

The Extreme-Right and Enfranchisement of Immigrants: Main Issues in the Public "Debate" on Integration in Belgium

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In Belgium, the issue of (local) enfranchisement of foreign residents has without any doubt become the most salient topic of public debate on integration of immigrants and their descendants. Although debate about the issue dates back to the early 1970s, at the start of the 21st century it is still one of the hottest topics in Belgian politics. A second salient topic concerns the strategy against the Flemish extreme-right wing party the Vlaams Blok, or the debate about the so-called 'cordon sanitaire' since the 1990s. This contribution wants to discuss the public debate on voting rights for non-Belgians and the strategy against the Vlaams Blok as the most contentious issues in the wider debate about (the future of) immigrant incorporation in Belgian society. Thus, we hope to be able to clarify the (absence of) debate on integration and multiculturalism in Belgium.

En Belgique, l'octroi du droit de vote (local) aux étrangers est incontestablement devenu la question centrale du débat public sur l'intégration des immigrants et des générations qui en sont issues. Bien que discutée depuis le début des années 1970, la question du vote des immigrés demeure, à l'aube du 21^e siècle, une des questions brûlantes de la politique belge. Une deuxième question importante concerne l'opposition au parti flamand de l'extrême-droite, le Vlaams Blok, ou le débat sur le soi-disant "cordon sanitaire" qui date des années 1990. Cet article se veut une discussion du débat public sur le droit de vote des immigrés et l'opposition au Vlaams Blok, les deux questions les plus contentieuses dans le débat sur (l'avenir de) l'intégration des immigrants dans la société belge. Nous espérons ainsi pouvoir élucider le (manque de) débat sur l'intégration et le multiculturalisme en Belgique.

Key words/Mots-clés: Immigrants; extreme-right/extrême-droite; enfranchisement/admission au suffrage; public debate/débat public; Belgium/Belgique.

Introduction

Belgium is politically a complicated country. Its unique federal system based simultaneously on a territorial logic (regions) and a nonterritorial logic (communities distinguished on language basis), its cross-cutting political cleavages, and its fragmented party landscape together generate a considerable degree of complexity. As a consequence, those unfamiliar with Belgian politics fail to see and understand a number of its basic traits, of which one is the persistent absence of genuine public debate. Indeed, in the Belgian political field, as a result of its participative nature, it is seen to be a necessity to create *backstage* compromises on nearly every imaginable topic. At the same time, the dominant political actors try to avoid public debate as much as possible if it turns out to be impossible to reach a foreclosed agreement. The art of *not* debating is a precious good among politicians, civil servants, and high ranking civil society representatives in Belgium.

To our understanding there are three main strategies in Belgium to practice this art of not debating. The most common strategy used is the tactic of *strategic underdefinition*. If two parties do not agree on the policy the country should adopt with regard to, for example, incorporation of immigrants—as was the case in the 1980s—the federal government will simply pass a law stating in vague and general terms what its objectives are. In the case of immigrant incorporation it was thus stressed the goal was “integration.” By giving hardly any substance to this concept, it has been left totally open to define what integration means in practice. A second strategy could be called the salami technique, which in order to be successful should always be combined with the third strategy—at least in public—*never to define your ultimate goal* (Hooghe, 1998). As one would do with the sausage, the salami technique slices policy domains as fine as possible. One will never really discuss a policy domain as a whole, because all policy-making is in general done slice by slice or issue by issue. Time and again, the various political parties that form the (regional, community, or federal) government will tend to negotiate on every issue and look for compromises *hic et nunc*. Furthermore, beside the party elite and the linked civil society leaders, hardly anyone of the public at large can know for sure what the ultimate policy goals of the different parties are in given domains. Stealth politics is (still) seen as a virtue for efficient government participation.

