
Original Article

Party members in a pillarised partitocracy. An empirical overview of party membership figures and profiles in Belgium

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Abstract This study examines the pillarised and partitocratic nature of Belgian political parties via an empirical overview of their party on the ground. Two main research questions guide the study: To what extent can party membership figures in Belgium be considered as ideal-typical of pillarised or partitocratic parties? And how does the social and political profile of party members in Belgium correspond to what one might expect from pillarised or partitocratic parties? The study relies on two types of data set: party membership figures since WWII and membership survey data of the four 'dominant' relatives in each party family in Belgium. The article shows contradicting results. Although party membership figures have nuanced the idea of partitocratic and pillar parties, the analysis of the profile of party members has produced more conclusive results. The members of some parties (PS, CD&V) still display a strong encapsulation in their sociological world, report specific reasons for joining, as well as lower levels of activism than in other parties. The pillar parties in Belgium seem to have reached a paradoxical situation in which their anchorage in civil society is still very strong, yet it relies on a shrinking social basis. These results raise the question of the incentives that parties offer to their party on the ground to mobilise citizens for participation. They indicate a need to look more systematically and empirically at this neglected aspect of party organisation, as it provides important information for the debate on party decline.

Acta Politica (2013) 48, 68–91. doi:10.1057/ap.2012.25;

published online 21 September 2012

Keywords: Belgium; party members; party activists; membership composition; incentives; ideological stance



Introduction

Some scholars have described parties as inescapable, vital or essential to the functioning of democratic systems. Others have speculated on their disappearance. Despite the debate on party decline or adaptation (Katz and Mair, 1995; Daalder, 2001), there is a general agreement that political parties play a central role in representative democracies. They fulfil many functions (Widfelt, 1999) and are therefore central to the effectiveness of civil society and contemporary democracy.

Belgium is no exception in this respect. Parties are recognised as central actors in the political system, which has been described as pillarised and partitocratic (Deschouwer, 2009). First, parties are numerous in Belgium. Through the years, the fragmentation of the party system and the effective number of parties has increased drastically due to the multiplication of cleavage politics (Delwit, 2012). In the second half of the nineteenth century, the denominational cleavage gave birth to the Christian Democrats and the Liberals, whereas the socio-economic cleavage gave rise to the Socialists. After WWII, the centre–periphery cleavage led to the emergence of the ethno-regionalist parties, but also the split of the three traditional party families along the linguistic divide (Deschouwer, 2009). In the 1980s, the development of new politics favoured the rise of the Greens and the Extreme Right. Today, each party family (Christian Democrats, Socialists, Liberals, Greens and Extreme Right) has its sister party on the other side of the linguistic border, but the strength and the electoral fate of either sibling vary across the linguistic divide, and they compete in separate electoral arenas (with the exception of Brussels and part of its suburbs).

Second, parties are crucial social and political actors linked to civil society via their membership and various satellite organisations (pillarisation), and they have developed strong links with public administration (partitocracy – Deschouwer, 2009). Belgian society has long been described as pillarised (Lijphart, 1981). Political cleavages have led to the creation of sociological worlds that encapsulate citizens and organise groups politically and socially through a dedicated political party, a trade union, a social care institution and a multitude of other organisations. Each pillar provides for its members in all aspects of their lives, from the cradle to the grave (Seiler, 1992). At the end of nineteenth century, the Socialists were the first to structure a pillar aimed at the defence of the secularised community and the working class (Delwit, 2012). The Catholics reacted by building their own network of organisations. The Liberals – traditionally an elite party – later developed a loosely structured pillar. Luther (1999) refers to these parties as pillar parties. The Belgian party system has also been described as a partitocracy, based on the strong grip of parties on all aspects of social and political life (administration, judiciary,

media and so on – De Winter, 1996). However, since the mid-1960s, new parties emerged outside traditional pillars and began to attract more and more citizens. These new parties voiced criticisms against pillarisation and partitocracy. For instance, regionalist parties ‘criticized pillarization [the growth of interest groups], the power of the traditional pillarized [interest group based] parties, and the poor democratic quality of the system’ (Deschouwer, 1994, p. 83). Green parties strongly criticised the parties’ monopoly on the State and pleaded for an enlarged role of the citizen in the decision-making process.

The central role exercised by parties in modern democracies – and in Belgium specifically – means that it is crucial to understand these changes, and to assess how they have affected party membership in Belgium. First, because when exerted indirectly, the linkage function relies on membership organisations. According to Poguntke, the party on the ground constitutes *the most tightly knit connection between party elites and voters* (Poguntke, 2002, p. 9). The changes affecting party membership may indirectly affect the capacity of parties to perform their linkage function. Second, party membership figures are often used as indicators of party change or party decline, both by parties themselves and by party scholars (Mair and van Biezen, 2001). Any signs of diminishing figures are interpreted as a growing distance between citizens and parties.

It is therefore paradoxical that the literature on party membership developed so late. It was not until the beginning of the 1990s that the first studies on party membership emerged. The work of Seyd and Whiteley (1992) can be considered as a turning point in this respect. Since then, several scholars or teams have performed the same type of analysis in their national contexts (Seyd and Whiteley, 2004). Belgium had an even slower start (van Haute, 2009). The existing research on party membership is often framed in the literature on party organisation and focuses on the role of members in the organisation (Deschouwer, 1994; Sandri and Pauwels, 2011). However, this literature often remains theoretical and does not offer an empirical analysis of party membership in Belgium. In terms of available data, party membership figures have been collected on a regular basis since the end of the 1980s; the first party delegates surveys were conducted in the early 2000s¹ and party membership surveys in the mid-2000s.

In this article, we aim at providing the very first empirical overview of party membership figures and profiles in Belgium. The article investigates the nature of party membership in Belgium. Two main questions guide the contribution: To what extent can party membership figures in Belgium be considered as ideal-typical of pillarised or partitocratic parties? And how does the social and political profile of party members in Belgium correspond to what one might expect from pillarised or partitocratic parties? Overall, the article presents original information on the nature of party membership in Belgium, and partly confirms the presence of pillarised or partitocratic parties in Belgium.



