2359 to 596 in January 1977 (first new elections taking place in October 1976). Electoral results before that period that are not systematically compiled in a reliable way by official authorities.

<sup>iii</sup> Since 2018, Walloon local elections are organised with a fully open list system.

<sup>iv</sup> We also estimated the index based on the mere electoral offer, i.e., by counting only the number of parties that presented a list at local elections. Results were highly similar and we could hardly detect any difference between the two indexes, the median scores of the parliamentary and electoral indexes being respectively 0.30 and 0.29 with quasi identical indicators of dispersion.

<sup>v</sup> From a heuristic viewpoint, this certainly is the only possible strategy regarding data collection and analysis. Yet, doing so, there is the risk of underestimating the genuine degree of nationalisation. However, to our knowledge, there is no empirical evidence that would support that the potential of underestimation is biased for certain periods of time. Therefore, this does not jeopardise our testing of data but caution must be warranted in the exact interpretation of the degree of nationalisation.

<sup>vi</sup> For a Flemish municipality in the 2000 elections.

<sup>vii</sup> In the appendix, Figure 4a shows the varying distribution of the intercept according to the 24 election years-region units. We observe a distinctive pattern where the average indexes are higher for Flanders, followed by Wallonia and then Brussels, irrespective of the election years. Once the region control variable is included, Figure 4b shows that the variance of the intercept across 24 election years-region units presents no distinctive pattern either per region or per election year.