As a consequence, it should not be surprising that Belgium has never witnessed a public national debate on multiculturalism as a whole. Debates such as the general public discussion on integration in the United Kingdom with the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain or the

Dutch controversy about the “multicultural drama” launched by publicist Scheffer have not taken place. At best in Belgium one will only debate a limited item in the field of multiculturalism. Indeed, in the Belgian context the omnipresence of the salami technique does not allow for easy engagement in an overall debate of a policy domain. Furthermore, a debate on multiculturalism is highly unlikely as no agreement exists between the two dominant national language groups about the basic issues, words, and concepts one would discuss (Verlot, 2001). For example, in the French community, use of the concept of multiculturalism is often rejected as politically incorrect. The politically correct behaviour in the French-speaking part of Belgium is merely to talk about socioeconomic issues when discussing incorporation of immigrants, rejecting the idea that there are ethnic—non-French—minorities (Martiniello, 1997). Indeed, acknowledgement of ethnicity is seen to endanger equality amongst citizens. Most Flemings would in turn not accept debating immigrant incorporation while ignoring the issue of cultural identity. Faced with these types of deadlock situations, Belgian politicians tend simply to avoid all-encompassing debates.

As a result, public debate on issues of integration and multiculturalism have until now been mostly limited in scope and coverage (as on Muslim cemeteries, inclusion of immigrants in public and private schools, the ban on the headscarf in schools, etc.). In addition, the life cycles of these debates tends to be extremely short. There are two notable exceptions. First and foremost, there has been the ongoing discussion about the local enfranchisement of non-European foreign nationals. Second, there has been an ongoing public debate (mainly in Flanders) about strategy against the anti-immigrant *Vlaams Blok*. It is these two debates that we address in the remainder of this article. We first briefly discuss the debate on the *cordon sanitaire* in order to follow with a more in-depth look at the debate on enfranchisement.

The Debate on the *Cordon Sanitaire*

In 1988 the extreme right and anti-immigrant party *Vlaams Blok* won 17.5% of the votes in the municipal elections of Antwerp, the largest Flemish city and one of the largest ports in the world. Ever since, there has been a permanent—albeit dreaded—debate in academia, politics, and media about the appropriate strategy to be used in the struggle against the extreme right in Belgium, and more specifically in Flanders. The continual electoral success of the *Vlaams Blok* in the 1990s has guaranteed that the debate surfaces time and again after each election. It should be stressed that in the last local elections of 2000 the *Vlaams Blok* obtained 33% of the votes in Antwerp.

Fuelled by the observation that the success of the *Vlaams Blok* in Antwerp was due to its anti-immigrant platform, the national government decided to install a so-called Royal Commissioner in 1989. This Royal Commissioner was to advise the government on taking adequate policy measures to improve relations between the immigrant and autochthonous populations. The assumption was that improvements in relations between ethnic minority groups and autochthonous residents would remove the fertile ground on which the *Vlaams Blok* was able to build its electoral success. Although the Royal Commissioner did important work, her manifold policy proposals were mostly ignored. Nevertheless, as one of the most important measures, it was decided to further strengthen the importance of *ius soli* in the nationality legislation. In addition, in 1994 a permanent Centre for the Combat against Racism and the Advancement of Equal Opportunities was established, to monitor (policy on) immigrant groups and undertake judicial actions against racial discrimination. It is of crucial importance to understand that policy-making in the field of immigrant incorporation has been as a result of reactions to the electoral success of an anti-immigrant political party. It is, therefore, not surprising that the fear of a White backlash has continually interfered with the development of policies on immigrant incorporation.

At the same time the electoral success of the *Vlaams Blok* incited the other political parties to campaign against the extreme right. Observing the struggle against the extreme right, described by Van Donselaar (1995), one can make the distinction between legal measures on the one hand, and the creation of barriers in the political system on the other hand. According to De Witte (1997), the latter category can be subclassified into the four categories of (a) isolation, (b) argumentation and discussion, (c) direct action, and (d) unmasking of the extreme right (Damen, 2001). Over the years, many proposals appeared in partisan publications and the mainstream press about how to combat the extreme right. These have ranged from proposed changes to the electoral system (i.e., the abolishment of compulsory voting, introduction of a general threshold for eligibility, enfranchisement of non-European Union foreigners), over discursive changes in the press coverage of the *Vlaams Blok* to stricter laws on racism and xenophobia. Parliament has been debating restricting public financing of political parties to those that recognize explicitly the European convention of human rights. Some have even called for a complete ban of extreme-right or undemocratic political parties.