Pillarisation, Partitocracy and Party Membership

Belgium has often been described as a textbook example of pillarisation and partitocracy. Partitocratic regimes are characterised by the need for strong mass-membership political parties that use public resources and semi-public agencies in a system of patronage and clientelism (De Winter *et al.*, 1996). Scholars have tried to measure the level of partitocracy in Belgium using different indicators: the power of the different political actors (legislative and executive branches, party leaders and so on – De Winter, 1996); the parties' grip on administration, judiciary and public media (De Winter and Brans, 2005); the use of ministerial cabinets (Walgrave *et al.*, 2005); and the level of clientelism, corruption and patronage (De Winter, 2000). All have concluded that Belgium scores higher on these indicators than most Western European democracies, with the exception of Italy, which is often considered as a comparable case in these aspects. The measures of partitocracy used in the existing literature have focused on the party in central office or party in public office, but not on the party on the ground. However, if one defines partitocracy as a regime of strong mass-membership political parties that overpower other political actors and whose influence extends to society as a whole, then the party on the ground is certainly a major feature of this concept. This article therefore aims at verifying the level of partitocracy in Belgian political parties by looking at three dimensions related to the party on the ground: party membership figures (supposedly high), grassroots links with society (supposedly extensive) and incentives for joining (supposedly more material-oriented).

As regards pillarisation, most authors have hypothesised a relative persistence of this feature in Belgium compared with the situation in other Western European democracies, such as Austria, the Netherlands, Luxemburg and Switzerland (Deschouwer, 2009). Luther defines pillarisation as the presence of vertically encapsulated political subcultures organised in rival organisational networks (Luther, 1999). He proposes a framework for analysis of parties and party systems in pillarised democracies. He distinguishes the characteristics of pillarisation at system level (related to the consociational character of the system) and characteristics identified at party level (intra-subcultural linkage between the party and its pillar). At party level, he identifies three dimensions (organisational penetration and incorporation of the subcultures, political mobilisation and provision of values/incentives for the subculture, and hierarchical party control of the subculture) and 11 indicators to distinguish pillar parties.² The existing literature on pillarisation in Belgium often focuses on the system level (consociationalism) or on indicators at party level related to the party in central office (bureaucratic and technocratic principles) or the party in public office (overlapping leaderships).

There are surprisingly no empirical studies of the party on the ground that put Luther's indicators to the test. However, his indicators of pillarisation at the level of the party on the ground are numerous³ and crucial if one wishes to capture the pillarised nature of political parties. The concepts of pillar party and partitocratic party partly overlap in terms of expectations regarding the characteristics of the party on the ground: both expect that parties display large membership figures and overlapping memberships – although for different reasons.

This article therefore investigates the pillarised and partitocratic nature of Belgian political parties via the characteristics of the party on the ground. Two main questions guide the contribution. Our first research question (To what extent can party membership figures in Belgium be considered as representative of pillarised and partitocratic parties?) aims at verifying the presence of strong mass-membership-based parties, as expected in pillarised and partitocratic parties (Hypothesis 1). The second research question (social and political profile of party members) aims at investigating whether Belgian party members display specific profiles, in order to test four hypotheses related to pillar (and partitocratic) parties. First, one would expect to find stronger links with extensive auxiliary association networks embodied by overlapping memberships in pillar or partitocratic parties than in other parties (Hypothesis 2a). One would also expect to find more appeal to shared subcultural ideational values reflected in the political attitudes and opinions of members in pillar parties than in other parties (Hypothesis 2b). The reasons for joining expressed by party members should reflect political mobilisation based more on material (partitocratic parties) or process (pillar parties) incentives than in other parties (Hypothesis 2c). Finally, intra-party participation should be more symbolic or acclamatory in its nature, with a more passive party on the ground reflected in a lower level of activism in pillar parties than in other parties (Hypothesis 2d).

Data and Methods

For each question and hypothesis, specific indicators related to the party on the ground are mobilised in line with the indicators suggested in the literature.

In order to test our first hypothesis (Hypothesis 1), we examine the trends in party membership over time. Two alternative measures can be used to collect information on party membership figures. On the one hand, the subjective measure is based on population surveys, whereby citizens are asked whether they are affiliated to a political party. However, the interpretation of what it means to belong to a party varies among the respondents, and leads to overestimations (van Haute, 2009). On the other hand, the objective measure



consists in asking the parties themselves. This technique raises the question of data reliability (symbolic nature of the data, neglected state of party registers, intra-party competition between branches and so on – see Mair and van Biezen, 2001). However, researchers can do little to address these problems and have to recognise the possibility of exaggeration or measurement error. Nevertheless, as these figures are used for long-term analysis, the potential biases do not prevent drawing conclusions about trends over time. Therefore, this article relies on the objective measure as an indicator of party membership figures.

In Belgium, the collection of party membership figures started in the early 1980s. Each year, from 1982 to 2008, the Belgian journal *Res Publica* provided figures collected over a 2-year period, alternating between Dutch- and French-speaking parties. The data gathering was carried out in collaboration with party central offices. Gaps were filled in by estimates made by Maes (1988) and by archival work. These figures were used in the major comparative studies on party membership (Mair and van Biezen, 2001; van Biezen *et al.*, 2011). They are now updated each year and made available online.⁴

In order to answer our second research question, various indicators were selected to investigate the profile of party members: the link with auxiliary associations and overlapping membership (Hypothesis 2a) is tested with indicators on the social background and encapsulation of members in pillar organisations. The existence of shared subcultural ideational values (Hypothesis 2b) is tested with indicators on the political attitudes and opinions of party members. The mobilisation based on material rewards (Hypothesis 2c) is tested with indicators on the reasons for joining expressed by party members. Finally, the oligarchic principle and the passivity of the party on the ground (Hypothesis 2d) is tested with indicators on the level of activism of party members. These indicators were developed in party membership surveys conducted in Belgium between 2003 and 2006.⁵ Given the fragmentation of the party system(s), not all parties could be included in the analysis. This article focuses on the ‘dominant’ relative in each party family, based on their share of seats in the House of Representatives during the time of the survey.⁶ The Dutch-speaking Christian Democrats (CD&V) and Liberals (Open VLD) were stronger than their French-speaking counterparts, whereas the French-speaking Socialists (PS) and Greens (Ecolo) were stronger than their Dutch-speaking counterparts.⁷ This case selection has the advantage of covering two parties that are traditionally considered as exemplifying the partitocratic and pillar party type (CD&V and PS), a loose pillar party (Open VLD) and a party that emerged outside and in reaction to the pillarised and partitocratic nature of Belgian political parties (Ecolo). It therefore allows for a comparison of patterns among parties, and to investigate whether non-partitocratic

and loosely partitocratic and pillar parties display different patterns than partitocratic or pillar parties.

