**Birds of a Feather or by Note? Ideological Nationalization of Local Electoral Manifestos in Belgium**

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**Abstract**

Scholars trying to unravel the phenomenon of nationalization seldom consider the local policy layer or the ideological dimension. This study applies a widespread content analysis of local election manifestos to investigate possible programmatic overlaps between the party headquarters and its local branches. Quantitative data of 89 programs is used to calculate an innovative nationalization measure which is later on introduced in a linear regression model. Ideological similarities seem to be omnipresent, but primarily among leftist parties, branches participating in the local government and in larger municipalities. Hence, local government is clearly being penetrated by national policy programming in the form of an ideological election template whose core is always maintained.

Keywords: Nationalization, Electoral Manifestos, Ideology, Content Analysis

**Introduction**

Ever since the introduction of the modern liberal democratic nation-state scholars have debated the surplus of an independent local government (Sharpe, 1970; Kjellberg, 1995). The discussion traditionally revolved around the ‘room for local choice’ evoking a tension between local self-government and central agency (with differing degrees of discretion in co-governance). In contemporary local governance, the range of functional responsibilities for local government has increasingly widened and the nature of their actions galvanized in an enabling direction. Hence, traditional central-local regimes have been replaced with a default of multi-level governance implying multifaceted modes of policy entanglement of the various layers of government affecting local leeway in a differentiated manner (Goldsmith & Page, 2010; Denters, 2011).

Capturing the colligated political dynamics of this debate, the thesis of nationalization of local politics has emerged as a discrete lynchpin. Originally coined to comprehend the deterritorialisation of national elections (Caramani, 2004), the concept has gradually been stretched to captivate the various dimensions of the alleged geographical homogenization of politics equally from a local government perspective. This hollowing out of place-bound heterogeneity has often been problematized with the local level identified as close to citizens taking tangible decisions that visibly affect their daily life. National influences are professed to erase the particularities of local politics.

Most of the subsequent research has been concerned with the nationalization of the supply and the success of parties in the early phases of local elections (Ackaert, 2006). The predominant perspective is ecological comparing differences between municipalities resulting in explorations of local party system nationalization (Kjær & Elklit, 2010a, Ennser & Hansen, 2013). Complementary efforts have widened the scope to include later phases in local elections or to reorient the unit of analysis to the individual level of politicians or voters (Kjær & Steyvers, 2014). Yet others have tried to sharpen insights in focussing on similarities in the structure and functioning of local chapters and their national centre or by scrutinizing uniformity in their policies. It is at the intersection of these latter two this paper is situated.

Its central research question is: to what extent does the nationalization of local elections apply in ideological terms? Particularly, this paper aims to scrutinize ideological nationalization as programmatic congruence through comparing electoral manifestos of local chapters with the model program provided by the central headquarters of their national mother party. Our approach is quantitative trying to measure local-national similarity through the amount of attention dedicated to designated policy categories in these manifestos. As an object of quantitative research in local politics, manifestos have not attracted abundant scholarly attention (but see Ashworth, 2000 & Agasøster, 2001) opposite to their regional or national counterparts (see the respective *Regional* and *Comparative Manifestos Project*). The large number of local units in each country (hampering straightforward generalizability) and the labour intensive coding of manifestos (whenever readily available) have evidently added to that. In contrast, this paper will try to both describe the extent to which this form of nationalization is the case as well as to account for variation within it by using manifesto data for the most recent local elections of 2012 in Belgium.

This context could be designated as exemplary for nationalization. Institutionally spurred by its semi-open proportional list system a local variant of the multiparty system has developed that can currently be characterized for the bulk of municipalities as mixed (national candidate lists as well as their non-national counterparts compete and obtain seats) to predominantly national (non-national lists compete but do not obtain seats). Our empirical research is limited to lists partaking in local elections in the Northern region of Flanders. Apart from the mundane limitations of data availability, this selectivity seems justified by the Belgian particularity of a fully regionalized party system (‘national’ parties have seized to exist) and the gradual organic and functional inculcation of municipalities in their regional orbit stemming from consecutive rounds of state reform (Wayenberg et al., 2011). In addition, the 2012 local elections have often been conceived as a most likely case of nationalization abetted by a surge of local anchorage of the Flemish-nationalist party N-VA in the slipstream of its preceding supra-local electoral seizure (Steyvers & De Ceuninck, 2013).

In sum, taking party lists as the prime unit of analysis the paper provides a cross-sectional account of one aspect in a ditto dimension of the wider dynamics of the nationalization of local politics, albeit important and often neglected. This is a first theoretical addition to the current literature the paper endeavours. It thereby seeks to transcend these limitations trying to contribute to the underdeveloped study of parties at the local level and their nexus with the national realm (Kjær & Elklit, 2010a). Moreover, by developing an innovative method to assess ideological nationalization and applying it in a representative context the paper tries to empirically enrich the on-going nationalization debate. This will help us to unravel the key query formulated alternatively: do birds of a feather indeed flock together or is each local species known by its place-bound note?