However, the issue that has been a source of permanent public discussion is the existence of the so-called *cordon sanitaire* around the *Vlaams Blok*. It should be noted that this debate was mainly Flemish although it did have spin-offs in other parts of Belgium. According to Damen (2001) the *cordon*

sanitaire can be defined as an agreement between the democratic parties that they will (a) not make governing agreements with the *Vlaams Blok*; (b) undertake no concerted legislative activities (laws, decrees, amendments); (c) not solicit the *Vlaams Blok* for support for resolutions; (d) not support resolutions proposed by the *Vlaams Blok*; (e) not engage in joint press conferences or declarations; and (f) not enter into voting alliances with the *Vlaams Blok*. About the first three norms of the *cordon sanitaire* there is almost no discussion, something that cannot be said about the last three.

Introduced on the Flemish side in 1989 by the Green party and the Socialist party (the left-wing parties), the *cordon sanitaire* was never fully accepted or respected by the other (centre and centre-right) democratic parties, that is, the Flemish democratic nationalists (*Volksunie*, now split into more right-wing NV-A and more left-wing Spirit), the Christian Democrats (formerly CVP, now CD&V) and the Liberal party (formerly PVV, now-VLD). Right-wing factions of these parties have been arguing that the *cordon sanitaire* functions as a perfect excuse for the left to keep the right out of (local) government, because the right-wing votes of the *Vlaams Blok* voters become useless. In addition, it has been argued by both left-wing and right-wing critics that the isolation of the *Vlaams Blok* gives it the advantage of the underdog. Protest votes, it is argued, would be directed toward the *Vlaams Blok* because of its exclusion from the political system. Another argument has been that the struggle against the *Vlaams Blok* would be better won by tackling the issues that provide the party with its electoral appeal. Nevertheless, until 2003 all Flemish democratic parties have de facto accepted the rough lines of the *cordon sanitaire*. Small infringements have taken place in various small municipalities, but in larger cities at the regional and at the national level the *cordon sanitaire* has been almost entirely respected.

The Debate on Local Enfranchisement of Non-EU Foreigners

We now take a more in-depth look at the ongoing debate about local enfranchisement of non-European foreign nationals. In the Belgian context, the debate about voting rights for immigrants (and naturalization) can since the mid 1990s be considered the most salient and most symbolic issue in the political debate about the integration of immigrants in Belgium. In fact, it probably is the only genuine public debate in Belgium where core discourses about immigrant integration have become visible. As Jacobs (1998, 1999, 2000) has highlighted in earlier work, Belgian politicians have been remarkably reluctant to enfranchise foreign residents. This has

been mainly due to polarization and electoral struggle over the anti-immigrant vote in the 1980s and early 1990s and to the disruptive effect of the Flemish-Francophone cleavage in the second half of the 1990s. In the remainder of this article we assess why discursive positions of political parties in the debate changed in the late 1990s in response to the discourse of the extreme-right. In the 1980s and early 1990s all traditional parties avoided supporting the demand for local enfranchisement for fear of a White backlash and increased electoral success of the extreme right. In the second half of the 1990s some of the mainstream parties gradually shifted their positions in favour of local enfranchisement once again.