The surveys were anonymous mail-back surveys of randomly selected grassroots members.⁸ For each party, 2500 questionnaires were mailed to a random sample drawn from the membership lists, with a clear mention of the academic nature of the project and with a letter of support from the party in central office for the PS and Ecolo.⁹ No reminder mailing was sent. A total of 2920 questionnaires were returned, generating a response rate of 29.2 per cent.¹⁰ Despite the low response rate, the data gathered are the first empirical data on the profile of party members in Belgium. For each party, data were weighted by gender and geographical origins. As the analysis does not present overall distributions of the four parties together but is carried independently for each party, the sample was not weighted according to the membership population of each party.

National Levels of Party Membership

The general decline in party membership figures has been at the centre of considerable attention in the literature. Cross-national comparisons emphasise the downward trend over time since the 1980s (Mair and van Biezen, 2001; Delwit, 2011; van Biezen *et al*, 2011). However, in pillar or partitocratic parties, one would expect to find comparatively high mass-membership levels (Hypothesis 1).

As far as Belgium is concerned, the declining trend is verified (Table 1). The 1980s are characterised by a rather stable absolute number of party members (M, around 600 000) and some fluctuation in relative terms (M/E) due to the enlargement of the electorate in 1981 (legal age from 21 to 18 years). The downward trend really started in the 1990s. In 20 years, parties as a whole lost about a quarter million members (from 637 954 to 390 316). This represents a loss of 38.8 per cent of the absolute number of members in Belgium despite the emergence of new parties (Greens, Extreme Right). However, the decline is less dramatic in comparative terms. At the end of the 1990s, Belgium was in the top five (out of 20) of the countries with the most party members in the EU, both in absolute and relative terms; it still ranked sixth out of 27 in 2008 and ranked last but one in terms of losses between 1980 and 1999, and between 1999 and 2008 (Mair and van Biezen, 2001; van Biezen *et al*, 2011). Comparatively, Belgium has a bigger pool of party members and faces a slower downward trend.

However, authors have added nuances to the general decline thesis. Scarrow (1996) stressed the importance of the starting point of the comparison for the conclusions that can be drawn. In Belgium, we can indeed attest to a decline

Table 1: Party membership figures (1946–2010)

	Communists	Greens		Socialists		Ethno-Regionalists		Christian Democrats		Liberals		Extreme Right	Populists	Total membership (M)	Total membership as percentage of the electorate (M/E)
		PC	Groen	Ecolo	SP.a	PS	VU N-VA	SLP	CD&V	CDH	Open VLD	MR	VB		
1946	76.194			38.838	56.422	*		91.790	39.604	*	*			302.848	11,11
1949	38.361			50.026	73.702	*		158.439	57.569		38.258			416.355	7,39
1950	24.360			54.040	73.118	*		71.679	27.481		36.867			287.545	5,10
1954	16.239			66.625	86.389	*		53.821	58.565	*	*			281.639	4,80
1958	11.328			78.280	108.720	*		182.399	70.064	*	*			450.791	7,58
1961	13.027			87.465	111.845	2.511		137.830	70.555	18.000	—			441.233	7,31
1965	14.320			86.095	103.208	12.630		101.437	39.888		89.882			447.460	7,35
1968	12.159			93.523	114.015	24.997		114.843	34.400		98.167			492.104	7,98
1971	10.012			102.327	133.008	40.795		105.652	45.998	29.134	28.433			495.359	7,90
1974	9.450			112.609	141.853	49.940		114.369	47.422	37.257	34.700			547.600	8,66
1977	9.269			108.424	144.146	51.878		131.636	56.301	54.788	*			556.442	8,81
1978	8.792			111.943	147.269	53.067		125.219	61.049	57.520	42.000			606.859	9,53
1981	7.583	*	900	116.730	167.087	46.671		125.001	54.021	60.926	47.233	1.607		627.759	9,13
1985	5.446	925	959	108.223	140.462	50.890		115.633	41.388	73.631	70.514	3.698		611.769	8,74
1987		1.375	617	103.546	145.298	49.164		139.266	42.838	75.339	76.298	4.213		637.954	9,06
1991		2.038	1.360	97.919	129.051	36.162		131.722	31.432	66.381	33.791	4.069		533.925	7,47
1995		3.985	2.367	80.582	117.533	15.637		108.671	30.569	79.561	35.133	9.322		483.960	6,72
1999		4.281	2.903	71.386	103.713	15.504		105.939	25.283	75.780	38.041	14.424		457.254	6,23
2003		6.078	3.751	61.637	82.787	11.464	4.175	86.816	19.823	73.438	34.485	16.860		401.314	5,30
2007		4.537	4.890	56.044	78.365	9.448	—	79.596	28.353	67.149	30.686	25.000	6.248	390.316	5,06
2010		4997 ^a	6029	49.345	81.491	15.799	—	71.287 ^a	26.069	66.662	33.056	22.500 ^a	—	377.235	4,85

^a figures of 2009.

Source: www.projectmapp.eu; Shaded cells: party did not exist/participate to the elections that year; *missing data.



between 1981 and 2007 (Table 1). However, if we study the trends over a longer period of time (since WWII), the picture is slightly different. The peak of the 1970s and 1980s stands out as the exception. At most, we can speak of a return to the levels of 1950, both in absolute and relative terms.