This paper proceeds as follows. The first part elaborates on the postulates of nationalization and their implications for the ideology of party chapters in the context of local elections. The second discusses the added value of the method proposed to measure ideological nationalization by studying the extent to which the relative attention dedicated to certain policy categories in local manifestos corresponds to that of the model program of their central organization. Subsequently, in the third part this yardstick will be applied to a bit less than 90 manifestos expounded in the 2012 local elections in the Flemish region of Belgium resulting in a description of ideological nationalization scores in a relative index. Furthermore, the fourth part will exploratory account for variation in ideological nationalization by probing into the explanatory power of differences in terms of party type. We will try to determine if the ideological position, the genetic origin and the party age matter for ideological nationalization. Participation in the (outgoing) local governing majority and municipal size will serve as control variables to assess the robustness of the party type effect. Finally, the fifth part presents some overall conclusions and thoughts for further discussion.

**Pluming the literature: reviewing evidence for ideological nationalization in local elections**

In this section the existing evidence will be examined mining the literature for indications of ideological nationalization of local elections. Starting from the nationalization of electoral politics from a local government perspective the focus will be sharpened on the ideological nationalization of local elections as the programmatic congruence of local chapters with their national headquarter. Pertinent insights for the Belgian case will be situated in the comparative findings.

*The nationalization of electoral politics from a local government perspective*

The basic tenet of nationalization holds that political differences are disappearing between the various geographic units of a nation (Lago & Montero, 2014). Herein, the extent to which this increasing homogeneity is the case in elections has become the predominant perspective. The bulk of this research has been concerned with convergence in the composition of the electoral offer and the distribution of electoral success over time and across space. Increasingly refined yardsticks have eventually spurned mixed empirical results. Whereas some have discerned a general trends towards nationalization, other accounts are more sceptical or emphasize its contingency (Caramani, 2004; Morgenstern & Swindle, 2005).

However, this research is predominantly concerned with the state-wide level and actually addresses the territorial homogeneity of *national* elections (with ‘local’ referring to the constituency level). To overcome this nationalism bias, several authors have pleaded a multilevel perspective enclosing the various subnational tiers for a more comprehensive and fine-grained view (Deschouwer, 2003; Mustillo & Mustillo, 2012). This would include taking local elections as an alternative frame of reference for which relatively scarce evidence on longitudinal and cross-sectional nationalization is indeed available. Again, most of it pertains to the convergence of the partisan supply and success.

Its emergence over time is often conceived as an indicator of a process of party politicization. This a central element in the work of Rokkan (1966: 244) associated with societal modernization implying ‘[…] *the breakdown of the traditional systems of local rule through the entry of nationally organized parties into municipal elections*’. Although this dynamic conception expects an almost teleological take-over of local politics by national political parties, traditional non-partisan elements continue to hold local ground (Bäck, 2003; Aars & Ringkjøb, 2005; Kjær & Elklit, 2010b). Apart from remaining differences in the territorial anchorage of national political parties, this is due to the enduring presence and success of various types of non-national candidate lists in local polities (Reiser, 2008; Copus et al., 2012).

The cross-sectional approach then refers to the extent to which the national party political presence (the degree to which all state-wide parties are competing) and/or performance (the grade of territorial homogeneity of their electoral results and governing) at a given local election are geographically alike (Thorlakson, 2006). In line with most longitudinal findings, the sustenance of divergence in local party system nationalization is often emphasized. Based on a discrete measure of their number to assess multilevel partisan resemblance Kjær & Elklit (2010a) confirmed the positive effect of municipal size on nationalization in terms of votes and seats in the Danish context whereas likewise evidence for Austria (Ensser & Hanssen, 2013) highlighted the (regional) degree of party organization as an additional explanatory variable.

Similar tendencies occur in Belgium. In the long run, national parties have effectively superseded merely place-bound phenomena in local elections. Accelerated by municipal mergers in the mid-1970s national forces have gained imprint on the local soil (Ackaert, 2006). Generally, a straightforward and increasing nationalization cannot be discerned. The presence, success and shifts of and between parties are not homogenous for the whole country. Local results largely follow similar evolutions as those for national elections but dissimilarities continue to characterize the geographical division of party votes (Wille & Deschouwer, 2007). Very much alike, supply sided evidence shows that the local party field is infused with national candidate-lists. Nevertheless, non-national counterparts have maintained their presence and contributed to the production of mixed or predominantly national local party systems in at least 70% of all municipalities (Steyvers et al., 2008). In addition, using post-electoral coalition success as an indicator, local factors tend to predominate with a keen eye on national considerations (Olislagers & Steyvers, 2015).