As in most European countries, local enfranchisement of foreign residents has primarily been a left-wing political demand. This is to some extent because classic left-wing parties (i.e., socialists) expect electoral progress from immigrant votes, but is, especially in the 1970s and early 1980s, equally a result of the leftist ideology of international solidarity (Rath, 1990). New left-wing parties (i.e., ecologists and left-liberals) support local enfranchisement because of their quest for radical democracy and defence of post-materialist values (Guiraudon, 1997). However, enfranchisement of foreign residents has not always been automatically advocated in leftist political discourse. At times of competition with anti-immigrant parties in the 1980s and 1990s, several socialist politicians objected to extending voting rights to non-nationals for fear of a White backlash from the working class. It is worth stressing that the support for local enfranchisement by left-wing politicians was not the result of a suffragist movement among foreign residents themselves, but was launched as an issue by the trade unions in the 1970s, only later to be joined by immigrant associations.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s a number of left-wing and centrist politicians favoured local enfranchisement. Due to pressure from the suffragist movement, in the early 1980s two consecutive centre-left-wing governments promised to take up the issue. The right-wing political parties opposed the idea of enfranchisement, stressing the importance of state citizenship, which might be granted to immigrants after considerable *integration*, a euphemism for acculturation, if not assimilation. In their discourse the newcomer is allowed to adopt state citizenship only if this equals "melting" into the receiving nation (postulated to be a community of common culture) to the point of indistinction. In contrast, the left-wing advocates of voting rights argued that local franchise need not be linked to state citizenship and that voting rights for immigrants constituted a next logical step in the development of democracy and workers' rights. Because of political instability the issue could, however, not be tackled, and

soon thereafter the consecutive short-lived left-wing governments that favoured local enfranchisement were replaced by a newly elected (centrist) right-wing government. Faced with the competition of extreme right-wing parties and individual populist politicians in the traditional parties in the region of Brussels, the Francophone right-wing liberals had by then—in pursuit of votes—adopted implicit anti-immigrant discourses. They forced the other parties of the right-wing government to drop the issue of local enfranchisement of foreign residents. Instead, a mild form of *ius soli* was introduced in Belgian nationality legislation, partly to counter demands for voting rights for immigrants. At the same time coalition bargaining resulted in the introduction of new restrictive measures on immigrants.

Faced with these events, in 1985 the trade unions and migrant associations revived their suffragist movement. Nevertheless, only the new ecologist parties continued to offer firm support to the idea of enfranchisement of foreign residents, insisting that it would be a logical next step in the process of democratization. Their discourse argued that political rights for foreign residents were unconditional rights that should be granted with no restrictive measures. In contrast, the extreme right-wing parties merely wished to grant immigrants an absolute minimum of rights—and definitely no political rights—and even openly stated that they aimed to kick all foreigners out of the country. These extreme right-wing views gained some *salonfähigkeit* from the fact that the right-wing liberals in government had initiated several anti-immigrant policies. This stimulated the (negative) electoral competition that was evolving about the immigrant issue and at the same time gradually nudged the spectrum of positions on immigrants in the direction of restriction. One can defend the thesis that these processes helped the electoral success of the extreme right wing (especially the *Vlaams Blok* in Flanders) in the following years. It is worth noting that Bourdieu (1998) has hypothesized that a similar evolution in France, where hardening of positions on immigrants by traditional parties seems not to have limited the success of the extreme-right has, instead—through legitimization—helped to augment it.

The *Vlaams Blok* enjoyed its first major success in the national elections of 1987 and the local elections in Antwerp in 1988 making use of anti-immigrant propaganda. The unexpected success of the *Vlaams Blok* in the late 1980s promptly transformed the immigrant issue into a major Flemish concern, where it had earlier been mainly a Francophone topic in Brussels. Despite a number of policy measures regarding immigrants, in the 1991 national elections the *Vlaams Blok* still gained a tremendous success. That same year the Belgian government signed the Treaty of Maastricht, in which Belgium agreed to create a European citizenship, which implied

unconditional local enfranchisement for EU citizens. The new centre-left government Dehaene-I decided to postpone the constitutional change, that was necessary to make this enfranchisement possible in order not to jeopardize ratification of the Treaty of Maastricht. In addition, the government hoped to avoid a Flemish-Francophone conflict over the Flemish fear—fuelled by some influential journalists—that enfranchisement of EU-citizens would further weaken the political minority position of the Flemish in the bilingual region of Brussels. It had been argued that enfranchisement of non-nationals, of whom a large majority is supposedly Francophone, would crowd out Flemish politicians at the local level.