Delwit (2011) emphasised that the decline concerns mass-based parties more than any other type of party organisation. In Belgium, the recent decline does not concern all parties equally (Table 1). Some parties gain members over time: the Greens (the French-speaking Ecolo and to a lesser extent the Dutch-speaking Groen!) and the Extreme Right (Dutch-speaking VB).¹¹ Others, such as the Liberals (Dutch-speaking Open VLD and French-speaking MR) tend to stabilise their membership. Drop-off in membership figures mainly affected the two families enshrining the most powerful traditional pillars: the Socialists (French-speaking PS and Dutch-speaking SP.a) and the Christian Democrats (Dutch-speaking CD&V and French-speaking CDH). Between 1981 and 1999, they lost on average 36 per cent of their membership base. Considering Seiler's classification of the pillar parties as a sub-group of the mass parties (along with the militant-based parties), this confirms the idea that the days of mass parties are over. However, it also confirms the idea that general decline in party membership has to be handled with care.

Two elements related to our first research question can be pointed out. First, membership figures seem to be linked to participation in governing coalitions. The Christian Democrats (CD&V and CDH) lost a large number of affiliates after their electoral defeat in 1999 when they were sent back to the opposition benches for the first time since 1954–1958. Conversely, the Liberals gained party members when they were in power in the 1980s. These variations may reflect the *partitocratic* nature of the Belgian political system, in which parties have developed strong links with public administration when in power, thus being able to provide instrumental incentives to join, while losing their attractiveness in the eyes of members guided by material rewards when in the opposition. Second, a particularly conflicting issue opposing pillars can affect the levels of party membership. For example, after WWII, the School War divided Belgium into two opposing blocs: the Christian Democrats, and the Socialists and Liberals. The three-party families recruited largely on this issue and saw their membership grow in consequence.

To sum up, Belgium did not escape the phenomenon of membership decline since the early 1990s. This decline is less pronounced than in other European countries and mainly concerns the pillar parties. Our first hypothesis is therefore partially supported: the pillar parties still count more members than the other parties in the Belgian system, but the gap is decreasing over time. The membership drop in pillar parties is of particular importance when it comes to discussing its meaning and consequences for representative democracy. Two interpretations can be put forward. On the one hand, the



decline could mean that the link between group-based membership and parties slackens or that parties have stopped looking at encapsulating their pillar. This could decrease the representativeness of parties, affect their anchorage in society and increase the gap between citizens and parties. In return, it might have serious consequences for the legitimacy of political parties. On the other hand, it could mean that these parties have abandoned their habit of keeping their numbers artificially high. The drop in membership could mean that there are stricter rules for joining, and more rigorous monitoring of membership lists. A membership decline might in that case be interpreted as a decline in patronage and clientelism. In order to address these questions, a closer look at the profile of party members in Belgium is needed.

Profile of Party Members in Belgium

Social background

The previous section has emphasised that a small proportion of Belgians belong to political parties. Before testing our hypotheses, this section presents an overall description of who these party members are and what their social background is.

In Belgium, party members tend to be more male, middle-aged, highly educated and professionally active. Similar profiles have been found in various countries (Seyd and Whiteley, 2004), stressing the inequalities among citizens in terms of political participation depending on their level of resources (Verba and Nie, 1972). However, these general characteristics hide variations among parties (Table 2).

In Belgium as in other countries, party members are disproportionately male (Scarrows and Gezgor, 2010). However, with an average of two-third of men among party members, Belgian parties rank among the most open parties towards women in the 2000s (third out of 12). Left-wing parties (PS and Ecolo) tend to recruit more women than right-wing parties (CD&V and Open VLD). In terms of age, parties tend to have older grassroots than the general population. Furthermore, Scarrows and Gezgor (2010) have shown that party membership aged dramatically between the 1990s and the 2000s in Europe. About one-third of party members were above 60 years of age in the 2000s, compared with 19 per cent in the 1990s. Despite this alarming figure, Belgium still ranks fourth out of 12 countries in terms of the average age of its party members. Our data confirm the high average age of party members in Belgium (Table 2). However, it stresses that it is mainly due to pillar parties (CD&V and PS), especially compared with Ecolo.

The education profile of party members in Belgium is also consistent with comparable studies (Scarrows and Gezgor, 2010): members tend to be highly educated (Table 2). However, one party certainly stands out, with exceptionally

Table 2: Social profile of party members (in per cent)

	<i>CD&V</i>	<i>Open VLD</i>	<i>PS</i>	<i>Ecolo</i>
<i>Gender***</i>				
Male	71.2	69.2	64.1	64.2
Female	28.8	30.8	35.9	35.8
Total (<i>N</i>)	598	458	820	1028
<i>Age***</i>				
<25	1.2	3.3	2.0	1.8
25–34	5.7	8.4	9.2	7.6
35–44	11.4	15.0	13.9	22.9
45–54	19.0	20.8	24.6	31.9
55–64	24.7	23.4	26.5	22.7
65>	37.9	29.2	23.8	13.0
Total (<i>N</i>)	578	428	797	1008
<i>Education***</i>				
None/Elementary	10.9	10.1	11.4	2.2
High school	41.8	47.7	43.3	25.6
Higher education	47.2	42.2	45.3	72.2
Total (<i>N</i>)	595	457	819	1028
<i>Professional Activity***</i>				
Active	45.5	54.0	54.1	66.7
Inactive	54.5	46.0	45.9	33.3
Total (<i>N</i>)	591	461	813	1025
<i>Professional Status***</i>				
Worker	5.2	3.7	6.3	2.3
Employee	14.0	10.5	13.7	22.5
Civil servant	8.7	11.2	24.0	20.2
Self-employed/Business owner	4.4	14.2	2.3	5.7
Professional (doctor, lawyer and so on)	3.0	5.6	1.2	3.6
Executive	5.2	5.6	6.4	10.2
Other activity	3.9	1.2	0.1	2.4
Homemaker	5.3	3.7	3.1	3.7
(Early) retired	45.3	36.5	35.2	21.5
Unemployed	1.1	2.8	3.4	4.6
Student	0.5	1.9	1.2	1.2
Disabled	1.1	1.4	2.3	1.6
Other – not active	2.3	1.9	0.7	0.6
Total (<i>N</i>)	563	430	813	1022

*** $P < 0.001$.



high educational attainments of its members: Ecolo, with almost 3/4 of its grassroots holding a higher education degree.