Fragmented evidence also exists on other aspects of the nationalization of Belgian local politics. Probing into the rationales for municipal electoral choice stresses the limited nationalization of individual voting behaviour. More than 60% of all reasons voters mentioned as most important refer to local motives (Marien, Dassonneville & Hooghe, 2015). Measuring organizational congruence displays the internal party structure varies strongly between local chapters of national parties (Deschouwer & Rihoux, 2008).

*Sharpening the focus on party ideology*

Thus, the existing evidence does not point to an overal nationalization of local politics. Herein, ideology is an aspect that has often been neglected however. To which degree and under which circumstances can a pattern of territorial homogeneity in terms of ideology be discerned? Given the electoral and multilevel partisan focus of our paper, the latter is delineated as the *programmatic congruence between local chapters of national political parties and their central headquarter in municipal elections*.

The literature is not very informative in this regard. Empirical research on ideological nationalization of local elections is limited and often focused on voting behaviour (Hajnal & Trounstine, 2014). Integrated comparative evidence from a partisan perspective is virtually non-existent. However, clues in collections of country cases can be found (Saiz & Geser, 1999). Also in Belgium, aspects of ideological congruence have been measured. In an elite-oriented approach key representatives of local branches were asked which issues they deemded important for their party in local elections (with nationalization depending on the pointing to identical issues by politicians from the same national party). Whereas Deschouwer (1996) did not find rock hard evidence for this type of ideological nationalization in earlier elections, follow-up for 2006 oppositely saw proof (Devos et al., 2007; Buelens et al., 2008).

In line with established supra-local research on party ideologies we alternatively suggest an analysis of congruence based on manifestos instead of expert judgments outlined below. Before, a few general assertions are needed as to why we would expect to confirm or reject ideological nationalization alltogehter.

There are several reasons to assume that there is indeed such ressemblance. First of all, the national party and its local divisions share a common ideological background. For instance, we may assume that green politicians at the local level will be in favor of environmental protection, just as their national counterparts are (Devos et al., 2007). Second, local branches are programmatically interesting because they add to the mobilization capacities of national parties (Frendreis et al., 1990; Pedahzur & Brichta, 2000). As a result, national headquarters provide substantial and practical support in election time. This assistence can be merely functional, supplying localities with templates for posters and leaflets, but could also include programmatic [endeavours](https://www.google.be/search?espv=2&biw=1920&bih=961&q=endeavours&spell=1&sa=X&ved=0CBgQvwUoAGoVChMI8fK0zo-DyQIVBHQPCh23YgjR) such as the provision of a model program. Writing an election manifesto is a very time-consuming activity for local actors who are often not professional politicians. Presenting spoon-fed policy proposals may come useful in engaging election campaigns and (implicitely) lead to ideological nationalization.

Finally, we may assume that local parties will use issues claimed by their national party to their benefit. Issue ownership (Petrocik, 1996) is an important asset in times of elections since it increases the credibility of a party on certain matters. Moreover, national parties will probably try to avoid that their issue ownership gets corroded by local party branches who formulate diverging policies. For instance, we believe that a socioeconomic rightist party would not agree with local branches proposing several local tax increases. Especially because it makes use of the national party brand. Indeed, according to the franchise party model (Carty, 2004), parties increasingly behave as stratarchically organized organizations. The central party is responsible for the party brand and the local branches can use it for their local campaigns. This is electorally profitable because local politicians can identify themselves with a reliable, well-known ‘product’ which voters can rely on. Although Carty (2004: 13) 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*”. Research in Belgium demonstrated an informal deliberation can be organized when ideological inconsistencies occur between the manifestos of local parties and the national program (Devos et al., 2007).

The first reason to assume that there may be little congruence between the ideology of the local party branches and their national headquarters is that the local level has other tasks and competences to deal with municipal-specific issues. Evidently, in abstract all governmental levels share similar problems. For instance, both levels make decisions on taxes. But each municipality, small or large, has its own specific problems. In a large city, traffic may be a big problem while a rural municipality may be faced with the problem of depopulation.

Secondly, some interpretations even conceive local politics as less ideological alltogether. 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 relative small scale of the local polity reducing the potential role of parties as aggregators of various interests and stressing the importance of personal relations (Copus et al., 2012). Hence, the assertion of Ackaert (2006: 113) that in Belgium local politics is first and foremost a matter for local politicians. These assumptions would mean that the party manifestos of local branches can diverge considerably from the national programmatic preferences.