Given the enormous electoral success of the extreme right, any reference to enfranchisement of all foreign residents had in the early 1990s become a taboo in the traditional political parties. A good illustration is the fact that the Royal Commissioner avoided any reference to voting rights and local franchise in her reports. In response to the triumph of the *Vlaams Blok*, several competing anti-racist movements were created in which migrant associations had only minor influence. These movements were, however, unable to influence effectively the political debate about local enfranchisement, and public debate about the issue remained marginal. Throughout the 1990s the traditional centrist and left-wing parties feared taking any steps or even openly discussing the matter of voting rights for foreign residents. But then, in March 1997, a dramatic event suddenly revived support for the idea of enfranchisement of all foreign residents.

The Benaïssa Case as a Discursive Catharsis

In March 1997 the remains of the murdered Belgian-Moroccan girl Loubna Benaïssa, who had disappeared in 1992, were discovered in an abandoned building in Brussels. Apparently, the local police had not made sufficient efforts to investigate the disappearance of a girl in a poor neighbourhood. The murder had been committed by a local paedophile. Only months before, Belgium had been severely shocked by the discovery of the bodies of two girls in the backyard of the notorious paedosexual criminal Marc Dutroux. Because of the outrage and despair engendered by these killings, investigations of cases of child disappearances were given absolute police priority, which led to the tragic resolution of the Benaïssa case.

Early in August 1996 two other kidnapped girls had been rescued from confinement and it became clear that Dutroux was responsible for the death of four missing girls. The kidnapper had been discovered

by public prosecutor Bourlet and magistrate investigator Connerotte, who were widely applauded by the public and attained somewhat of a hero status. In October 1996 it was announced that the Court of Cassation could possibly remove judicial investigator Connerotte from the case. Connerotte had been attending a solidarity dinner with the victims' families, and this was seen to compromise his neutrality. In anticipation of the courts' ruling, thousands of workers all over the country held spontaneous strikes and tens of thousands of young people skipped classes to go and protest in front of the law courts in support of Connerotte. The Court of Cassation, nevertheless, did remove Connerotte from the case.

This decision of the Court nearly resulted in a siege of the Brussels Palace of Justice by angry people who had gathered on the steps of the building. At that time, Nabela Benaïssa, the sister of the still missing Loubna, was able to calm the crowd by calling for serenity, using a megaphone. That evening on the television news and the next day in all newspapers, the image of Nabela, a veiled Belgian-Moroccan 18-year-old girl, addressing the (mainly Belgian) crowd was given central importance. It totally contradicted stereotype representations of immigrant women in popular discourse. Faced with the court's decision, the parents of the murdered and missing children decided to organize a protest manifestation in Brussels a few days later, the so-called White March. At short notice, but with the help of an unseen media announcement and coverage, the protest march of 20 October 1996 was one of the largest in Belgian history. Three hundred thousand people from all social groups, ethnic backgrounds, and ages joined in the march.

Five months after the White March the police announced that the remains of the Moroccan girl had been located. Three days after the discovery, a public Islamic service was held at the great Mosque of Brussels. Thousands attended the ceremony, including many non-Muslims, and it was broadcast live. It was the first time an Islamic ceremony was shown on Belgian television. Specialists were invited to explain all the rituals and symbolism to the public. Just as had been the case during the funerals of the other murdered girls, the country experienced a day of genuine national grief. During the ceremony the parents of the other kidnapped and/or murdered children—parents who had become famous Belgians in the meantime—explicitly stressed their solidarity with the Moroccan family specifically and the Moroccan community in Belgium in general. These statements were widely quoted by the press to illustrate the feeling of unity in grief of all social and ethnic groups in the country. The next day Loubna was buried in the Moroccan city of Tangier. That day Prime Minister Dehaene reported publicly on television comments of others who had stressed that the dramatic events

surrounding Loubna could possibly alleviate tensions between several segments of the multicultural society and would help create new forms of solidarity. Dehaene even expressed support for a debate about local enfranchisement of foreign non-European residents, which the government had until then anxiously avoided and postponed for fear of a White backlash.