Finally, differences can be observed in terms of occupation (Table 2). The PS has the highest proportion of workers, but also of civil servants (reflecting its penetration of public administration). Ecolo has a higher proportion of employees, reflecting its recruitment among the middle class. The Liberals (Open VLD) is the party of the self-employed. The Christian Democrats demonstrate their cross-cutting position on the socio-economic cleavage: no active category stands out; in fact, the party mainly includes one inactive category: the retired. These specificities reflect the historical anchorage of parties on a specific side of a cleavage and the special links some parties have with administration (in the case of the PS).

Members and overlapping memberships

Hypothesis 2a stresses that the party on the ground in pillar and partitocratic parties should have stronger links with auxiliary association networks via overlapping memberships than in other parties. In order to test this hypothesis, we have selected four indicators: religious orientation, educational network, social care and trade union affiliations.

The denominational cleavage resulted in two competing worlds: the Catholic world mediated by the Christian Democrats, and the secularised world mediated by the Liberals and the Socialists. These divisions are still visible today in the composition of Belgian parties.

In terms of religious orientation, the two main pillar parties are characterised by the distinctive religious beliefs of their members (Table 3). Almost all members of the CD&V are religious (Catholic or Christian). Conversely, members of the PS are for large part non-believers (64.1 per cent). The Dutch-speaking liberals (Open VLD) present an interesting profile with 64.8 per cent of Christians/Catholics, which goes against the idea of a secularised party. This can be explained by a successful realignment of the Liberals on the denominational cleavage and their decision to open to (Catholic) believers in the early 1960s, as well as to the historically stronger degree of religiosity in Flanders. Ecolo emerged in the 1980s as a cross-cutting party on the denominational cleavage. This characteristic is reflected in its grassroots, which displays an almost equal proportion of believers and non-believers.

The second indicator is the education network. The issue of education left its mark on the political history of Belgium with two major conflicts on the organisation and the funding of the education system. As a result, two competing systems coexist (Deschouwer, 2009): the official system (linked to the Socialist and Liberal pillars), and the free denominational system (enclosed

**Table 3:** Party members and historical pillars (in per cent)

	<i>CD&V</i>	<i>PS</i>	<i>Open VLD</i>	<i>Ecolo</i>
<i>Religious orientation***</i>				
Non-believer	1.2	64.1	28.2	53.0
Catholic/Christian	97.2	33.6	64.8	43.5
Other religion	1.7	2.3	7.0	3.6
Total (<i>N</i>)	598	777	457	985
<i>Education network***</i>				
Official network	8.6	82.5	48.8	35.3
Free denominational network	77.3	11.3	22.8	54.2
Other network	5.5	0.8	15.4	2.6
Multiple networks	8.6	5.4	13.0	7.9
Total (<i>N</i>)	383	594	285	920
<i>Mutual health insurance company***</i>				
Christian MHIC	91.6	7.4	29.3	40.1
Socialist MHIC	1.2	77.0	6.7	19.4
Liberal MHIC	1.5	1.1	46.6	2.0
Neutral/Independent MHIC	5.7	14.6	17.3	38.5
Total (<i>N</i>)	597	816	461	1018
<i>Trade union membership***</i>				
Christian (ACV/CSC)	95.7	4.3	26.7	54.0
Socialist (ABVV/FGTB)	1.8	91.8	7.4	36.1
Liberal (ACLVB/CGSLB)	1.8	1.9	61.5	1.8
Other	0.7	1.9	4.4	8.1
Total (<i>N</i>)	279	135	513	454

****P* < 0.001.

in the Catholic pillar). Again, the two main pillar parties recruit members who are strongly rooted in their pillar: 77.3 per cent of the members of the CD&V have completed a degree in the free denominational system, whereas 82.5 per cent of the members of the PS were educated in the official system (Table 3).¹² The other parties display a more balanced distribution.

The third indicator is social care institution affiliation. In Belgium, welfare institutions are not run by the state. After WWII, pillar parties played a major role in implementing the welfare state and designed pillarised institutions to deal with the new welfare policies. Consequently, welfare institutions are semi-public institutions linked to the three pillars (Catholic, Socialist and Liberal). Each pillar developed its own mutual health insurance companies (MHIC), and citizens have to register with one of these MHIC (traditionally the one linked to their sociological world). Although a new neutral MHIC emerged, the members of the two main pillar parties (CD&V and PS) are still extensively



enclosed in their pillar: 91.6 per cent of the members of the CD&V chose the Catholic MHIC, and 77.0 per cent of the members of the PS chose the Socialist MHIC (Table 3). The members of the Open VLD are also – but to a lesser extent – linked to the Liberal MHIC (46.6 per cent). Once again, Ecolo cross-cuts the cleavage: the party includes the highest rate of members opting for the neutral/independent MHIC.

The last indicator is trade union membership. Each pillar developed its union to ensure the representation in the socio-economic negotiations. If they are affiliated,¹³ the members of the main pillar parties (PS and CD&V) display a quasi perfect encapsulation in their pillar. It is also the case for a majority of the members of the Open VLD with the Liberal union, whereas the members of Ecolo display once more a balanced distribution between the two main unions (Socialist and Christian).

In sum, Hypothesis 2a is supported. The members of the two historical pillar parties (CD&V and PS) are strongly encapsulated in their sociological world. As part of a loosely structured pillar, the members of the Open VLD show a medium encapsulation within the liberal organisations. The members of Ecolo are characterised by cross-cutting profiles. It is interesting to note that there is no significant difference in the level of encapsulation between the generations of members based on the year of joining as regards the two main parties (PS and CD&V): the level of encapsulation has not diminished over time.