**Applied methodology and data**

Existing research on ideological nationalization primarily uses elite survey data which has several important disadvantages (Deschouwer 1996; Devos et al. 2007; Buelens et al. 2008). For example, it cannot be ruled out that politicians express their own opinion or of their faction instead of the whole party. In this paper, we therefore suggest a more reliable approach by analysing congruence based on party manifestos. Directly analyzing manifestos should avoid possible subjectivity. Moreover, these programs are the result of internal discussions and are usually approved by a body of the party. In other words, a manifesto represents the whole party and its ideology (Budge 1987:18; Gemenis and Dinas 2010:181).

Also, by choosing party manifestos as the level of analysis, we join an internationally reknown research tradition for ideological research of parties at the national level, like the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) (Klingemann et al., 2006; Volkens et al., 2013). This paper partly copies the CMP approach to the local level. For example, we also chose to code on salience and not on position. Although there are reasons to assume that identifying positions could be beneficial (e.g. Pellikaan et al., 2003; De Lange, 2007; Gemenis and Dinas, 2010; Meguid 2005; Janda et al., 1995), we are convinced that those insights would only have a marginal added value for our specific research question. In theory, local branches can contradict the central headquarters but still keep in mind that they all share a common ideological baseline. We can therefore expect that policy positions will not fundamentally diverge. Secondly, our coding process also follows CMP guidelines[[2]](#endnote-1) (Volkens, 2002:3-4). Ultimately, a new coding scheme arose focussing on local competences and containing 19 categories[[3]](#endnote-2). The entire scheme can be found in the appendix. An inter-coder reliability test was performed between the main coder and one independent coder and was calculated with the Fleiss’ Kappa measure. We tested if both coders would classify the same quasi sentences into the same category. Our results exceeded the expected threshold of .7 (Fleiss’ Kappa = .71).

To investigate the ideological nationalization of local politics, we coded both the local election program and the (national) model program used as an example for the local party branches. These manifestos are designed and approved by the national party board can therefore be used as an ideological guideline. The coding of the manifestos enables us to calculate the relative attention for a category (issue) in each party manifesto. These percentages are then used to calculate the Relative Nationalization Score (RNS) of a local election manifesto, i.e. the degree of resemblance between the election manifesto of local branches and the model program. First of all, for each of the categories the difference is calculated between the relative attention for a category in the local manifesto and the national manifesto. Afterwards, the sum of these 19 differences is calculated. By taking the sum of all relative differences, we avoid that large discrepancies between categories have a significant impact on the RNS. The average score would conceal small and large resemblances between certain categories. Next, the sum is divided by 200 (%), this is the maximum possible difference in relative attention between the model program and the manifesto of the local party branche. Finally, we substracted 1 from this score and took the absolute value to create the RNS. This is merely an esthetic intervention, making the endresult a score between 0 (perfect localization) and 1 (perfect nationalization).

*RNS = [ ( ∑ |pl –pn| / n ) -1 ]*

*Pl = relative attention of the local manifesto*

*pn = relative attention of the national manifesto*

*n = maximum theoretical difference*

The manual coding of manifestos is a labour intensive process. As a result, not all party manifestos of all Flemish municipalities for the elections of 2012 were coded. Our dataset consists of a total of 89 local election programmes[[4]](#endnote-3). All cases were selected to create an approximately equal distribution between the municipalsize and 7 flemish parties[[5]](#endnote-4). Because of the relatively small number of large cities in Belgium, most cities are not unique in the sample size. Hence, 89 cases does not equal 89 municipalities. Throughout this paper one should always keep this selectionbias in mind and reflect on its possible impact on our results.

**Presentation of the results and probing into their variety**

Below we will first of all try to describe the ideological nationalization of the local level. Afterwards we will account for variation within it. The first hypotheses is the following:

H1: The emphasis that local branches of national parties put on certain issues in their local manifestos is not significantly related to the model program of their national mother party.

*Level of ideological nationalization*

Figure 1 shows the distribution of RNS scores of local party manifestos. The RNS varies between zero and one: zero (0) means that a manifesto is perfectly localized and shows no ressemblances with the national template. One (1) represents perfect nationalization and theoretically a perfect copy of the model program.

First of all, the scores between .5 and 1 are normally distributed. Most of the scores cluster around the mean result (.74) while the standard deviation is small as well (.08). All manifestos show a high degree of similarity compared to their national model manifesto. The minimum score is .56, which can already be seen as a significant indication of ideological nationalization. At the other extreme end, 5 manifestoes could be categorised as very strongly nationalized as their scores range between .85 and 1. In general, the data suggests a very clearcut image of nationalization of the local manifestos. In short, there is no doubt we can reject H1 and confirm a widespread ideological congruence between local departments and the center: deviations in terms of issue salience or relative attention for these subjects are limited. All local party branches seem to embrace the ideological standards of the national party. There is limited variation in how much they rely on that template. Hence, the national model program seems to be a blueprint for the local program, which can be tinkered minimaly depending on the local needs but whose core is always to be maintained.