During the next couple of weeks several Christian Democratic and Socialist politicians who had, fearing the success of the *Vlaams Blok*, formerly opposed to voting rights for immigrants started declaring themselves in favour of local enfranchisement. Following the Benaïssa events, on the Francophone side all democratic politicians would support local enfranchisement of all non-Belgians. These changes would eventually lead to the banning of constitutional objections to local enfranchisement of non-nationals in 1998. On Flemish (mainly Christian Democrat) demand, however, a transitory article was included in the constitution that stipulated that non-EU nationals could be enfranchised only after the year 2001 (in practice, 2006 at the earliest). The extreme right-wing party *Vlaams Blok* continued ardently objecting to enfranchisement of non-nationals.

By the year 2001 all democratic parties on the Francophone side would support local enfranchisement. On the Flemish side the Socialist party clearly repositioned itself in favour of local enfranchisement. They even proposed a Bill on enfranchisement of foreign residents from non-EU countries that contained fewer conditions (three years of residence) than the bills of the ecologists, who had always defended the extension of voting rights (with five years of residence as a condition). At the same time, in the Flemish Christian Democratic party, several politicians openly called for the extension of voting rights, in an attempt to change the official party position. The right-wing liberals continued to stress the importance of naturalization in order to obtain political rights.

All in all, at the start of the 21st century the chances of local enfranchisement were still slim. The former (1999-2003) "purple-green" government, a coalition of socialists, right-liberals, and ecologists, agreed during their formation talks to further liberalize naturalization rather than enfranchise foreign residents. Although socialists, ecologists, and the Francophone right-liberals supported local enfranchisement, the Flemish right-liberals were able to veto such a change. During formation of the government, the other coalition partners were willing to drop the issue in exchange for new (and relatively open) procedures for naturalization.

In the course of the legislature, ecologists and socialists nevertheless tried to sidestep this deal and reopen debate on enfranchisement. This attempt was backed by influential academics and civil society move-

ments and triggered a number of Senate hearings on the issue, which were widely covered in the press, especially on the Flemish side. In March 2002, however, the Senate turned down a proposal to enfranchise non-EU non-nationals at the local level. The vote in the Senate took place after a remarkably tense period of political debate and negotiating. At first the Flemish right-wing liberal government party threatened a government crisis if Parliament decided to vote on the issue. From their perspective, the reopening of the debate was seen as a breach of the coalition agreement. Other political parties, both in government and in opposition, however, insisted on a parliamentary debate and decision, referring to the ultimate and independent function of Parliament. In order to do their Flemish counterparts a favour and avoid the Bill on enfranchisement being accepted by Parliament, MPs of the Francophone right-wing liberal government party decided to vote collectively against enfranchisement. At the same time they stressed that their official party position was still clearly in favour of local enfranchisement of non-EU non-nationals. Equally, all MPs of the Flemish liberal party opposed the Bill, although a significant number had made it clear that they were nevertheless personally in favour of enfranchisement. The MPs of the Francophone Christian Democratic opposition party supported the Bill, whereas the Flemish Christian Democratic opposition party opposed it. Among the latter, once again, a significant number had stressed that they personally were in favour of enfranchisement. Their official justification was a demand to return to somewhat stricter laws on naturalization before there could be local enfranchisement of non-EU non-nationals. These remarkable developments illustrate the high political salience and symbolic importance of the issue in Belgian politics. It is hence, not surprising it once again popped up in 2003 as one of the main contentious issues for the new federal government.

Why Did the Discursive Changes Take Place?

As described above, the Benaïssa event allowed for a discursive repositioning of several mainstream parties and individual politicians. Where they had been taking mildly (or implicit) anti-immigrant stances, they could now adopt changes in their discourses about political incorporation of immigrants. Either implicitly or explicitly, the Benaïssa case could be used in the face of criticism as a reference point to justify the change. The Benaïssa case thus functioned as a symbol of changes in society that enabled a more positive political stance toward immigrants. The politicians involved could thus

deny possible charges of ideological inconsistency. The question remains as to why mainstream politicians opted for a repositioning on the issue.