Opinions and attitudes

The previous section emphasised how pillarisation left its imprints on the sociological profile of party members in Belgium. The multiplication of societal divisions along cleavage lines has generated a highly fragmented party system. One also expects more appeal to shared subcultural ideational values reflected in the political attitudes and opinions of pillar party members than in other parties (Hypothesis 2b). Two types of indicators were used to survey the ideological profile of the respondents: a subjective measure (self-placement on a left–right scale) and an objective measure (position on various issues). The idea of shared values also implies a higher degree of cohesion among party members in pillar parties compared with other parties. Table 4 summarises the average position of members on the various indicators as well as the dispersion around the mean (as a measure of cohesion).

Table 4 indicates that the members of each party present a specific ideological profile, distinct from the other parties. As regards the self-placement on the left–right scale, a large majority of the members of Ecolo and the PS opt for a position to the left of the political spectrum (Table 4), the members of the CD&V for a centre(–right) position,¹⁴ and the members of Open VLD for

Table 4: Ideological profile of party members

	<i>CD&V</i>		<i>Open VLD</i>		<i>PS</i>		<i>Ecolo</i>	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Variance</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Variance</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Variance</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Variance</i>
Left-Right (Self-Placement 0-7)***	4.0	1.35	4.2	1.48	2.3	1.83	2.2	0.91
Socio-economic scale (1-4)***	2.4	0.19	2.0	0.18	2.8	0.26	3.1	0.26
Openness-Retreat scale (1-4)***	2.6	0.34	2.2	0.32	2.5	0.58	3.4	0.27
Progressivism-Conservatism scale (1-4)***	2.4	0.47	2.7	0.29	3.1	0.60	3.4	0.47
Libertarianism-Authoritarianism scale (1-4)***	2.3	0.32	2.1	0.32	2.1	0.42	2.7	0.32

*** $P < 0.001$.



centre–right positions. Contrary to our expectations, the more cohesive party is Ecolo, the less cohesive is the PS (see the measure of variance).

The differences between parties are even more striking if we look at the position of party members on specific issues. The respondents were asked to give their opinion on 17 propositions that were reduced to four scales (Table 4).¹⁵ The first scale is a strict socio-economic scale. It confirms what was highlighted by the subjective left–right self-placement: on average, the Greens tend to adopt the most left-wing positions, followed by the Socialists, the Christian Democrats (almost perfect centrist position) and the Liberals. This ‘ranking’ of the parties is identical for the other scales, which confirms the intertwined nature of the cleavage structure in Belgium. On average, the Greens systematically adopt the more ‘leftist’ positions on each scale: openness/retreat, progressivism/conservatism and libertarianism/authoritarianism. This result confirms the strong anchorage of the party in the ‘new politics’ (Poguntke, 1989). The members of the PS, on the contrary, tend to adopt different positions on the non-economic scales. They display a centre position on the openness/retreat scale (they are even to the ‘right’ of the Christian Democrats), and an authoritarian position on the libertarianism/authoritarianism scale. However, on the progressivism/conservatism scale – which is the modern translation of the denominational cleavage – their anchorage to the left is much more obvious. It is also the only scale on which the Liberals adopt an average leftist position. Conversely, the Christian Democrats adopt more conservative and authoritarian positions on average, but an open position on the openness/retreat scale.

Overall, the members of all parties present clear positions that correspond to the traditional anchorage of parties on the traditional cleavages in Belgian politics. However, the level of cohesion on the indicators tends to go against our expectation: the members of the pillar parties (especially the PS) systematically display the least cohesion on the various indicators. Conversely, the members of Ecolo – or the Open VLD depending on the indicator – are the most cohesive. Hypothesis 2b is therefore only partly supported.

Enrolment

In the literature, scholars have identified three main categories of selective motives to join political organisations: purposive or ideological, solidary or process, and material (Clark and Wilson, 1961; Whiteley, 1995), but have also observed that often party members also report collective or altruistic reasons for joining. The partitocratic and pillarised nature of a political party may affect the distribution of motivations for joining of its members. We expect to find higher proportions of members who joined for material reasons

Table 5: Party members and reasons to join (in per cent)

	<i>CD&V</i>	<i>Open VLD</i>	<i>PS</i>	<i>Ecolo</i>
Material incentives***	4.0	4.6	8.4	0.3
Process incentives***	38.9	43.2	43.9	20.9
Ideological incentives***	57.1	52.3	47.7	78.8
Total (<i>N</i>)	576	438	811	1019

*** $P < 0.001$.

(patronage – partitocracy) or for process/solidary reasons (automatic move linked to the encapsulation in the pillar – pillarisation) than for ideological reasons compared with other parties (Hypothesis 2c).

In the survey, the respondents were asked to give the primary reason for joining.¹⁶ They had to choose among ten predetermined answers, which were then reduced to three categories: material, ideological/purposive and process/solidary motives. However, when analysing the results (Table 5), one should keep in mind that on average members joined long before they were surveyed,¹⁷ and that answers to this question are often ‘ex-post reconstruction of the motives to join’ (van Haute, 2011, p. 3) with a high probability of recall error.

Ecolo clearly stands out with a remarkably high proportion of members who joined for ideological/purposive motives (more than 3/4). This is in sharp contrast with the PS, with ideological motives accounting for less than half of the PS affiliations. As expected, process incentives seem to be more common within the pillar parties than for Ecolo. Finally, material incentives are almost non-existent within Ecolo, while more than 8 per cent of the socialist members declare that they joined to obtain a favour or to start a political career. The members of the CD&V and the Open VLD are mid-way between the profile of the members of the PS and Ecolo.

As expected (Hypothesis 2c), process/solidary motives tend to be more common among the members of the pillar parties and material incentives more common among members of partitocratic parties – especially the PS – than for the more recent, smaller party Ecolo. It is interesting to note that the larger presence of material incentives is constant between generations for the PS, whereas it fluctuates for the CD&V (lower levels for the members who joined before the 1980s or after the 1990s, and higher levels for those who joined in the 1980s).