**[Figure 1 around here]**

*Party type or context*

In order to explain the variation in ideological nationalization we will look to the party type and the local context. Firstly, we assume that some party characteristics are more appropriate in understanding nationalization than others. Based on the ideological positioning, genetic origin and newness of the parties (party age), we formulate different expectations. Secondly, municipal size and participation in the outgoing local governing majority are used to model the differences we find.

*Party effect*

According to some scholars (e.g. Enyedi and Linek, 2008; Adams et al., 2009:616) 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. Based on this hierarchical organization we can expect that local chapters of rightist national parties will have less programmatic freedom than the local chapters of left parties. Although recent comparative research (Pilet and Cross, 2014:228) does not provide rock-hard evidence of this leftist democratic tradition because all parties (left and right-wing) have made efforts to increase the voice of party members in the internal workings of the party (e.g. LeDuc, 2001 ; Heidar, Kosiara-Pedersen and Saglie, 2012 ; Wauters, 2013). We assume that the chances of ideological nationalization are larger within rightist parties.

H2a: Parties of the right show a higher degree of ideological nationalization than left-wing parties.

The genetic origin of a party could also have an influence on the extent of ideological nationalization today. In this sense, parties that started out as mass parties can be considered highly centralized. All mass parties share the important role of the national headquarters in their party organization. This includes that the local party branches are coordinated by the central party (Krouwel 2006:255). Of course, the era of mass parties lies far behind us, but according to Gunther and Diamond (2003:173) 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:

H2b: Parties that were founded as 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 1960’s 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 and Diamond 2003: 174). Moreover, many new parties dissaprove strong hierarchical steering and choose for a more democratic form of organization (Bolleyer 2011: 322). This less developed organization with emphasis on democratic party organization leaves more room for local autonomy. We therefore propose the following:

H2c: Traditional parties show a higher degree of ideological nationalization compared to new parties.

The operationalization of the above threefolded division between parties is rather straightforward. We follow Belgian experts and academic scholars and regard the greens and the socialdemocrat and the new extreme labour party (PVDA) as leftist parties. The christian democrats, liberals, regionalists and extreme right pary on the other hand are considered rightist. Both content analyses of the national party manifesto by the *Manifesto Project Database* and subjective self-placement scales of members (Van Haute et al., 2013) confirm this dichotomy. 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, are characterized by three ‘pillar’ parties: the liberal party, the christian-democratic party and the socialist party. All three had and shared political power at the end of the 19th century and almost during the complete 20th century. Only later new parties began to emerge, starting with the regionalist party, the greens and the extreme rightists. Neither of them was able to recreate the immense pillarized party structure of the three traditional parties. In recent elections the extreme left labour party returned on the political scenery as a viable political choice.

*Context effect*

With regard to the municipal political context we discern two factors that could explain variation within ideological nationalization: local government participation and municipality size.

First, we distinguish between parties belonging to the majority before 2012 and those who were not. We assume that branches participating in local government have an information advantage over branches that belong to the opposition. The first have aldermen or a mayor at their disposal, often (semi-)professional politicians, that can spend more of their time to politics than amateur politicians and can, for instance, write a tailor-made program for their municipality. As a result, we expect parties that belonged to the majority will be less dependent on the central party for programmatic input. This leads to a third hypothesis:

H3: local party branches that participated in the outgoing local governing majority are less ideologically nationalized than parties who were in opposition.

The data concerning municipal governing coalitions was provided by the Flemish ministery of internal affairs. Our dataset consists of 55 parties that reside in the local coalition (61.8%), whereas 34 local branches (38.2%) didn’t belong to the majority or didn’t occupy any seats in the local council at all.

Variation in nationalization is often explained by looking at municipality size. E.g. Ennser and Hansen (2013) and Kjaer and Elklit (2010) found that the nationalization of the party system is positively related to the size of a municipality. The resemblance between the national and the local party system is larger in cities compared to small municipalities. Since both studies focus on another dimension of nationalization we cannot automatically conclude that the ideological nationalization will probably be more outspoken in larger cities. To a certain level the theoretical framework of the franchise party (Carty 2004) does also seem to point in this direction. According to this model parties are very concerned with providing a consistent ideological message to its supporters and the electorate. In this way cities can be considered as strategically more important for the party brand and the consistency of the party message because they get a lot more media-attention. This could mean that the party at the central level will try to influence the electoral manifesto’s of their local branches more in large cities than in small municipalities. On the other hand, Carty (2004:11) also states that within a franchise party the relationship between the central party and the local branches can vary significantly. Larger or more important local branches may have more independence than smaller or less vital local branches. Hence, based on these mixed expectations we formulate two opposite hypotheses:

H4a: municipality size and the degree of ideological nationalization are positively related.