Two main hypotheses may explain the discursive changes among mainstream political parties. The first is related to the electoral potential and increasing political importance of immigrant groups, especially in the Brussels Capital Region and is of particular importance for Francophone Belgium. The second reason is related to deeper transformations of the political landscape and the advent of what could be called new political cleavages in the face of the weakening importance of more classic political cleavages and is of particular importance for Flanders.

We first consider the growing electoral potential and increasing political importance of immigrant groups. Due to liberalized legislation on naturalization, increasing numbers of immigrants and their descendants gained Belgian citizenship. As a consequence, Belgians of immigrant origin increasingly constitute an important electoral niche. It is likely they will support those political parties who take and have taken pro-immigrant positions. In order not to miss out on this electoral potential, mainstream parties might see themselves obliged to reposition themselves on immigrant issues. Although they already have voting rights as nationals themselves, Belgians of immigrant origin or descent are likely to favour those political parties that endorse liberalization of naturalization or granting of voting rights to non-nationals. These issues indeed symbolize the openness of political parties toward immigrant incorporation and are likely to be interpreted as such by the immigrant Belgian electorate. In addition, it is highly probable that the enfranchisement issue will keep surfacing in the political debate, and non-nationals might at some stage effectively be enfranchised. Political parties might want to consider the effect their position has in the debate about enfranchisement on the electoral preferences of the potential future non-national electorate.

Especially in the bilingual Region of Brussels Capital the Belgian population of immigrant descent constitutes an important electoral niche of around 7% to 9% of the current electorate. The non-Belgian population amounts to 29% of all inhabitants, thus constituting an even larger electoral potential. The repositioning of the Francophone mainstream parties with regard to the political incorporation of immigrants must be considered from this perspective. Belgians of immigrant origin already constitute an important electoral niche in Brussels. This was clearly shown in the October 2000 local elections in which a tremendous increase of politicians of immigrant origin were elected, partly due to ethnic block voting (Jacobs, Martiniello & Rea, 2002). In a number of municipalities in the Region of Brussels Capital,

Belgians of immigrant (mainly Moroccan) origin now constitute over 20% of the city council members and have thus become an important political factor. All democratic Francophone parties have competed for this new electoral niche. In the long run, the immigrants' vote might even influence the Flemish-Francophone balance of power if the population of immigrant origin votes massively for Francophone parties and thus helps to crowd out Flemish politicians. On the Flemish side politicians are increasingly aware of this possibility and have realized that they could also try to use the immigrant electoral potential to their advantage in Brussels (Jacobs, 2001).

We claim that the attempts at repositioning by the mainstream parties are also related to deeper transformations of the political landscape mainly on the Flemish side. This might be interpreted as the advent of new political cleavages in the face of the weakening importance of more classic political cleavages. In post-war Belgium there were three dominant (cross-cutting) political cleavages: the classic left-right labour-capital or workers-employers cleavage, the philosophical cleavage between Catholics and atheists, and the linguistic cleavage between Francophones and Flemings. Apart from Brussels, the linguistic cleavage has lost much of its importance due to the process of devolution and the creation of distinct subnational political schemes. The philosophical and religion-related cleavage between Catholics and atheists has also lost importance following a number of institutionalized compromises (notably in educational policy) and the sharp decline in religious denominations. Last but not least, with the development of the welfare state, the fall of the Iron Curtain, and the rise of "third-way" political discourses, the workers-employers cleavage has also lost some of its importance. After a period of ardent neoliberalism in the 1980s and early 1990s, Belgian liberal parties have at the dawn of the new millennium tried to reposition themselves at the centre of the political spectrum and have again taken up support for state-regulated capitalism. The Flemish socialist party has partly embraced the third-way discourse, thus dropping a number of hard-line left-wing positions in the capitalist system and favouring moderate state-controlled market regulation. Empirical evidence (Swyngedouw, 1992a, 1992b, 1994) suggests that while the importance of the classic political cleavages is weakening in the political landscape, two new associated cleavages are emerging (Deschouwer, 1993; Hellemans, 1993; Swyngedouw, 1992a, 1992b, 1994, 1998). On one side the materialist/post materialist cleavage; on the other side, but not perpendicular to the other, the ethnocentrist/multiculturalist cleavage has appeared. Two new political actors have come to the stage along these new cleavages, stressing political issues that had remained