Activism

When looking at the profile of party members, it is important to examine not only their attitudes but also their behaviour. Previous surveys have shown that

**Table 6:** Level and type of activism (in per cent)

	<i>CD&V</i>	<i>Open VLD</i>	<i>PS</i>	<i>Ecolo</i>
<i>Average time devoted to party activities per month***</i>				
More than 10 hours	7.8	8.8	5.2	18.0
From 5 to 10 hours	5.5	6.4	6.7	14.1
Up to 5 hours	30.0	21.6	35.6	43.9
None	56.7	63.3	52.5	24.1
Total (<i>N</i>)	580	422	787	1010
<i>Frequency of contacts with local branches in the past year***</i>				
Often	38.3	36.4	35.6	60.5
A few times	34.8	33.0	34.2	23.7
Rarely	17.0	17.3	15.2	10.2
Never	9.9	13.3	15.0	5.6
Total (<i>N</i>)	595	451	804	990
<i>Number of meetings attended at local level in the past year***</i>				
6 or more	25.0	22.1	25.5	48.3
3–5	12.0	11.5	19.7	13.9
1 or 2	17.9	15.0	22.6	15.0
None	45.0	51.3	32.2	22.8
Total (<i>N</i>)	591	452	807	981

*** $P < 0.001$.

only a minority of members actually take part in party activities on a regular basis (Seyd and Whiteley, 1992; Heidar, 1994; Seyd and Whiteley, 2004). In pillar parties, intra-party participation should be rather symbolic or acclamatory in its nature, with a stronger horizontal power game and a more passive party on the ground reflected in a lower level of activism than in other parties (Hypothesis 2d). Conversely, one would expect Green party members to be highly involved in party activities, in line with their participative norms (Rüdig, 2005).

Our surveys do not contain indicators of the nature of intra-party participation (symbolic/acclamatory nature) but they allow assessing the level of activism of party members in Belgium with three indicators. The first indicator consists of the average number of hours that members declared that they had dedicated to party activities during an average month of the previous year (Table 6).

The results indicate that 80 per cent of the respondents spend very little (up to 5 hours: 35 per cent of all respondents) or no time at all (45 per cent of all respondents) on party activities. This low degree of reported activism is consistent with similar surveys (Seyd and Whiteley, 2004). However, there are significant differences among Belgian parties, along the expected lines.

The traditional parties display a low proportion of members who declare that they devote 5 hours or more per month to their party (11.9 per cent for the PS, 13.3 per cent for the CD&V and 15.2 per cent for the Open VLD). The Greens have a higher proportion of active members (32.1 per cent).

The next two indicators grasp the type of activities that members engage in. The first one measures the frequency of contacts with the local branch during the past year. The results indicate that Belgian parties maintain solid links with their members and supporters at local level (Table 6). Again, Ecolo stands out with an above-average proportion of very active members (60.5 per cent); the traditional parties display very similar patterns (between 35 and 40 per cent). The most significant differences between parties emerge with the third indicator, that is, the annual frequency of attendance of party meetings at local level (Table 6). On average, one out of three members did not participate in any local party meeting during the previous year. Parties differ significantly on this indicator, ranging from a share of 48.3 per cent of very active members for Ecolo to 22.1 per cent for the Open VLD.

Overall, Hypothesis 2d is supported. Ecolo singles itself out as the participatory party. The PS displays lower levels of activism, as expected for a pillar party. However, its worker and mass party features counterbalance the passivity of the pillarised grassroots. The Christian Democrats display a low level of activism, but a strong local branch activity. Finally, the Open VLD is a party of contrasts, with a pool of very active members and a dormant majority.

Conclusion

The primary goal of this article was to present an empirical overview of party membership figures and profiles in Belgium and to investigate the pillarised and partitocratic nature of Belgian political parties via the characteristics of the party on the ground.

Party membership figures have nuanced the idea of partitocratic and pillar parties. On the one hand, some parties (PS, CD&V) still display higher levels of party membership. On the other, the gap with other parties is decreasing and they did not escape the phenomenon of membership decline since the 1990s. It may be interpreted as a decline of linkage between parties and civil society through mass membership, and/or as a weakening of pillar parties, patronage and clientelism, which are two features of partitocratic regimes.

The analysis of the profile of party members via survey data has produced more conclusive results regarding the presence of pillarised and partitocratic parties in Belgium. The analysis showed that members are representative



of their pillar and display strong links with extensive auxiliary association networks embodied by overlapping memberships. These strong links are consistent throughout the sample, inconsiderate of the year of joining. The results have also emphasised that party members adopt opinions in line with their party's position on historical cleavages, although they did not support the idea of more ideological cohesion in pillar parties compared with other parties. In terms of the mobilisation capacity of parties, the results showed that pillar parties tend to mobilise more than other parties on the basis of process rewards, and that partitocratic parties mobilise more on the basis of material rewards, although this feature would be in decline for the CD&V. Finally, the analysis supported the idea that the members of pillar parties tend to be more passive than in other parties.

These various indicators all point in the same direction: the members of the pillar parties (PS, CD&V and to a lesser extent Open VLD) display a strong encapsulation in their sociological world and historical cleavages. Their membership reflects their belonging to a social subculture. This contradicts greatly with the profile of the Green party members.

The answers to our two questions lead to contradicting results and point towards a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, the anchorage and encroachment of pillar parties on civil society is still very strong. These features show few signs of decline if we compare the profile of the successive generations of party members. This tends to confirm the pillarised and (to a lesser extent) partitocratic nature of the traditional parties in Belgium (PS, CD&V). On the other hand, these parties also face the most rapid decline in terms of party membership figures and have the largest proportion of older members. Therefore, they maintain a very cohesive sociological world, but this world is shrinking and faces difficulties to renew itself. It is more the case for the CD&V, which seems to have partially lost its partitocratic features, than the PS, which seems to have been more successful in maintaining its capacity to provide material rewards as triggers for participation. Conversely, weakly pillarised parties are able to maintain their membership levels. However, they cannot provide the same appeal to a large and well-structured sociological world and display a lower anchorage in civil society via group-based membership. They are not in a state of repeating what the pillar parties did in the 1980s and develop a mass-membership basis.