H4b: municipality size and the degree of ideological nationalization are negatively related.

In order to test these hypotheses the absolute number of inhabitants per municipality was used as a proxy for the municipality or community size.

**Presentation of the regression Model: variety explained**

Before introducing the multivariate model we look at the relevant bivariate analyses of our independent variables and the RNS. Starting off with the difference between parties, figure 2 is a zoomed in distribution plot of the nationalization scores between 0.6 and 0.8. That way, we can easily compare all seven parties and compare each party score to the entire sample. Contrary to our expectations, none of our proposed party types shows a clear elevated or diminshed nationalization degree:

* the right wing parties are somewhat evenly distributed between higher scores (N-VA), medium scores (CD&V and VLD) and lower scores (Vlaams Belang)
* the social democratic party Sp.a does not lead the nationalization list but just surpasses the average score
* all traditional parties (Sp.a, CD&V and Open Vld) take an intermediate position
* all new parties are to be found at both extreme ends: at one side we find the regionalist party (N-VA) which is most strongly nationalized (M = .79) and the greens (GROEN) (M = .78); on the other side we come across the extreme right party Vlaams Belang (this remarkable score implies that all extreme right wing branches can be characterized as weakly nationalized, at least compared to other Flemish parties branches, because both the average and the standard deviation (SD = .06) are very small.)

**[Figure 2 around here]**

Now let’s turn to the context variables. The manifestos of governing party branches seem to have an average RNS of .76 while the average RNS of ‘non-majority’ parties was .73 (p<.001). A positive relationship between the Relative Nationalization Score and belonging to the local coalition (Pearson Rho .215, p<.05) confirms the descriptives. We assumed an inverse relationship and suggested an effect of professionalism. The expectation that mayors or aldermen are professional political actors with an advantage of time and ressources compared to their legislative colleagues, does not seem to hold. The results indicate an opposite relationship: local party elites with an executive mandate seem to keep tighter relations with the national party than the ‘less important’ local councillors that are on the opposition bench.

Our data also suggests partial evidence of the positive relation between municipal size and ideological nationalization, meaning that the manifestos of parties in large cities indeed tend to be more congruent with the national model programs. The correlation (Pearson Rho .203), however, barely exceeds the .05 significance boundary (p = .057). We assume that the small sample size is mainly responsible for this low significance level. However, this does not mean we can discard the moderate correlation. One could interpret this municipal autonomy as national indifference for the performance of rural communities as the most important battle is fought in important cities. Moreover, national leaders or top party officials are disproportionally located in cities and could very well translate the partyline into their local department. Nevertheless, these results seem to indicate a positive relation between municipal size and the degree of nationalization and thereby confirming our hypothesis.

*The multivariate analysis*

Before introducing all previous indicators into a multivariate regression analysis, we first take a look at Table 2 (see appendix) which contains a correlation matrix of our dependent variable, the amount of ideological resemblance, and the six independent variables. All relations with our Relative Nationalization Score seems to be rather disappointing. Only the ideological position of a party has an influence on the level of congruence. Right parties have significantly lower nationalization scores (rejecting H2a). The social democratic mass party on the other hand behaves the way we expect it to (confirming H2b). Traditional parties leave limited breathing room for their local departments as it is shows a positive correlation (confirming H2c). Readers should however be warry to generalize these effects as significance levels surpas the conservative thresholds.

Table 3 reveals our three hierarchical regression models. The first model tries to envelop the influence of party characteristics. Contradictory to our theoretical presumptions, our threefold of categorization doesn’t have any predictive power. The bivariate results are simply confirmed. The coefficients show no significant effects when only accounting for parties. It is not surprising then, that the R² is negligible and the model itself is not significant as well.

Moving on to the second model results are different. Controlling for party type, residing in the local majority increases the Relative Nationalization Score with 0.044. This leads us to reject our hypothesis H3 as the relationship is positive. Professionalism could in this regard lead to the intertwining of political elites and therefore more disciple. The introduction of this first context variable has a two folded effect, because coefficients for the right wing parties also rise. We now recognize a similar effect as found in the correlation matrix. The ideological position of a party on the left-right scale has an effect, albeit small, on the nationalization degree. Caution is always needed when interpreting the coefficients, since we deal with a small sample size and the levels of significant are set accordingly.