marginal in the old political landscape, which was structured by the three classic political cleavages. On the one hand, the ecologist parties have seen growing electoral success throughout the 1980s and 1990s by stressing environmental issues and taking a number of postmaterialist stances. On the other hand, extreme right-wing parties with clear anti-immigrant and materialistic stances have occupied a place in the political field. In response, ecologist parties have adopted a clear pro-immigrant stance. The traditional political parties have remained hesitant in both domains.

One can argue that voting rights are one of the symbolic issues—other issues pertain to ecology, self-determination (gay rights, euthanasia, etc.), and law and order—over which debate helps (re)structuring the new political landscape in the face of the diminishing importance of classic political cleavages in structuring voting behaviour. Survey research (Billiet, Swyngedouw, Depickere & Meersseman, 2001) has shown that there is a clear distinction to be made of the overall value preferences of the electorates of the ecologists on the one hand and the extreme right on the other hand, with the traditional parties in-between. These findings support the thesis of new political cleavages in which the ethnocentrism-multiculturalism divide and the materialist-postmaterialist divide are together of central importance.

The discursive changes of the late 1990s might be interpreted as a repositioning of political parties with regard to the two above-mentioned cleavages in the face of the weakening differences between political parties on the classic socioeconomic and ideological-religious divides on the one hand, and the growing concerns about immigrant incorporation and the development of post-materialist values on the other hand. It might now be argued that the socialists are trying to (re)position themselves on the multiculturalist and postmaterialist side of the spectrum in order to compete with the ecologists. The workers' faction of the Christian Democratic party is pleading to do the same, but is challenged by another faction within the Christian Democratic party that wants to take an assimilationist-materialist position. The more conservative faction among the Christian Democrats would thus rather compete with the assimilationist-materialist position of the liberals. The latter, at least most clearly on Flemish side, tend to take up mildly ethnocentric discourses to compete with the clear anti-immigrant stance of the extreme-right. The Benaïssa case allowed for socialists and (and a faction of the) Christian Democrats to change their positions in the debate on enfranchisement, hoping to reposition themselves on the new political cleavages around the ethnocentrism/multiculturalism and materialist/postmaterialist divides.

Conclusion

In Belgium only two issues, directly or indirectly linked to the integration of immigrants, have been the subject of ongoing public debate. Ever since the electoral breakthrough of the anti-immigrant party *Vlaams Blok* at the end of the 1980s, the discussion on what strategy to follow in the struggle against the extreme right has been a topic of continual debate. At the centre of the debate was the existence of the so-called *cordon sanitaire*, ostracizing the extreme right. Although right-wing factions of the centre and centre-right democratic parties have internally witnessed permanent criticism of it, the *cordon sanitaire* was still in place and functioning in early 2003. More directly linked to the issue of immigrant incorporation, the issue of local enfranchisement of non-nationals has in Belgium become the most symbolic issue in the wider debate about integration. In the 1980s and 1990s the mainstream parties avoided supporting the demand for enfranchisement for fear of a White backlash and increased the electoral success of the extreme right. In the second half of the 1990s some of the mainstream parties gradually shifted their positions in favour of enfranchisement once again. It has been shown that the events surrounding the Benaïssa family created a sort of discursive catharsis: an opportunity for a number of mainstream politicians to shift positions in the debate and part with past discourses. We attribute the reason for the change in positions to two distinct factors. The first is related to the electoral potential and increasing political importance of immigrant groups, especially in the Brussels Capital Region on the Francophone side. The second reason is related to deeper transformations of the political landscape and the advent of new political cleavages in the face of the weakening importance of more classic political cleavages in structuring voting behaviour on the Flemish side.

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