This contribution raises a crucial question for the functioning of representative democracy in Belgium: In a country where parties have always played a central role, and in a context of shrinking sociological worlds and of criticisms towards patronage and clientelism, what can parties offer as an alternative to pillarisation and partitocracy to mobilise citizens for participation? This question is fundamental in representative democracies. Indeed, some authors (Widfelt, 1999) have claimed that the erosion of party membership

figures threatens the representativeness of the party on the ground, thereby decreasing the linkage capacity of parties. Although we have only looked at one aspect of pillarisation and partitocracy, that is, the level of the party on the ground, this indicates a need to look more systematically and empirically at this neglected aspect of party organisation, as it provides important information for the debate on party decline.

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Notes

- 1 With the exception of the *European Political Parties' Middle-Level Elites Project* conducted at the end of the 1970s.
- 2 Pillar parties, also labeled parties of social integration (Neumann, 1956), are identified by Seiler (2000) as sub-types of mass parties, along with the parties of activists (*partis de militants*). Both originated outside the parliament, but would differ in terms of the level of rigidity of their organisational structures.
- 3 Among the 11 indicators of intra-party pillarisation, 5 can be directly related to the characteristics of the party on the ground: mass party membership and extensive auxiliary association network (organisational penetration), ideational values and material values (political mobilisation) and overlapping memberships (hierarchical party control).
- 4 www.projectmapp.eu, Website of the working group on Members and Activists of Political Parties.
- 5 www.projectmapp.eu for a copy of the questionnaires used for the surveys.
- 6 Legislature 2003–2007. The dominant party of the Extreme Right (VB, Dutch-speaking) is not integrated in the analysis. No agreement could be reached with the party to conduct a survey of their members.
- 7 This equilibrium is rather stable in Belgian politics. The Christian Democrats are traditionally stronger in Flanders than in French-speaking Belgium, whereas the Socialists and the Greens are stronger in French-speaking Belgium than in Flanders. The dominance of the Flemish Liberals in the Liberal family has, however, been lost since 2007, but it remains to be seen whether it is a temporary or structural change.
- 8 PS in November 2003; Ecolo in March 2004, Open VLD in January 2006 and CD&V in June 2006. The context is one of semi-continuity with a stable federal government that includes the Liberals and the Socialists on both sides of the linguistic divide, but excludes the family that best embodies the state in Belgium: the Christian Democrats. All surveys were conducted at the start of an electoral campaign (the 2004 regional and European elections for PS and Ecolo, and the 2006 local elections for Open VLD and CD&V). However, constant campaigning is a trait of Belgian politics in the 2000s: elections were held in 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2009 and 2010. At the time of the survey, each party was in a specific situation: the PS was in a winning sequence; Ecolo was having difficulty finishing its first participation in power at federal level; Open VLD was recovering from an electoral defeat at the regional elections of 2004 (falling from the first to the third rank in Flanders); and CD&V had just made a comeback to power at regional level in 2004 after the trauma of 1999.
- 9 The sampling method varies between parties according to their degree of collaboration in the research. The PS and Open VLD selected the sample from their own register on a simple random basis and questionnaires were sent from their headquarters. Given the smaller size of Ecolo's membership, the questionnaires were sent to all members with the *Quinzaine* – one of the party's publications. The CD&V provided us with their membership list from which a stratified random sample was drawn.
- 10 Response rate by party: PS 32.9 per cent ($N = 822$), Ecolo 32.2 per cent ($N = 1029$), Open VLD 18.6 per cent ($N = 465$) and CD&V 24.2 per cent ($N = 604$). The variation can be explained by the origin of the survey (French-speaking university), the method used (no reminder could be sent) and the poor state of the party registers.
- 11 We cannot provide membership figures for its French-speaking counterpart, the Front national, due to its very weak organisation and the party's refusal to disclose its figures.
- 12 The free denominational network is dominant in Flanders: www.ond.vlaanderen.be/onderwijsstatistiek. Conversely, in the French community, the official network attracts 40.8 per cent of students: <http://www.statistiques.cfwb.be/index.php?id=510>.

- 13 Belgium has high rates of union affiliation, partially due to their role in the payment of unemployment benefits. However, parties differ significantly in terms of union affiliation. The members of the PS are significantly more affiliated (63.6 per cent) to a union than in the other parties. The low rate of union affiliation among the Liberals (30.1 per cent) is consistent with their position on the socio-economic cleavage.
- 14 60.6 per cent of the members of the CD&V chose a centre-right (3) or centre-left (4) position on a 0–7 left–right scale.
- 15 For each proposition, the respondents had the opportunity to say whether they fully agree, agree, disagree, fully disagree or have no opinion. The propositions correspond to the items included in the Belgian Electoral Survey (ISPO-PIOP) and measure the positions on the major cleavages. The responses were coded so that the lower score corresponds to the most right-wing position, and the highest score to the most left-wing. The 17 propositions were included in a factor analysis that revealed four dimensions: Factor 1 openness-retreat: items on asylum seekers (0.690), UE enlargement (0.648) and right to vote for foreigners (0.722); Factor 2 socio-economic: items on privatisation of the postal services (0.686), role of unions (0.740) and state intervention in the economy (0.625); Factor 3 progressivism–conservatism: abortion (0.739), marriage before children (0.762) and adoption rights for same-sex couples (0.726); Factor 4: libertarianism–authoritarianism: death penalty (0.668), discipline at school (0.518) and police (0.623). On this basis, four scales were established.
- 16 The exact wording of the question was: Citizens join political parties for a variety of reasons. What was your most important reason for joining XX? (Please tick only one box).
- 17 On average, members joined Ecolo 9 years ago, the Open VLD 19 years 7 months ago, the CD&V 24 years 9 months ago and the PS 26 years 2 months ago.

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