Adding municipal size in the third model increases the viability of our predictive efforts. Local departments based in larger cities show increasing similarities with the national level. We can therefore conclude that our fourth hypothesis of municipal size is accepted and that those results are in line with data from party system nationalization. The third model is the only one that significantly succeeds in explaining some variation in ideological nationalization. However, only 14% of the variation can be attributed to our theoretical explications. The three subhypotheses concerning the effect of party types should all be rejected. The ideological position does contribute to the model, only the direction of the effect is reversed. Exactly the same could be said for taking part in the local coalition. Executive leaders within the municipality branch increases central-local congruence.

**[Table 3 around here]**

**Conclusions**

This article has tried to assess the extent of nationalization of local elections by measuring the ideological congruence between the election manifestos of local chapters and the model programs provided by the central headquarters of national political parties. We found that the overall degree of ideological nationalization at the local level (measured as the congruence in relative attention for specific categories) is relatively high for all Flemish parties. This interesting result empirically enriches the pending debate of nationalization of local politics, usually confined to party supply and electoral success.

It also adds to the underdevelopped research domain of political parties at the local level by empirically assessing the relation between the national headquarter and its local branches trough the perspective of ideological nationalization in election time. We found evidence in line with the assumptions that Carty (2004:11) made about the franchise party model. According to his model programmatic issues are for the most part a central matter in order to ensure “ […] *that the party is providing a consistent message to its supporters and the electorate”.* Our analysis shows that the national model program is indeed a blueprint for the local program in terms of the relative attention paid to different policy domains. The manifestos of local chapters are tinkered minimaly depending on the local needs but the core of the national program is always maintained.

The ideological impact of the national party headquarter on its local chapters is thus very substantial in our sample. Still, variation exists and we have probed into different party and context factors to potentially account for this diversity trough multivariate analysis. Overall, the explanatory power of our models is not very high. Even when combining both types of factors it remains rather weak. Generally, context is more explanatory than party type. Specifically, right wing parties are significantly less ideologically nationalized. Party chapters included in the departing local majority and those active in larger municipalities show a significantly higher ideological nationalization. These relationships notwithstanding there is clearly ample room for additional explanation. It may e.g. be that individual level factors play an important role, such as the presence of a local politician in the party in central office, the capacity (time, personel, expertise) to write a manifesto that is more than a copy-paste of the national model program, the ideological congruence between (the president of) a local party chapter and the ideology of the national party, etc.

Clearly a lot of reseach remains to be done at the explanatory level, but this also accounts for the descriptive level. We only focussed on one election, but the question of nationalization is preferably analyzed longitudinally. This would enable us to describe whether central-local party relations have evolved over time and localities have gained or lost autonomy. However, the data for such a longitudinal perspective are not available yet. Untill now manifestos have not attracted abundant scholarly attention in local politics. We think this paper has proven that it is worthwhile analyzing local election programs. Our method has made a first step herein by focussing on the congruence between party levels in terms of the relative attention dedicated to designated policy domains. This should be complemented by taking into consideration similaries and differences in terms of position as well. The analysis of party manifestoes should thus be approach by several methods. More comprehensive data will not only enrich the nationalization debate or the party literature . Theycan also help to unravel other interesting questions in local politics. For instance, combining content analysis and local manifestoes on a large scale could, as a next step in this line of reseach, be a fruitful way of testing the role of ideology in coalition theories. Furthermore manifesto data could help identify problems concerning local acountability: to what extent are local parties participating in the municipal majority aware of their promises during the preceding campaign. As the number of questions that can be devised is endless, we hope to have triggered interest for manifesto research on the local level.

**Appendix**

**Table 1: Locally oriented coding scheme**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Category** | **Content**  |
| 1 | Communication and the digital revolution | Local communication, e-government, City marketing, Local campaigns and sensibilization, ICT and Wi-Fi, Smartphone apps, Reduction of the administrative burden |
| 2 | Culture and tourism | General spare time policy, Libraries, Nightlife, Events and concerts, Local societies, Art, Care of monuments, Festivals, Carnival, Museums |
| 3 | Service provision | Administration, Human resources, box-office, Permissions, Opening hours |
| 4 | Diversity and integration | Racism policy, Equality, Accessibility, Sexual preference policy, Policy towards foreigners, Civic integration, Freedom of religion |
| 5 | Finances | Budget, Taxes, Administrative rules towards budgetary control |
| 6 | Community | Flemish culture and identity, Community building, Social cohesion, Folklore, Neighborhood policy |
| 7 | Democratic participation | Civic Democracy, Consultation, Neighborhood councils, Advisory boards |
| 8 | Family and child care | Day care, Family policy, Playgrounds, Parental education, Combination of child and family, Youth associations |
| 9 | Local economy | Self-employment, Local enterprises, Employment, Hotel and catering, Industry  |
| 10 | Environment | Parks, Energy, Waste, Sewers, Animal care, Agriculture, Countryside development, Horticulture, Flooding areas, Water policy |
| 11 | Education | General provision of education, Universities, Internships, Local art schools, Evening education |
| 12 | Elderly care | Housing designed for seniors, Service apartments, Retiring homes |
| 13 | Political management | Local government, Policy preparation, cooperation and coordination, Management function, Executive board, Inter-municipal cooperation, Local council |
| 14 | Environmental planning | Public maintenance, Public areas, City or town planning, Infrastructure, Public domain |
| 15 | Social policy  | Local social policy, Social welfare, Health policy, Volunteers, Social housing, Informal care, Personal debt mediation, Service vouchers, Social activation |
| 16 | Sports | Sports areas, Stadium, Swimming pools |
| 17 | Safety | Police, Fire corps, Criminality, Supervision and penalization of fraud, Drugs, Local sanctions (GAS, BIN) |
| 18 | Traffic and mobility  | Road safety, Parking zones, Public transport, Cyclists and pedestrians, Traffic jams  |
| 19 | Housing policy  | Housing policy, Housing fraud, Community land trust, Private property |

**Table 2: Correlation Matrix of Ideological Nationalization (RNS) and six Independent Variables**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| RNS | -.178\* | .128 | .024 | .172 | .108 |
| 1. Right Party |  | -.514\*\*\* | .144 | .207\* | -.067 |
| 2. Mass Party |  |  | .448\*\*\* | .199\* | -.092 |
| 3. Traditional Party |  |  |  | .387\*\*\* | -.226\*\* |
| 4. Local Majority |  |  |  |  | -.105 |
| 5. Municipal Size |  |  |  |  | - |

Note: All correlations are Spearman Rho coefficients
\* p < .1; \*\* p < .05; \*\*\* p < .01

**Table 3: Multivariate Linear Regression of Ideological Nationalization (RNS) at the Flemish Local Elections of 2012**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 |
|  |  | B | S.E. | B | S.E. | B | S.E |
|  | Constant | .750\*\*\* | .017 | .748\*\*\* | .017 | .730\*\*\* | .018 |
| Party | Right Party | -.029 | .023 | -.043\* | .023 | -.041\* | .023 |
|  | Mass Party | -.003 | .035 | -.018 | .035 | -.016 | .034 |
|  | Traditional | .016 | .022 | .006 | .022 | .014 | .021 |
| Context | Local Majority |  |  | .044\*\* | .019 | .045\*\* | .019 |
|  | Municipal Size |  |  |  |  | .002\*\* | .001 |
|  | R²  | .034 |  | .092 |  | .144 |  |
|  | Anova sign. | .398 |  | .083 |  | .022 |  |

Note: \* p < .1; \*\* p < .05; \*\*\* p < .01

**Figure 1: Distribution of the RNS scores (N=89)**

**Figure 2: Relative Nationalization Score per party (N=89)**

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2. First, we divided the entire manifesto into quasi-sentences. This is a sentence or a part of a sentence that contains one political message (Volkens, 2002:3-4). Afterwards these quasi-sentences were assigned to the correct category of the coding scheme. Because the original CMP coding scheme was designed to grasp ideological positions on a national level, it is useless for our local approach. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. They were all distilled from the local competences as stated in municipal laws, combined clarification documents (VVSG, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. In total, 2840 pages were coded. To make a distinction between real manifestos and mere pamphlets or leaflets, only manifestos containing at least 5 pages and 100 quasi-sentences were incorporated in the data. On average a manifesto existed of almost 32 pages or 566 quasi-sentences. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
5. Our sample consists of 7 Flemish parties who can be conceived as national parties with an appropriate organization and who contested local elections throughout the entire region. Data was retrieved for the extreme left party PVDA (n = 8), the green party GROEN (n = 14), the social democrats of the Sp.a (n = 13), the Christian democrats of the CD&V (n = 17), the liberal party Open VLD (n = 11), the Flemish-nationalist party N-VA (n = 15) and the extreme right Vlaams Belang (n = 11). Except for the PVDA, all were represented at the regional parliament. CD&V was the biggest fraction with 31 out of 124 seats. They had a coalition with socialists (19 seat) and the regionalists (16 seats). Open VLD and Vlaams Belang both received 24 seats and on the other side of the spectrum the greens gained 7 seats. A more libertarian party, Lijst Dedecker, was popular at the beginning of the 21th century and received 7 Flemish seats but quickly lost its appeal and only participated in a limited number of municipalities for the latest local elections. As a result, they were not included. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)